AFRICAN EDUCATION RESEARCH FUNDING CONSORTIUM

Peer Assist Note

Peer assist support on how funders can cultivate visionary research leadership that drives evidence to action

Date: September 26, 2023
Time: 2-3 pm (WAT)
Venue: Zoom

Proposed "practice case"

On this occasion, rather than presenting a project and asking for advice, the BHP Foundation presented a broad set of questions that it has been reflecting on and used a new project as a "practice case" to consider some of the answers. The proposed practice case/project is the Education chapter of the African Evidence Network (AEN)'s Africa Evidence Youth League that was launched at the Evidence 2023 event in Uganda in mid-September 2023.

About the Africa Evidence Youth League (AEYL) – Education Chapter

Across the continent, emerging Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) leaders have been raising their voices to play a more active role in finding solutions for the challenges facing African countries through the improved use of data and evidence for decision-making. At the recently concluded Evidence 2023 event, AEN set up the Africa Evidence Youth League (AEYL) to address some burning issues identified by emerging EIDM leaders at AEN engagements in 2022 – with a focus on the continent's education systems.

About 45 emerging education leaders (under age 35) from 13 countries representing universities, think tanks, governments, government departments, and civil society organisations were brought together to facilitate a co-design. They drafted a youth manifesto, co-designed the league, and thought about what they wanted their online community of practice to look like. By convening this vibrant cohort of young leaders and providing them with a platform for capacities and network building, the AEYL will enhance evidence use in the continent's education sector and ensure EIDM remains future-fit and relevant to Africa's education decision-makers.

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The initiative is funded by the BHP Foundation and the MasterCard Foundation.

Learning questions explored during the peer-assist session

How can funders cultivate visionary research leadership that drives evidence to action?

- Broaden who is in the room.
- Engage young people early on in decision-making and keep pushing against adultism.
- Listen (well).

How can research and impact agendas be meaningfully co-created with local researchers)?

- Capture all voices (not just physical presence).
- More inclusion of practitioners in review panels (aside from the funders in review stages).
- Avoid elite capture by including different categories of people – from policymakers to people with lived experience.
- Involve everyone from the very beginning (which often does not happen) and get multiple, iterative layers of feedback along the way.
- Have meaningful conversations about what is locally needed (vs. what is externally perceived to be needed).
- Have a good facilitator.
- There is a need for a formal intermediary to translate knowledge.
- Provide more support and funding for non-research partner engagement.
- Have flexibility/accountability in funding.

How can funders support locally-led research leadership on new policy issues or fields?

- The researchers can respond to emerging topics and generate evidence that can be used at various levels.
- Local researchers with local knowledge of context can do this work. However, early career researchers might need support. Therefore, funders should consider providing this support, perhaps with people from the global north (they still have a role to play).
- Leaving space for experimentation and failure. (This is key in the early policy spaces)
- Provide plenty of resources for networking, collaboration, and mentorship.

*Question to consider: Are there ways to credibly assess the policy or practice relevance of proposals (even if windows aren't there)? **Response:** There's value in starting to look at the sub-national level, not only the national level.*

How can we challenge (existing) practice?

- More flexible grants for topics identified by the local researchers.

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- Avoid sharing many details about the funder's strategy ahead of meetings with new partners. For instance, one funder mentioned that they spend most of the time at the first meeting learning about the grantee/partner's work and their ideas. This is to avoid the situation where grantees/partners try to retrofit and map ideas to the funder's strategy. Rather, this allows them to talk more about what they are already doing and are excited about, and the funder will be able to see if there is a good alignment.

Final reflection (summary)

- Engage young people in decision-making processes.
- Have everybody in the room (from policymakers to young people), whether that's the physical room or the virtual room.
- Have people with lived experience in terms of who funders partner with (to avoid elite capture).
- Think about the sweet spot around co-design and provide good facilitation and space to have conversations.
- Provide flexible funding.
- Funders should listen to the grantee/partner's dreams and aspirations before presenting their strategy.
- Consider supporting/advocating credible policy change at the sub-national level instead of (the usual focus on) the national level.

Thank you for reading the note. Please consider these other questions that emanated from the session. Kindly forward your contribution or response to Busayomi Sotunde at osotunde@onthinktanks.org. We look forward to hearing from you!

(Question 1) How can we break out of elite capture of funding and have more diversity of (young) people beyond the networks of our networks to bring others on board, particularly getting people that have lived experience?

(Question 2) Facilitation and co-design are critical and having facilitators that listen and listen well. From a funder's experience, how can we identify good facilitators?

(Question 3) On the question on policy windows (above), how do you create policy windows when there are no policy windows? Is that something that young people can think about doing? Is there a way that they can use evidence for advocacy to create policy windows? (In contexts like Africa, a lot of those policy relationships tend to be held by quite senior people,

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and they tend to be very personal. How do we help young people have much more structured relationships with policymakers?)

(Question 4) How do we incentivise collaboration in a way that's meaningful? How do we incentivise transparency and collaboration among young researchers?