



THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERING FOR EVIDENCE USE IN AFRICA

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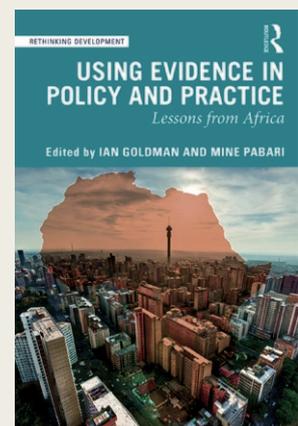
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SUMMARY & KEY MESSAGES

Case study research on the use of evidence in African policy processes revealed that knowledge brokers played critically important roles throughout – as facilitators and linkage agents, capacity builders and knowledge managers. However, these roles are often underestimated and under-resourced. Effective knowledge brokers understood the internal and external contexts. They harnessed opportunities and mitigated risks and barriers. They built strong relationships. They understood policy needs and promoted demand for evidence. They facilitated effective multistakeholder processes. They analysed and synthesised information and communicated it in the appropriate form at the appropriate time. They strengthened institutional capacity – systems and processes – to use evidence.

Thus, knowledge brokers require both hard skills and soft skills, from expertise in facilitation, research methods and policy processes to competencies such as credibility with stakeholders, the capacity to build trusted relationships and political savviness.

Strengthening knowledge brokering for evidence use in Africa requires institutionalising systems and not just developing the capacities of individuals. This includes:

- Recruiting staff with soft skills as well as technical skills;
- Strengthening anticipation of demand for evidence through evaluation and research agendas, while developing the capacity to respond quickly through rapid synthesis, rapid evaluations, analysis of existing data, etc;
- Widening the involvement of stakeholders in evidence processes, e.g. in evaluation steering committees;
- Institutionalising feedback to practitioners and policy makers from users or beneficiaries of policies and programmes, e.g. through their participation in evaluation steering committees, workshops that facilitate community contributions, dialogue processes;
- Establishing systems to better manage knowledge (such as knowledge management platforms);
- Creating more effective learning cultures which encourage the use of evidence, and the learning from what is working or not working to improve performance and impact.

Introduction

This policy brief is one of a series linked to the book, 'Using Evidence in Policy and Practice – lessons from Africa', which draws on case study research on the use of evidence in five countries – South Africa, Uganda, Benin, Kenya and Ghana, as well as the Economic Community of West African States region (ECOWAS). This brief explores the knowledge broker roles which emerged in the different cases and how these contributed to evidence use. In the book we highlighted the role of applying interventions to promote use (which we call *use interventions*), which trigger *change mechanisms* including *access* to evidence, *agreement* on the evidence and *formalisation* of channels for using the evidence. The analytical framework suggests that these interventions must build capability and motivation to use evidence and create opportunities for evidence to be used.

Knowledge brokers have a key role to play in making this happen. Knowledge brokers can be individuals such as researchers, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners, policy makers and even politicians, or organisations such as think tanks, M&E or research units situated in NGOs, government or parliament.

The research on the eight cases was conducted between November 2018 and May 2019.¹ A common analytical framework was developed which is outlined in the policy brief by Langer (2021). Key stages in the analytical framework are understanding the context, stimulating demand for evidence, supporting generation of evidence and facilitating use interventions to trigger changes in capability, opportunity or motivation. In this brief we draw out implications of the internal and external context for the evidence generation process, and the facilitation of evidence generation, follow-up, and use. We draw as well from the characterisation of knowledge brokering by Martinuzzi (2016) which distinguishes three roles of knowledge brokers (p6):

- The development, transfer and translation of knowledge to make it easier to access and use, in which case knowledge brokers act as **knowledge managers**;
- Facilitation of knowledge-based networks and processes, in which knowledge brokers act as **facilitators and linkage agents**, managing the context and facilitating the relationships and the process of the evidence journey, and stimulating

¹ The eight case chapters are referenced as Department of Basic Education (Pophiwa et al., 2020); Violence against Women and Children (Amisi et al., 2020); Rapid Response Service (Kawooya, 2020); Public Procurement Evaluation (Kawooya et al., 2020); Benin Agriculture Policy (Kouakanou et al., 2020); Wildlife Act in Kenya (Pabari et al., 2020); Sanitation in Ghana (Smith et al., 2020); Tobacco Control (Mane et al., 2020).

interaction, trust and commitment (building the motivation and opportunity to use evidence);

- Development of individual and institutional capability to produce and use policy-relevant knowledge, in which knowledge brokers act as **capacity builders** (building the capability and opportunity to use evidence).

What are the knowledge-brokering roles involved in these stages? As Davies et al. indicate 'evidence and policy can indeed have productive engagement, so long as craft (and sometimes cunning) are deployed by those seeking to influence or be influenced' (Davies et al., 2019: p374). This policy brief seeks to describe the craft that knowledge brokers must deploy.

Why evidence use without brokering is challenging in an African context

Cairney (2019: p22) suggests three conditions that would seem to be necessary for evidence to win through:

1. Actors are able to use evidence to persuade policy makers to pay attention to, and shift their understanding of, policy problems;
2. The policy environment becomes broadly conducive to policy change;
3. Actors exploit high levels of attention to a problem, the availability of a feasible solution and the motivation of and opportunity for policy makers to adopt such solutions during (often brief) windows of opportunity.

Knowledge brokers are key actors in points one and three, and need to be familiar with the policy environment. In most African countries policy making is highly contested by stakeholders with unequal power, access to information and different interests. Also there is often political instability, relatively weak institutional capacity and limited space for civic engagement. Below are some of the features of the policy environment identified in the different African case studies that we researched.

Some of the features of the system we observed are:

- The politicised rather than technocratic nature of policy making, reflecting perceived short-term political benefits from particular policies, programmes or services;
- Hierarchical and very bureaucratic processes in government, with limited capacity to foster learning and facilitate dialogue among stakeholders;
- Suspicion by government of civil society, which is often seen as trying to undermine it;
- The desire to make quick decisions, and so the difficulty of using established knowledge bases, or collecting new evidence;

- Limited availability of data, which is often of patchy coverage and reliability;
- Limited capacity to generate evidence within government, both in terms of numbers of staff and expertise, and so the outsourcing of much of the evidence generation;
- External consultants and researchers often do not fully understand either the reality on the ground or constraints on implementation, and may not prioritise building capacity in government. When they differ in ethnicity and class from the communities they are researching or government staff, this can generate tensions and questions of legitimacy;
- Mechanisms to feed information back to practitioners and policy makers from the users or supposed beneficiaries of policies and programmes are weak.

In such a context, deliberate and politically savvy interventions to translate, adapt and integrate different types of evidence into policy and implementation are needed. Actors must use a variety of tools, processes, systems and relationships to draw attention to a policy issue, create a conducive environment for change and ensure that what is known about the problem and solutions is used in policy.

Knowledge-brokering roles required to facilitate evidence use

Table 1 summarises some of the interventions used by knowledge brokers in the case studies in relation to the different elements of an evidence journey. As can be seen, knowledge brokers used a variety of tools and interventions to translate, interpret and adapt evidence to support use.

In *dealing with the external context*, the relationships between knowledge brokers and external stakeholders were critical to their facilitation and linkage roles, for example seen strongly in the Rapid Response Service case but evident across the other case studies. Relationships were embedded through systems such as steering committees, methodological review workshops and sector standing meetings.

In *dealing with internal context*, interventions built on knowledge brokers' understanding of internal dynamics, actors and policy processes. They used this knowledge to build relationships with policy makers and programme managers, and training in evidence use was used to build organisational capacity to use evidence. Another important role of knowledge brokers was influencing the formal structures and processes to better institutionalise and enable evidence use.

Table 1: A framework for understanding knowledge broker roles

| Elements of the analytical framework ² | Knowledge Broker Domains (from Martinuzzi, 2016) | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| | Facilitator and Linking Agent | Capacity Builder | Knowledge Manager |
| Addressing the context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships with stakeholders; identifying and cultivating external evidence champions • Advocacy campaigns for evidence and policy outcomes including training of senior managers, changing the narrative from a punitive approach to learning and improving performance • Closely partnering with programme managers in evidence generation and use processes • Raising awareness about service delivery issues with communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering stakeholders through training, exposure, learning by doing • Facilitating study tours to learn from others • Strengthening civil society's capacity to use evidence • Empowering citizens to engage with service providers by training and providing them with user-friendly information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using established intersectoral policy-making platforms • Developing a roadmap with clear roles and responsibility for stakeholders • Establishing/managing structures and processes for competitive bidding for commissioned evaluations (credibility) |
| Promoting demand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing the narrative to an improvement support approach and closely partnering the evaluating programme managers • Convincing programme managers to evaluate their programmes • Marketing services of research/M&E unit to programme managers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiating/supporting intersectoral discussion forums, important in widening awareness and ownership • Developing guidance for integration of evidence in policy, e.g. regulatory impact assessment guide • Training senior officials in evidence use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying evidence needs and developing evidence/evaluation agendas |
| During evidence generation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative management of evidence generation • Evaluation/research units supporting but not leading evaluation process • Establishing/facilitating meetings with stakeholders such as: consultative workshops on methodology; evaluation steering committees or reference groups; participatory workshops, e.g. theory of change workshop; validation workshops with stakeholders • Ongoing management of relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation of participatory workshops and meetings (e.g. theory of change workshops) • Facilitate learning by stakeholders during an evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outsourcing evidence generation to ensure impartiality and independence • Quality assurance systems to ensure credibility of evidence; steering committees, peer reviewers, etc. • Synthesising data from different stakeholders and interpreting for policy implications, publishing in bulletins, monthly reports, etc. • Analyses on policy-relevant trends |
| Follow up and learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of findings to management, ministers, parliament, civil society • Facilitating ongoing dialogue process and campaigns based on the evidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural mechanisms to make sure reports are discussed and decisions are made • Institutionalising the use of evidence in M&E policies and systems, e.g. management response, improvement planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions of evidence/evaluations in cabinet • Developing policy briefs and evidence summaries, using communication tools to make evidence accessible, i.e. infographics, data visualisation. • Evidence shared publicly, e.g. websites. |

² From Langer et al. (2020)

Examples of *stimulating demand*, included knowledge brokers in the Violence case, who sought to understand policy and programme priorities and used tools to prioritise and communicate planned evidence generation activities such as evaluation plans. In Uganda, South Africa and Benin, training of deputy ministers or senior managers in evidence or evaluation was used to promote demand for evidence, and this was organised by knowledge brokers in the centre of government. The presence of a system requiring evidence such as national evaluation plans was important.

During the *evidence generation* phase, knowledge brokers used tools to ensure the credibility of the evidence. Some of the tools they used were: commissioning external evaluators to ensure independence in complex evaluations; setting up inclusive multi-sectoral steering committees to ensure stakeholders could participate in generating evidence and interpreting the findings; and using quality assurance systems. Brokers generated evidence themselves by collating evidence from different sources³ or producing bulletins or briefs to present data and highlight policy implications to their ministries.

During the *follow up and learning phase* countries that had formal national evaluation systems which had institutionalised tools such as management response and improvement plans were at an advantage as these tools were helpful in structuring and incentivising use of evidence. However, knowledge brokers were needed to make these systems work. Publishing the evidence in accessible formats was an important way of getting a wide variety of stakeholders to understand the evidence and ensure use. In some cases, such as the Sanitation in Ghana case, evidence was actively taken to share the findings with communities.

Navigating complex African realities

As described earlier, the context within which evidence journeys and policy cycles take place is often complex and messy. How do knowledge brokers navigate this complexity?

It was noted earlier that the political nature of policies and programmes calls for sensitive handling. Knowledge brokers managed this challenge by investing in getting senior managers and politicians to trust the evidence processes. For example in the Department of Basic Education (DBE) case study, a known critic of government was involved in one evaluation. The M&E unit ensured that sufficient evidence was provided to support the findings and recommendations which helped to garner acceptability of the findings. In the Tobacco case, bringing politicians into the action research process proved very important. Workshops were held with both senior technical people and politicians, which helped to create

a climate where they were able to approve a new tax regulation, despite lobbying by the tobacco industry⁴.

The nature of the political process is that quick decisions often have to be made. How do you balance the need for a swift response with a response based on solid research evidence? The case of the Rapid Response Service in Uganda specifically addressed this problem, with briefs provided within 28 days, based on existing evidence. Another valuable approach was having a systematic evaluation plan, with the programmed evaluations anticipating evidence needs. This could be seen with the evaluation cases from South Africa, Uganda and Benin, where the presence of a national evaluation system enabled a systematic approach to evaluation, and also specified a range of interventions (such as evaluation steering committees), which helped to broker the relationships, trust and agreements needed for evidence to be used.

Another element of complexity is managing the relationships between government and civil society. In the Tobacco case, a research institute had built trust from previous work and so was accepted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and participating countries as leader of the project, and the institute reinforced the trust with the inclusive way the project was managed. In the Kenya case, the Chair of the National Committee responsible for the Wildlife Act that was being reviewed and the Principal Research Officer from the Parliamentary Research Services unit played critical roles as facilitators and linkage agents. They proactively reached out to civil society, ensuring that civil society was aware of the opportunities and modalities to engage, and was informed as to the structured public participation fora to enable the equal voice of all stakeholders. In addition, efforts were made to ensure that there was transparency in the process and stakeholders were informed about the decisions made and the reasoning behind them.

The limited capacity in government was dealt with in most of the cases by outsourcing the generation of evidence, whether through outsourcing the conducting of an evaluation (e.g. the Uganda procurement evaluation), provision of rapid evidence (RRS), or leading on action research (Tobacco). However, in the successful cases we did see that the capacity of government staff to play a policy entrepreneurial role was critical to success, including capacity to manage the technical and policy content and process, to manage internal relationships as well as relationships with the researcher/evaluator⁵. The hierarchical structures within government can make it difficult to play these roles, spanning technical and high level managers and politicians.

⁴ Other examples included the Chief Directors responsible for M&E in both the Departments of Social Development (DSD) and Basic Education (DBE) in the two South African cases, or the parliamentary researcher leading in the dialogue around the Wildlife Act in Kenya.

⁵ Seen for example in the Violence, DBE, Uganda procurement, Kenya Wildlife cases

³ For example in the Rapid Response case

We also saw examples where the knowledge brokers were dealing with tensions arising from the different cultures, ethnicities, classes and ideologies amongst government, researchers and civil society.

In the Violence case we saw them addressing profoundly different value systems between government departments; using the evaluation steering committee to debate differences and apparent conflict between the criminal justice system and social (developmental) approaches to violence; presentation of evaluation findings to heads of departments and ministers on both sides; and dealing with soft issues where evaluators were from different ethnic/national backgrounds. These require sensitivity to the issues, and time spent with individuals and structures to discuss these issues and how to resolve them.

The weakness of feedback from users/citizens to government is a problem in many of the countries. We saw the introduction of effective feedback mechanisms from citizens/users leading to significant changes⁶.

The skills and characteristics of a good broker

Across the case studies, certain knowledge-brokering skills and competencies, both hard and soft, emerged as important in enabling evidence use. These skills and competencies include:

A) AS FACILITATORS AND LINKAGE AGENTS

- *Professional experience* in the particular sector/thematic area (for example procurement, or wildlife management) is essential, to be credible and for trust building;
- In-depth *knowledge of the external and internal context* – including key stakeholders in the sector, power dynamics, relationships, cultures, values, the wider political and socio-cultural environment, the policy development cycle and processes;
- The *ability to facilitate* what may be a 2–3 year multistakeholder process;
- The capacity to *establish and nurture relationships* – humility and the ability to listen, facilitate, negotiate, build consensus and promote effective dialogue.

B) CAPACITY BUILDERS

- Knowledge of *organisational change processes*;
- Understanding of policy processes and cycles;
- Training and coaching skills.

C) KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS

- Experience in using *tools such as stakeholder and situation analysis* to design and support knowledge management processes, including the identification of evidence needs and agendas and using to inform facilitation and linkage processes;
- The ability to *generate or collate evidence*: the capacity to conduct rapid evaluations and rapid synthesis of existing studies, and to analyse or collate existing data to generate and present new evidence;
- *Research skills*, including the ability to advise on research methodology, undertake evidence generation if needed;
- *Critical thinking*, problem-solving and decision-making skills – the ability to reflect critically, understand the problem and facilitate decision making in complex and challenging circumstances;
- *Communication* – the ability to write effective reports, critique reports, translate research and evaluation reports into policy-relevant messages, write simple, jargon-free briefs, and the ability to present to a range of stakeholders in a powerful way.

Effective knowledge brokers need the following key competencies:

- Credibility and trusted relationships and networks amongst stakeholders in the evidence ecosystem;
- Political savviness, humility and the ability to understand and relate to individuals from across a diversity of ethnicities and professional backgrounds.

What next – Strengthening brokering in evidence use in Africa

To strengthen knowledge brokering it is important to institutionalise systems, not just develop the capacity of individuals. Systems include:

- Recruiting staff with soft skills as well as technical skills;
- Strengthening anticipation of the need/demand for evidence through evaluation and research agendas, while complementing this through developing the capacity to respond quickly through rapid synthesis, rapid evaluations, analysis of existing data, and so on;
- Widening the involvement of stakeholders in evidence processes, e.g. institutionalising the inclusion of civil society in evaluation steering committees;

⁶ For example in the Kenya Wildlife consultative process, as well as with agricultural producers being brought in to play a strong role in policy development in Benin

- Institutionalising feedback to practitioners and policy makers from users or supposed beneficiaries of policies and programmes, e.g. through their participation in evaluation steering committees, holding workshops that facilitate community contributions, dialogue processes;
- Establishing systems to better manage knowledge (such as knowledge management platforms);
- And eventually creating more effective learning cultures which encourage the use of evidence, and the learning from what is working or not working to improve performance and impact.

What emerges is the need for hard technical skills in M&E, in research and analysis as well as effective soft skills to facilitate powerful learning processes. The soft skills are often not recognised and so staff with such skills are not recruited, and little attention is given to building these skills. The related policy brief on M&E units (Goldman et al., 2021) takes forward this understanding of knowledge brokering to apply it to the roles and functions of M&E units, and the policy brief on building relationships and dialogues (Amisi et al., 2021) provides more detail on how these roles can be facilitated.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This brief draws on case study research carried out for the project, 'Evidence in practice: documenting and sharing lessons of evidence-informed policy making and implementation in Africa', supported by the Hewlett Foundation. The case study research was guided by an analytical framework that combines two different frameworks: i) the Science of Using Science's framework that looks at evidence interventions and outcomes from a behaviour change perspective (Langer et al., 2016) and the Context Matters framework that serves as a tool to better

understand contextual factors affecting the use of evidence (Weyrauch et al., 2016). The framework approaches evidence use from a policy maker's perspective (i.e. from a demand rather than supply perspective). The framework takes into account contextual influencers and breaks down an evidence journey into the ways in which evidence is generated, the interventions taken in order to ensure evidence use, the change mechanisms that arise as a result and the relationships between the evidence journey and the immediate and wider outcomes that emerge.

