The challenges of evaluating public understanding of science events in South Africa – paving the way for ensuring meaningful evaluations.

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- Mandate
- Strategic approach
  - Science for Tomorrow
  - Science for All
  - Science for Decision Makers
- Department of Science & Technology (DST)
- PUSET projects & evaluation in SA
Key questions

- What should the purpose of science event evaluations be?

- What exactly can be gained from evaluation of PUSET projects? Can tangible outputs be demonstrated?

- Are there best practice approaches or frameworks for evaluating science awareness events?
What is evaluation?

- Evaluation is a “rigorous, independent analysis of ongoing or completed activities” …… and

- On a more practical level is about effective ways of learning how to do things better.

(Boddington & Coe, 1996)
International experience - benefits

- Benefits of evaluating public understanding of science events:
  - Can help crystallise ideas about the event and what is intended to be achieved.
  - Can provide information on the outcomes of an event, with suggestions for improvement.
  - Can ascertain who has attended the event, along with recommendations for improvement.
  - Can provide encouragement by demonstrating that efforts have been worthwhile.
International experience – what to evaluate?

- Audiences
- Numbers
- Experiences
- Education
- Attitudes
- Follow-up

- Which are the intended audiences?
- Numbers for each category.
- What are their experiences at the event?
- What do you expect them to learn at the event?
- Do you expect audience attitude to change by the event?
- What do you expect your audiences to do after the event?
International experience – what to evaluate?

- Extent of media coverage (especially in terms of media output)
- Perspective of the organisers, participants and stakeholders
- Types of activities and perceived success levels (quality of presenters and presentations)
Challenges of PUSET evaluations in South Africa

- How best to evaluate awareness programmes? (in order to satisfy funders)

- Evaluation in relation to key objectives
  - Constructing clear specific objectives

- Funding limitations
Challenges

- **Institutional arrangements**
  - **Independent** (less intimate knowledge of project 7 process, but autonomous, have evaluation skills, better reliability of findings)
  - **Internal** (intimate knowledge, not evaluation experts, needed on implementation jobs, self evaluation)
  - **Decide what is fitting**

- **Process facilitation**
  - Call for proposals, preparation of terms of reference, selection of evaluator
  - Dialogue between evaluation commissioner & evaluator
Challenges

- **Skills transfer**
  - Critical area in South Africa
  - Lack of knowledge of and capacity in – evaluation processes, scope & objectives, articulating relevant questions, selecting evaluators, writing terms of reference, effective ways of planning & monitoring evaluation.

- **Utilisation of evaluation findings**
  - How to institutionalise feedback & recommendations
  - Change management/ information & knowledge management
Challenges

- Cost-benefit analysis
  - Benefits of evaluations must outweigh costs & limitations
  - Often thorough evaluations are too costly and time consuming compared to their real use and effect.
  - FEST allots approximately 6-8% of project costs to evaluation (although insufficient).

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Recommendations

- **Capacity build** into managing evaluation process (devising evaluation objectives and key questions, writing of terms of reference, selection of evaluators, managing the evaluation process).

- **Institutionalise evaluation findings** (information & knowledge management strategy).

- Encourage **dissemination** of evaluation findings.

- Direct **more resources** to evaluations.
Final remarks

- Impact of PUSET projects is very hard to measure.
- Evaluators try to measure tangibles such as inputs, outputs, utilisations and social benefits.
- Measurable indicators are highly valued, but difficult to construct.
Conclusion

- Evaluations can be a **useful tool**, but should be used with discretion so that the **benefits outweigh the costs**.
- In order to increase the cost-benefit ratio, a lot more thought should be given to **how the results of evaluations get used** (for improvement) and **disseminated** (for broader benefit).

“**Construct knowledge for action**”