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Pabari, Mine; Odhowa, Ahmed Hassan

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Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results
ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

POLICY BRIEF

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HOW RELATIONSHIPS AND DIALOGUE FACILITATE EVIDENCE USE

MATODZI M. AMISI
Research Associate, Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results-Anglophone Africa

MOHAMED S. AWAL
Team Leader, Ghana Centre for Democratic Development

MINE PABARI
Researcher, Athari Advisory

DEDE ABENA BEDU-ADDO
Ghana Monitoring and Evaluation Forum



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SUMMARY & KEY MESSAGES

This policy brief shares lessons from four case studies documenting experiences of evidence use in policies or programmes in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The brief explores how relationships between knowledge producers and users, and between users were built and maintained, and how relationships facilitated evidence use. It highlights the importance of establishing spaces for dialogue to build intersectoral relationships and solve problems collectively. Dialogue that is facilitated and ongoing enables actors to be aware of diverse existing evidence, to want more evidence, to understand the evidence, and to be motivated to use the evidence. This is particularly important in the African context.

KEY MESSAGES

- Monitoring and evaluation/research units within governments and parliaments can play an important role in facilitating relationships between knowledge producers and policy makers and implementers. This role needs to be considered more explicitly.[1]
- Sensitively facilitated policy dialogue spaces are essential for building relationships between knowledge producers and different users, as well as between users. To be effective these spaces need to recognise and manage power imbalances between stakeholders.
- It is important that emphasis on evidence does not outmanoeuvre community choice and voice or practitioners' experience as credible sources of knowledge.
- Planning and funding for evaluations and research needs to consider relationship-building aspects and active participation by different stakeholders, both during and after the evidence generation process.

Introduction

This policy brief shares lessons from four African case studies which sought to understand the facilitators and barriers to evidence use in policy making and implementation in Africa. The research used an analytical framework that recognises evidence use as a form of behaviour change. The analytical framework recognises that relationships are a core factor influencing the use of evidence[2]. This policy brief explores the lessons learned from the four cases about how relationships and effective dialogue mediate evidence use.

The four case studies are Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) in South Africa (Amisi, Buthelezi, & Magangoe, 2020); revision of Kenya's Wildlife Conservation and Management Act (WCMA) (Pabari et al., 2020); the improvement of sanitation services in Ghana (Smith, Bedu-Addo, Awal, & Mensah, 2020), and using evidence for tobacco control in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Mane, Diagne, & Tiemtore, 2020). The case studies were among eight case studies carried out for the book titled 'Using Evidence in Policy and Practice: Lessons from Africa' (Goldman & Pabari, 2020).

Why relationships matter

Evidence-informed policy and practice (EIPP) increasingly recognises that policy making and implementation is political. Policy is shaped by the values, culture and experiences of policy makers and practitioners, as well as technical considerations such as human resources and budgets (Du Toit, 2012; Parkhurst, 2017). Evidence use is increasingly viewed as a social process, aided by processes that promote information flows between individuals and organisations, and by collective interpretation of existing knowledge (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021). In this understanding of evidence use, relationships between different stakeholders in the policy ecosystem are critical. This is especially true in an African context where there is a strong orientation towards collective values and responsibility, living in harmony with others, knowledge is situated in culture and experiences, and leaders tend to be afforded absolute authority by virtue of their position.

> "Dialogue that is facilitated and ongoing enables actors to be aware of diverse existing evidence, to want more evidence, to understand the evidence, and to be motivated to use the evidence."

1 Discussed further in the policy brief by Goldman et al., (2021), Enhancing the knowledge broker roles of government and parliamentary M&E/research units, available at https://www.wits.ac.za/clear-aa/supporting-evidence-use-in-policy-and-practice/

2 Discussed in the policy brief by Laurenz Langer (2021) Using Evidence in Africa: A framework to assess what works, how, and why, available at https://www.wits.ac.za/clear-aa/supporting-evidence-use-in-policy-and-practice/

Relational aspects of evidence use – lessons from the case studies.

BUILDING INTERSECTORAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FACILITATING DIALOGUE DURING EVIDENCE GENERATION

The case studies demonstrated that evidence use must be considered *during* the evidence production process, not just at the end of it. Creating space for collaborative management of a research process builds on existing relationships in a sector and facilitates new ones as people get to know each other over the course of the project. For example, in the case study of tobacco control, action research was commissioned to inform tobacco tax reforms to help countries control tobacco use. A participatory approach was adopted involving key stakeholders, including the chairperson of the Customs Commission of ECOWAS. Steering committees were established in each country and regionally, and a scientific committee was set up to validate documents and procedures. These committees provided space for ongoing dialogue and debate on the research and the policy at hand. Interaction between researchers and policy actors was weaved into the action research with officials from the tax administration, customs administration and statistical bodies participating in the research. The diversity of voices participating, the involvement of politicians, and the open communication and trust between stakeholders all enabled the action research process to shape individual countries' tobacco policies and fostered collaboration within ECOWAS countries.

Steering committees or reference groups are important to institutionalise the involvement of stakeholders, but not sufficient to establish trusting relationships. There must be demonstrated commitment to collaboration, particularly from the chairperson/facilitator of the process and political leadership. In the case studies, decisive but empathetic leadership and inclusive facilitation of steering committee meetings was crucial to elicit both subject matter knowledge and the relational expertise of participants in collaborative research processes. This facilitation enabled participants to understand each other's motivation, values, and beliefs, which helps to unlock stakeholders' full participation in collaborative processes (Rickinson & Edwards, 2021).

When a key stakeholder is not able to participate in a collaborative research process, other means can still be pursued to ensure open lines of communication. For example, South Africa has a vibrant civil society sector but its relationship with government is often fraught with tension. Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a key role in policy implementation of services to women and children, but it was not possible for them to participate in the VAWC evaluation steering committee[3]. The evaluation team understood that not involving CSOs would antagonise the sector and reduce the quality of the evaluation. Therefore, strategic consultations were held with CSOs at different phases of the project to harness their inputs. The peer reviewers were also carefully selected to ensure representation of CSO voices.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATE AGENCIES

Stevens argues that the relationships and contestations that happen within and between government agencies can be decisive in policy choices, often more than policy–researcher interactions (Stevens, 2010). The VAWC case study showed that the South African government departments in the social sector and criminal justice sector had different understanding of the causes of violence, which has contributed to policy fragmentation. The steering committee offered a space to debate different interpretations of the problem and different policy positions. Although these discussions were not adequate to align the policies of different ministries, it was important that this contestation was discussed and documented.

In the Kenya case, the relationship between influential leaders in the executive and the legislature was central to the successful review of Kenya's WCMA. The two arms of government worked closely, reviewing evidence from different sources.

The cases suggest that stakeholders who need to work together to address complex social problems must have ongoing intersectoral, evidence-informed policy discussions on the nature of the problem and ways of strengthening their collaborative responses.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NON-STATE ACTORS

Contradictory evidence from a diversity of sources can be a significant barrier to evidence use in policy making. In the case of Kenya, non-state actors with different perspectives were required to engage with one another during successive attempts to revise the WCMA over the course of many years. Although unsuccessful, the attempts brought them together to negotiate evidence from different sources and perspectives and build relationships. During a further review of the WCMA in 2013, the relationships already established between non-state actors meant that they were able to present shared positions to policy makers. This meant that energy could be focused on the policy questions as opposed to negotiating conflicting positions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

In the long process of developing and implementing policy, stakeholders need to engage in effective dialogue to ensure that different perspectives are heard,

3 The Evaluation Steering Committee role was carried out by an existing intergovernmental Technical Committee whose mandate precluded CSOs' participation

a range of evidence is considered, and differences are handled constructively. Dialogue goes beyond having meetings or workshops where researchers or evaluators present findings, followed by a hurried discussion. Dialogue requires a facilitated process to build relationships and common knowledge about the motives at play in how the problem is understood and acted upon, and to build consensus on a way forward.

For example, in the Kenya WCMA case study, stakeholder forums were carefully facilitated to give all participants an equal voice, and to avoid influencing the submissions. The Parliamentary Committee convened debates between individuals with opposing views and organised breakfast meetings to give policy makers from both the executive and the legislature the opportunity to engage with experts from the sector to broaden their understanding of the realities and needs of the sector.

In the South African VAWC case study, CSOs provided inter-sectoral dialogue platforms that were facilitated with the deliberate intention to build relationships, lessen the dominance of researcher voices, disallow the use of jargon, and offer a voice to all stakeholders, including government. The sanitation case in Ghana also demonstrates that the facilitation of regular engagements to discuss the evidence at multiple levels of government fostered relationships between researchers and policy actors, strengthened trust in the evidence and built confidence to use the research evidence.

In well-facilitated dialogue spaces trust between stakeholders is often cultivated in informal interactions that happen outside of formal meetings. People get to know each other beyond their professional roles through informal side conversations and other opportunities.

HOW RELATIONSHIPS ENABLE INFORMATION FLOW

The VAWC case study demonstrates the value of interpersonal networks. The good relationships that were built up in the VAWC research process led to the government departments involved in the research being invited to share the lessons in several CSO dialogue spaces like the Soul City social innovation process and the Violence Prevention Forum. The invitations were often arranged by the researchers and CSO representatives who had participated in the evaluation process. These individuals also shared the information with other CSO actors, with other researchers, and with donors. This type of sharing, together with evidence-sharing tools used by government, ensured that the evaluation became widely known and was an important input to developing the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide.

The District League Table project highlighted in the Ghana case involves a CSO translating and transferring complex government performance data into information that can be understood by local actors and community members. The case demonstrates how established relationships between NGOs enabled the flow of information between international, national and local CSOs. The national Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation (CONIWAS) ensured that information reached smaller as well as larger CSOs.

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF POLICY ANALYSIS/M&E/RESEARCH UNITS IN FACILITATING RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing and maintaining relationships is demanding. Even when trust has been established, it can be eroded if lines of communications are not kept open or problems are not addressed. From the case studies we learn how individuals and units responsible for research/policy analysis/M&E within public institutions met different stakeholders outside of official meetings to identify needs, address problems, engage policy makers and promote the use of findings.

The Kenyan case study provides an illustrative example in that the Principal Research Officer supporting the committee responsible for the revision of the WCMA proactively reached out to stakeholders to keep them informed about the process and about opportunities to provide submissions. The chair of the committee was fastidious in ensuring transparency – documenting the outcomes of dialogues and debates and ensuring that the reasons for accepting or rejecting evidence and positions were communicated widely.

Conclusions and implications

The findings demonstrate how interactions between stakeholders facilitate the use of different types of evidence. The flow of information between actors and institutions was dynamic and multidirectional, not just researchers transferring research evidence to policy actors and implementers. Several lessons can be drawn from the case studies:

- ***The importance of quality relationships***

Quality relationships require effort; they need to be built and sustained. In an African context where being in harmony with others is valued, opportunities for intersectoral interaction are required to foster understanding and acknowledgement of actors' different motives, values, and expectations, and to build trust. When convening such spaces, it is important to be aware of the silencing effect of good relationships between stakeholders where individuals might value harmonious relationships above advocating for a position that might offend.

- ***Collaborative processes need to be facilitated***

Spaces for collaboration need to be effectively convened and facilitated. Researchers and policy actors often do not have the necessary skills to manage effective processes, particularly when dealing with complex social issues where there can be conflicting evidence,

competing interests, and differing values that are rarely acknowledged or talked about. Skilled facilitators need to manage the power dynamics between stakeholders and sensitively handle different motives and expectations. When power imbalances are recognised, when different forms of evidence are heard and there is a safe space for questioning, interpreting and learning together, actors and institutions can shift in their understanding, collaborate to solve complex problems and act.

- ***The value of collaboration has to be explicitly recognised***

The value of collaboration has to be recognised. Relationship-building activities such as attending workshops, making phone calls, meeting people for coffee/lunch, etc. takes work time. Investment in collaboration and building relationships cannot happen unless it is desired, valued, planned for, and resourced. Policies demonstrate the value placed on working collaboratively. For example, the South African National Evaluation Policy Framework (2011) set the necessary conditions to encourage collaborative evaluative processes (Goldman et al., 2015). In Kenya, public participation was promulgated as a core pillar and principle of governance under the new Constitution of 2010.

- ***Interpersonal relationships are important but not sufficient***

All the case studies show that relationships must be built at individual level and institutionalised at organisational level. Individual interpersonal relationships are the mechanisms through which individuals build trust, share information, and reach out to each other when they need assistance. However, it is important that there are institutional mechanisms established to sustain relationships and to foster dialogue. Legislation, policies and guidelines can embed collaborative work in organisations.

- ***Relationships with communities should not be forgotten.***

Community voices should be instructive in policy and implementation. Yet traditional evidence use interventions that focus on pushing research to policy actors can undermine non-research-based evidence (Du Toit, 2012; Parkhurst, 2017). Platforms for dialogue that promote interaction between researchers, CSOs, government, international NGOs, etc. can mitigate against any one stakeholder having undue influence.

In summary, interpersonal and organisational relationships that are trusting, appreciative and reciprocal facilitate crucial intersectoral information sharing. Relationship-building interventions need to be implemented during the evidence generation process and as part of follow-up and sharing the learnings. Processes to build relationships must recognise and manage power and hierarchies of knowledge to limit domination of one form of evidence, thus enabling different forms of evidence to inform policy and implementation.

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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.



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