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Barriers to evidence-based policymaking in Africa: A literature review

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Abstract

This paper reviews the barriers to evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in an African context, emphasizing the complexities that hinder the effective use of empirical data to tackle socio-economic challenges like poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. Despite an average economic growth rate of 4.6% from 2000 to 2019, Africa continues to struggle with governance issues, political instability, and a lack of reliable data, which prevent informed decision-making. Using institutional theory, the study identifies key obstacles such as inadequate training among policymakers, reliance on external sources, and the influence of Western policies. The research employs a qualitative methodology, conducting an extensive literature review of secondary data sources from reputable academic and organizational publications. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and policy papers from numerous platforms. The review focuses on literature from the past 20 years (2003–2023), addressing both historical and contemporary trends in EBPM in Africa. Recommendations for enhancing EBPM include strengthening governance frameworks, improving training for policymakers, and fostering local research capabilities. The findings highlight the need for substantial reforms in governance and institutional processes to fully harness the potential of EBPM for sustainable and equitable development across the continent.

Keywords: Policy; Equitable Development; Socio-Economic; Economic Growth; Sustainable Development

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1. Introduction

Evidence-Based Policymaking (EBP) is an approach that emphasizes the use of the best available evidence to guide decisions during policy planning and design (Davies et al., 2000). It involves systematically integrating various sources of information, such as empirical research, expert insights, and stakeholder perspectives, to inform and improve policy outcomes (Dang et al., 2021; Greenhalgh et al., 2016). The growing adoption of EBP across the globe is driven by the recognition that leveraging both quantitative and qualitative data allows policymakers to better understand societal needs and evaluate the likely impacts of their decisions (Macaulay et al., 2022; Lisa et al., 2021). The overarching aim of EBP is to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of development interventions by grounding policy decisions in robust evidence rather than relying solely on personal judgment or political interests (Fedorowicz & Aron, 2021). This view is echoed by Erismann et al, (2021), who highlights that research funders increasingly advocate for the translation of research findings into policymaking to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

In the African context, there is growing awareness of the value of evidence-based approaches (Godman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many countries across the continent continue to face persistent socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and income inequality, despite numerous policy efforts. For example, in South Africa, high unemployment rates endure due to deep-seated labor market inefficiencies and governance constraints, even amid ongoing policy reforms (Loewald et al., 2021). Similarly, in Nigeria, agricultural policies have struggled to ensure food security, largely due to the inadequate implementation of evidence-based recommendations concerning climate adaptation and resource management (Apampa, 2021). These cases illustrate how governance deficits can hinder the effective use of evidence in addressing pressing development issues.

According to the African Development Bank (AFDB, 2020), Africa experienced an average economic growth rate of 4.6% annually from 2000 to 2019, largely driven by foreign direct investment (FDI) and the export of natural resources to countries in the Global North. However, the World Bank (2021) notes that this growth has not translated into inclusive development, as poverty, inequality, and unemployment remain widespread. The United Nations (2022) attributes these persistent challenges to weak governance and political instability, both of which continue to obstruct sustainable progress. The United Nations Environment Programme (2021) warns that unless African countries adopt development strategies grounded in solid evidence, recent gains could be reversed.

This paper is grounded in the belief that evidence-based policymaking is a critical pathway toward achieving equitable and sustainable development in Africa. The primary objective of the study is to examine the barriers impeding the implementation of EBP across the continent and to propose actionable strategies to address these challenges. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the key barriers to implementing evidence-based policymaking in Africa?
2. How can policymakers effectively integrate evidence into decision-making processes to tackle socio-economic issues?
3. What strategies can support the promotion of equitable and sustainable development through EBP?

In addition to this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: a discussion of the methodology employed, an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the study, a literature review, and finally, conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Methodological approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach and conducted an extensive literature review to identify and analyze the barriers to evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in Africa. Secondary data were the primary sources of information, sourced from credible academic and organizational publications. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and policy papers from platforms such as Google Scholar, JStor, AOSIS, Oxfam, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and the United Nations.

Further, to ensure the inclusion of high-quality and reliable sources, only peer-reviewed articles and official reports from reputable organizations were considered. The literature selection process was guided by a combination of structured and systematic search criteria. Specifically, search terms such as "evidence-based policymaking," "Africa," "development," "policy barriers," and "governance" were utilized. Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were applied to refine the search results and ensure a focus on publications relevant to the research theme.

The selection process only included studies published within a 20-year timeframe, spanning from 2003 to 2023, to maintain the study's relevance and provide a contemporary understanding of the topic. This time range was chosen to capture recent trends as well as historical developments in EBPM in Africa. Lastly, the review emphasized literature addressing socio-economic challenges specific to the African context, such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality, as well as institutional and governance-related obstacles to EBPM. By synthesizing insights from diverse but complementary sources, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to EBPM and suggests actionable strategies for overcoming them.

3. Theoretical framework

This study adopts institutional theory as its theoretical lens to examine the barriers to evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in the African context. Institutional theory emphasizes the role of structures, rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive elements in shaping the behavior of organizations and individuals, often leading to actions that deviate from purely economic or rational decision-making (Glynn et al., 2023). This framework is especially relevant for understanding how government agencies and development institutions either facilitate or obstruct the integration of evidence into policymaking processes (Edler & Barker, 2022).

A central tenet of institutional theory is that established institutional norms and practices often dictate organizational behavior, sometimes to the detriment of innovation or evidence-informed approaches. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three key processes through which institutions evolve: coercive isomorphism (pressure from external factors, such as donors), mimetic isomorphism (imitation of perceived successful models), and normative isomorphism (influence of professional standards and networks). These mechanisms can both support and hinder the uptake of EBPM, depending on the institutional and political context.

In the African policy landscape, institutional theory offers critical insights into the underutilization of evidence. Scholars such as Grindle (2004) and Hyden (2006) emphasize that policy decisions in many African countries are heavily influenced by political dynamics and institutional legacies, which often sideline empirical evidence. Browne, (2012) also emphasize that donor-driven policies impose pressure on governments by linking financial assistance to predetermined policy agendas. This dynamic often compels African states to prioritize donor objectives over local evidence. For instance, Ros et al. (2021) note that while donor funding, such as that from the Global Fund, has significantly advanced HIV/AIDS interventions in sub-Saharan Africa, it has also led to the adoption of policy frameworks that may not align with local epidemiological data or cultural contexts, undermining long-term effectiveness.

In addition, entrenched bureaucratic practices present internal institutional barriers to EBPM. Umboh (2023) argues that centralized decision-making and patronage-based systems often overshadow contributions from local researchers and think tanks. This is compounded by limited institutional capacity and a lack of technical expertise, as observed by Andrews et al. (2017), which restricts the ability of many African governments to systematically gather, interpret, and apply empirical data in the policymaking process.

By applying institutional theory, this paper aims to unpack how structural and normative constraints, such as donor influence, bureaucratic inertia, and limited technical capacity, impede the adoption of evidence-informed policymaking. It also explores how power relations between governments, donors, and local institutions shape the production, dissemination, and utilization of evidence in African policy environments. Ultimately, institutional theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the socio-political and organizational complexities that hinder the implementation of EBPM on the continent.

4. Review of literature

4.1. Economic growth and persistent socioeconomic issues in Africa

Existing literature suggests that while the African continent has experienced substantial economic growth, significant socioeconomic challenges persist. Over the past two decades, Africa's average annual growth rate has been estimated at 4.6%, indicating notable progress in macroeconomic performance. However, this growth has not translated into meaningful improvements in social and economic well-being due to a range of structural constraints. Despite rising GDP figures, poverty remains widespread, as the benefits of growth have not been equitably distributed across populations (Ngubane et al., 2023). Unemployment, especially among youth, continues to pose a critical challenge, partly because economic expansion has largely favored capital-intensive sectors over labor-intensive ones (Megbowon & Zerihun, 2025). In addition, income inequality persists due to the unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of effective policies promoting redistribution and inclusive development (Saipudin, 2024).

These socio-economic disparities are further compounded by poor governance and inadequate investment in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Habiyaremye, et al, 2022). To achieve equitable development, these challenges must be addressed (Cripps et al., 2024). At this stage it essential to clarify that equitable development is an approach that seeks to ensure that all communities, particularly marginalized and underserved groups, benefit from economic, social, and environmental advancements

(Agyeman et al, 2003). Central to equitable development is the integration of equity-focused frameworks into decision-making processes, emphasizing participatory governance, redistribution of resources, and sustainability to foster shared prosperity (Browne, 2023).

Further, the International Monetary Fund, IMF (2021) alludes that the continent of Africa is still characterized by low levels of development that can be attributable to poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. With reference to the United Nations Development Programme (2020), the attainment of sustainable and equitable development will only show if these above-mentioned challenges are addressed.

It is worthy to also acknowledge that Africa's economic, social, and political development status is a direct result of its political history. Notably, after the colonial era, from the 1980s to the 1990s, Africa embraced a variety of externally imposed structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and reform initiatives that failed to promote productivity, employment, and poverty reduction. These SAPs, introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, emphasized fiscal austerity, privatization, and trade liberalization but often led to reduced public spending on health, education, and infrastructure, exacerbating inequality and poverty (Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999; Easterly, 2001). Research by Moyo (2009) also highlights how these reforms dismantled state-driven development mechanisms without providing viable alternatives, resulting in limited economic diversification and persistent socio-economic challenges.

In crux to the above, post the 1980s and 1990s, it is well-documented that Africa has adopted and implemented a variety of models to improve its level of development. These include the two-sector model of growth, developed by Arthur Lewis in the 1950s; the import substitution industrialization model developed by Prebisch and Singer in the 1960s (used by Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Zambia); as well as the growth-with-equity paradigm of the 1970s (Ewang, 2013; Jerven, 2015). However, the persistent issues of poverty, unemployment, and income inequality remain a prevalent feature that defines the continent to this day.

The paradox of economic growth versus the persistent socioeconomic challenges is prevalent and resilient feature in Africa. This disparity therefore underscores the need for policy-making that is informed by empirical evidence to help address the root causes of low-level development. This paper examines barriers to evidence-based policymaking as a measure to improve development and halt socio-economic issues in Africa.

4.2. The importance of evidence-based policymaking in Africa

Incorporating evidence-based approaches into policymaking in Africa is essential for addressing pressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. Scholars like Nutley et al. (2007), Hwang (2021) -and WHO (2018) emphasize that evidence-based policies are grounded in research and are data-driven. When effectively adopted and implemented, these policies can lead to development solutions that are both efficient and responsive to local needs and promote development that is equitable and sustainable.

Given Africa's numerous resource constraints, evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) presents a strategic approach to maximizing the impact of limited resources (Uneke, et al, 2022). By focusing on methods that yield the most significant outcomes, policymakers can prioritize initiatives that align with the realities of their communities. Additionally, EBPM enhances accountability among both evaluators, practitioners and policymakers. It fosters a culture of responsibility by ensuring that policy decisions are informed by the best

available evidence, thereby supporting desired development outcomes. This commitment to data-driven decision-making can strengthen public trust in governmental institutions.

4.3. Governance challenges in Africa: Implications for development

According to Kjaer (2023) the concept of governance is defined as "the provision of political, social and economic goods that a citizen has the right to expect from his or her state, and that a state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens." Literature searches show that corruption, political instability, weak government institutions, and poor adherence to accountability, are the main features that undermine the attainment of sustainable development in Africa (Jones, 2023; Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, 2022; Smith, 2022). In this regard, to overcome this challenge Paudel, (2024) recommends that a unified strategy to address the continent's governance challenge and promote equitable development, peace and stability is necessary.

Furthermore, Paudel, (2024) declares that the African Union (AU) Commission, along with other AU member states and regional economic communities (RECs), must advocate and seek to implement norms for democratic governance. In contrast, existing literature strongly highlights that poor governance attributed to corruption and poor accountability hinders development efforts. In contexts for this study, where the above-outlined issues are dominant, evidence-based policies may be overlooked, ignored, manipulated, since policymakers may prioritize personal and political interests over collected evidence (Transparency International, 2022; Mahmoud, 2014; Jones, 2023). Poor governance, political instability, and corruption weaken the capacity for data-driven decision-making, perpetuating ineffective policies and hindering progress toward development goals (Paudel, 2024; Smith 2022).

4.4. Key barriers to evidence-based policymaking in Africa

The barriers to evidence-based policymaking in Africa are multi-faceted, with significant challenges related to governance and institutional structures. According to Conallin (2022) these barriers include inadequate training and capacity among policymakers, over-reliance on external sources of evidence, the influence of Western policies, the lack of resources, and ineffective dissemination of information. Adu, et al, (2023) argues that evidence-informed policymaking is essential to improve and economically develop Africa, as well as accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To emphasize this Naffa further articulates that today the world is engulfed with complex development problems, such as climate change, increased conflicts within and across country borders, political instability, social fragility, and weak governance to mention a few. Evidence-based policy creation is perceived as an effective and efficient way to counter these problems (World Bank, 2021a; Adu et al, 2023). Delving deeper into the challenges and barriers Africa faces when seeking to execute evidence-based policies, Botha, eta al, (2021) proclaim that another issue Africa faces are related to limited reliable data. This simply implies that many countries lack appropriate and comprehensive statistical systems to store important data. In many instances, required data is either missing or inaccurate which often affects health, education, and economic planning (Ojiemhenkele, and Ofangbonmu, 2024).

As highlighted above, literature also suggests that many policymakers lack the necessary skills to interpret and utilize evidence effectively because of inadequate training and capacity. This inadequacy leads to a gap

between available data and practical application in policy design and implementation. According to (Mukherjee et al, 2021), investing in capacity building for policymakers is crucial to bridging this gap. According to Tawiah, (2025) African countries often rely heavily on data and evidence provided by foreign agencies, which may not be contextually relevant or aligned to local needs. This reliance can diminish the relevance of evidence in local policymaking processes.

Another barrier to effective evidence-based policymaking is political instability. The continent is renowned for being home to several politically unstable governments. Africa is reported to also being home to many political leaders who often prioritize short-term gains over long-term evidence-based strategies. This challenge leads to a neglect of valuable research findings (Eden, et al, 2021; Boin, 2009; World Bank, 2021b). Bogenschneider, and Corbett, (2021) emphasizes this point and argues that frequent changes in leadership and policy directions severely disrupt the implementation of evidence-based policymaking. According to Vickery (2022), Africa also lacks policymakers that have sufficient training to interpret data towards informed decision making. This often result in reliance on external consultants who may not fully understand local contexts. Subsequently, this leads to the misalignment of policies.

Further, it is also believed that the scarcity of resources and technological advancement limits the ability of local researchers from engaging in evidence generation. Limited financial and human resources hinder the ability to collect, analyze, and utilize evidence effectively. This lack of resources can also impede the development of local research initiatives necessary for informed policymaking. This then perpetuates reliance on external sources who do not adequately understand local needs (Aker and Mbiti, 2010). To ascertain this view, Pawson (2019) declares that "evidence sourced from other regions may not always be directly applicable to culturally different African continent". Understanding of local conditions is essential when executing evidence-based policies (Pawson, *ibid*). Evidence generated in Africa is not effectively communicated to policymakers, resulting in a disconnect between research findings and practical application. As Fedorowicz, and Aron, (2021), notes, enhancing communication strategies is essential for improving the uptake of evidence in policymaking.

Western policies also influence African Policymaking. The existing imposition of Western models and policies do not account for unique local contexts, further complicating evidence-based policymaking in Africa (Kpessa-Whyte, and Dzisah, 2023). This misalignment can result in a disconnect between evidence and actual policy outcomes. Literature searches strongly propose that one of the major impacts of colonialism in African is that it brought about the under-development of African territories in many ways. According to Mbembe (2001), the colonial era imposed strict administrative structures and legal systems that continue to set and shape the political landscape and institutions for many African nations. Fast forward to today, development aid is another avenue through which western nations influence African policies. For a continent like Africa that is characterized with low levels of development, high levels of poverty and unemployment, as well as a growing income inequality gap, foreign aid is very critical but beneficial. Aid comes with regulations that promote specific governance models which reflect Western democratic ideas over local ones (Moyo, 2009; Nunn and Qian, 2014). Subsequently, Makinda et al. (2015) support this view, arguing that organizations such as the African Union often adopt policies based on international norms and standards, which can sometimes disregard local contexts.

Contrary to the above narrative, Mama (2003) argues for the importance of Africanizing policymaking by emphasizing that policies must reflect local cultures rather than those imposed by the West. For this reason,

avenues for African voices in the policymaking process must be established. Essentially, existing literature strongly indicates that the influence of Western policies on African policymaking is quite substantial, and strongly shaped by the historical legacy, economic dependency, and ideological theories (Adesanya, 2022).

4.4.1. What can be done to address barriers to evidence-based policymaking in Africa?

To overcome the challenges identified in evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) across Africa, existing literature emphasizes the need for capacity building among policymakers and institutional reforms. According to (Langer et al, 2019), equipping policymakers with the skills necessary to analyze, interpret, and apply evidence is essential. Training programs focused on data literacy, evidence synthesis, and policy design can bridge the gap between available research and its practical application. Furthermore, Mathews (2021) advocates for the establishment of local research institutions and partnerships between academia, government, and civil society to generate contextually relevant data that directly address Africa's socio-economic challenges. These collaborations can enhance the credibility and accessibility of locally produced evidence, reducing the continent's reliance on external sources.

Another significant step proposed in the literature is the development of robust data collection and management systems. Taghiyeva, (2024), stress the importance of establishing comprehensive national statistical systems to ensure that accurate and reliable data are readily available for policy formulation. Investments in technology and infrastructure to support data generation and storage are also crucial. According to Aker and Mbiti (2010), advancements in digital technology can provide innovative solutions for evidence collection, especially in resource-constrained settings. For example, mobile and satellite technologies can facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of policies in real time, offering more reliable feedback mechanisms.

Beyond capacity building and technological investment, fostering political stability and good governance is critical for effective EBPM. Literature suggests that political will is a cornerstone for evidence integration into policymaking (Stewart, et al., 2021). Leaders must prioritize long-term development goals over short-term political gains, ensuring that evidence is not sidelined for populist agendas. The American Evaluation Association Evaluation Policy Task Force (2022) recommends instituting accountability mechanisms, such as independent evaluation units, to ensure that decisions are informed by evidence. Additionally, creating platforms for inclusive participation can promote transparency and allow for diverse perspectives to be considered in the policymaking process.

By addressing these barriers through targeted strategies, African nations can build a foundation for evidence-based policymaking that is locally relevant, sustainable, and impactful in addressing persistent socio-economic challenges.

4.5. The advent of evaluations in an African context

With the advent of evaluation centred studies in Africa, many scholars have argued that evaluation measures must be tailored to reflect the unique complexities of the continent. Moving away from conventional approaches of evaluation and engaging in participatory and equity-driven evaluations that unravel the underlying mechanisms driving poverty, unemployment, and inequality is long overdue. Literature search thereby indicates that participatory-centred evaluation methods will empower marginalized voices and

facilitate a deeper understanding of local needs. Thus, helping to create an equitable and just society (Erismann et al. 2021).

The above-mentioned request is a result of the belief that conventional evaluation frameworks overlook local factors (Dlakavu et al., 2022). Fish, (2022), stipulates that current tools to evaluation are based on Western-Eurocentric paradigms. And these paradigms do not consider the unique socio-economic and political realities in Africa. It is further articulated by Fish (2022) that evaluations should be founded on principles aimed at uncovering factors contributing to poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and other socio-economic issues rather than just measuring outcomes. The reviewed literature proposes that there is a growing call for evaluation methodologies that are co-created with local communities and stakeholders (Fetterman, 2019). This must be done to ensure that evaluation results reflect the needs and perspectives of the communities being evaluated because scholars often argue that nuanced approaches that recognizes local complexities and social dynamics must be established.

5. Conclusions

This paper examined the complexities and barriers to evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in the African context, emphasizing its critical role in addressing persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. While Africa has experienced notable economic growth, reflected in rising GDP and other development indicators, this progress has not translated into broad-based improvements in living standards. Deep-rooted structural issues, weak governance, and political instability continue to undermine the continent's development trajectory.

Drawing on institutional theory, the study illustrated how governance systems, institutional norms, and power relations shape the extent to which evidence is integrated into policymaking. It found that poor accountability, rigid bureaucracies, and weak institutional capacities often obstruct the adoption of evidence-informed approaches. Additionally, donor influence and the dominance of externally driven policy models frequently marginalize local knowledge systems and context-specific solutions.

A key finding of this paper is the disconnect between the production of research and its application in policy, which underscores the need for a shift toward more participatory, contextually relevant, and inclusive policymaking frameworks. Bridging this gap requires not only technical reforms but also a transformation in how institutions value and engage with evidence.

In conclusion, while economic growth signals potential for development, it alone is insufficient to overcome entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Realizing the transformative potential of EBPM in Africa will require comprehensive reforms in governance, greater institutional accountability, and the integration of locally grounded, equity-driven policy approaches. Tackling these barriers is essential to fostering inclusive development and building more resilient and responsive policy systems across the continent.

6. Recommendations

To effectively promote evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) in Africa and address the challenges outlined in this paper, a range of strategic recommendations is proposed.

First, government frameworks must be strengthened. As noted by Chirau and Ramasobana (2022), African governments should prioritize transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in policy development and implementation. This includes establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor the integration of evidence into policymaking processes. Such institutions can help reduce corruption and ensure adherence to data-driven approaches. In support of this, Tirivanhu (2022) emphasizes the need for comprehensive training programs and workshops aimed at enhancing policymakers' capacity to interpret, evaluate, and utilize evidence effectively.

Another critical barrier to EBPM is the limited availability of resources for policymakers. Therefore, African countries must invest in local research infrastructure and data systems. Strengthening indigenous research institutions and supporting local researchers will help generate contextually relevant evidence that reflects the realities on the ground. Increased funding and institutional backing are essential to ensure the sustainability and impact of these efforts. Robust and reliable data collection and analysis systems are also necessary to inform sound policy decisions, providing timely and accurate information that aligns with national development priorities.

Moreover, stakeholder engagement should be a core element of evidence generation and use. As Tirivanhu (2022) points out, research programs must be closely aligned with local needs. This calls for participatory approaches, including public consultations, focus groups, and community-based research. Engaging stakeholders ensures that policies are informed by the lived experiences of those most affected and enhances policy legitimacy. Additionally, developing effective communication strategies to translate and disseminate research findings to policymakers is essential. This step helps ensure that evidence is accessible, actionable, and reflective of community needs.

Furthermore, African nations must critically assess the impact of international aid and external policy prescriptions on local governance and development. Countries should advocate for development models that are African led, prioritize indigenous knowledge systems, and reduce dependency on externally imposed frameworks that may not be suited to local contexts. This shift will empower nations to take ownership of their development agendas and tailor interventions to their unique socio-political environments.

Finally, communication and dissemination mechanisms must be strengthened. Leveraging technology can bridge the gap between researchers and policymakers, facilitating the timely sharing of research insights. Digital platforms, policy briefs, and interactive data tools can enhance accessibility and ensure that evidence reaches decision-makers in a user-friendly format. This will support real-time, informed policymaking and foster a culture of evidence use in governance.

By implementing these recommendations, African countries can overcome the systemic barriers to EBPM and unlock its potential to drive inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development across the continent.

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