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POLICY BRIEF

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USING EVIDENCE IN AFRICA

A FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS WHAT WORKS, HOW, AND WHY

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SUMMARY & KEY MESSAGES

This policy brief presents an analytical framework for investigating the effects of interventions aiming to support the use of evidence for decision making. The brief describes the components of the framework and how it has been applied to guide the analysis of evidence-use cases and interventions. The objective of the analytical framework is to provide an inductive analytical tool that can be adapted and applied by all stakeholders in an evidence journey and at different stages to better understand the process and outcome of evidence use. The aim is to facilitate a structured analysis of evidence use in decision making to transfer and compare findings and lessons learnt across contexts. Having used the framework to guide the analysis of the eight case studies presented, the following key messages have been identified:

- An analytical framework for evidence use supports the design and evaluation of interventions and analysis of cases of evidence use.
- Evidence use is not a passive process and the framework provides a versatile analytical tool to guide the active intervention in and facilitation of this process.
- The framework suggest three main shifts in thinking about evidence use:
  i. Centring the decision makers and their demand for evidence as the starting point for evidence use.
  ii. Unpacking evidence use interventions by underlying mechanisms of change.
  iii. Conceptualising evidence use as a behaviour change.

Background

The development of the analytical framework followed both deductive and inductive processes. As a starting point, the analytical framework draws on two existing conceptual tools to research and understand evidence-informed decision making (EIDM): the Science of Using Science framework (Langer et al., 2016) and the Context Matters framework (Weyrauch et al., 2016). We merged both these existing frameworks into a combined version. In a second step, we applied the framework iteratively across the eight case studies and reflected on its usefulness and adaptability. This process led to a revision of the initial framework and resulted in the development of a contextualised analytical framework to explore evidence use in Africa (Figure 1).

It is important to note that the two technical conceptual devices of the Science of Using Science framework (mechanisms and outcomes) are retained close to their original design and the Context Matters framework was retained as in the original. However, the revised combined framework advances on these building blocks and adds new conceptual elements in terms of: demand for evidence, evidence generation, types of evidence use, and development impact. In addition, the design of the revised framework is based on empirical data and has been applied at a primary research level enhancing its relevance and legitimacy substantially.

Why & how an analytical framework can support EIDM

The fragmented state of the knowledge base on evidence use in policy and practice motivates the need to develop a common analytical framework. An overall assessment of what works, how and why, to support evidence use is challenging as evaluations vary in their measures of evidence use, the descriptions and classifications of interventions, and the sector-specific size and nature of the evidence base. This has led to a situation in which an enormous body of knowledge on what works for EIDM exists but conclusions cannot be easily drawn from it, nor transferred across contexts. This state of fragmentation is by no means unique to the African evidence ecosystem; it applies at a global level too.

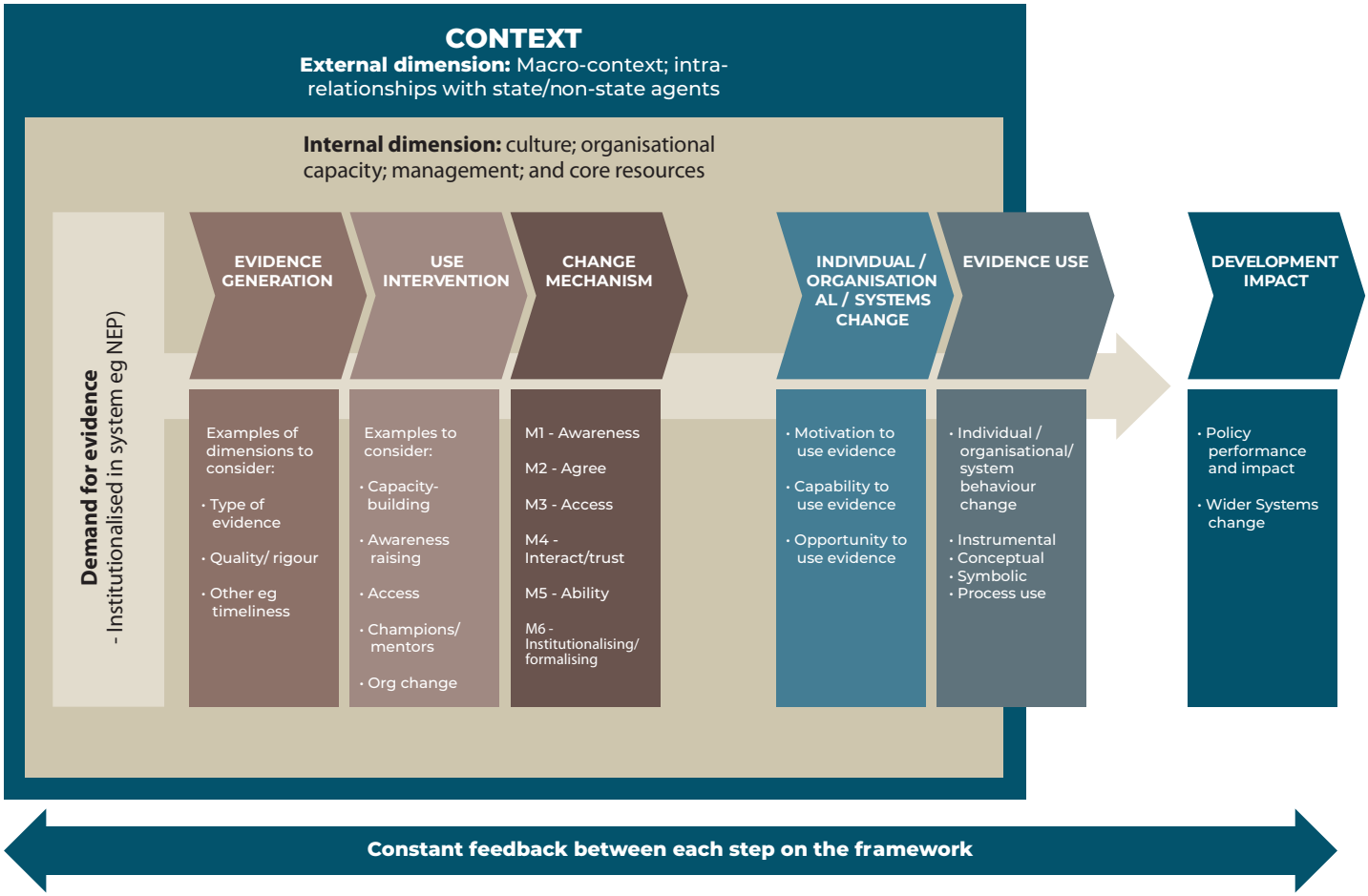
By designing a new analytical framework for evidence use in Africa, which is tested, refined and applied consistently across the regional body of knowledge on EIDM, we offer three value propositions to:

i. Structure the available research and tacit knowledge on EIDM in a consistent manner;
ii. Identify patterns in this overall evidence base;
iii. Support cross-learning and collaboration around synergies of different interventions and approaches promoting evidence use.

A framework to assess what works, how and why

The combined analytical framework consists of eight conceptual elements, as mapped out sequentially in figure 1 below. However, feedback loops affect all elements and evidence use rarely follows such a linear process in practice. Notwithstanding, the significance of each individual conceptual element remains and it is unlikely that an evidence journey takes place without including each of the eight elements presented.

Figure 1 Analytical framework (Langer et al., 2020)



EVIDENCE USE STARTS WITH THE DECISION MAKERS

The framework starts with the *demand for evidence*[1], which is assumed to be a key contextual feature that affects all other elements. The demand for evidence refers to decision makers' and evidence users' appetite and need for evidence and its integration into decision-making processes. Choosing the demand for evidence as a starting point is deliberate and reflects a more government-focused rather than researcher-focused direction and application of the framework. Both conceptually and normatively, it suggests that exploring and supporting the use of evidence requires centring of activities on the user of evidence and to assume a demand-led perspective.

This perspective is distinct from much existing research that assumes the production or supply of research and evidence to be the starting point for EIDM. The framework posits that it is the decision-making need for evidence that presents the start of an evidence journey. As a result, *evidence generation* is introduced as a second element. In this, the nature of the supplied evidence determines the potential for its use significantly. Three key elements to consider refer to the quality of the supplied evidence (e.g. is it trustworthy and relevant); the type of the evidence (e.g. are research questions and methods fit-for-purpose to address the policy need); and the specific evidence claim (e.g. does the body of available evidence and existing evidence standards support the recommendation).

EVIDENCE USE INTERVENTIONS & MECHANISMS

The third element of the framework introduces the *evidence use interventions*, which refer to any programme, instrument, strategy or activity that aims to support the use of evidence. The term 'intervention' indicates that a deliberate and tangible effort is made to intervene in the status quo in order to effect change in relation to evidence use. Examples of evidence use interventions include the training of decision makers to access and appraise evidence or the design of a departmental evidence portal to facilitate access to evidence.

There exists a plethora of different evidence use interventions and, in Africa alone, by one count, there have been over 150 different interventions (Nduku et al., 2020). Naturally this diversity and complexity challenges

1 Elements of the framework are italicised

Table 1: Evidence use mechanisms

Mechanism	Description	Example of linked activity
Awareness (M1)	Building awareness of, and positive attitudes towards, EIDM.	• Social marketing of the norm to use evidence • Awareness-raising campaigns
Agree (M2)	Building mutual understanding and agreement on policy-relevant questions and the kind of evidence needed to answer them.	• Co-production approaches between researchers and government staff • Steering committees
Access (M3)	Providing communication of, and convenient access to, evidence.	• Knowledge repositories • Communication campaigns and strategies
Interact (M4)	Interaction between decision makers and researchers to build trusted relationships, collaborate, and gain exposure to a different type of social influence.	• Knowledge brokers • Networks and communities of practice
Ability (M5)	Supporting decision makers in developing skills in accessing and making sense of evidence.	• Capacity-building (e.g. workshops and formal training courses) • Mentoring programmes
Institutionalising / formalising (M6)	Influencing decision-making structures and processes.	• Secondments • Embedded support (e.g. knowledge brokers)

an overall assessment of the relative impact of different interventions. For example, when attempting to assess the effects of EIDM mentoring in Africa, the very definition of what constitutes a mentoring programme differs by countries and professions. In order to make sense of this body of work, the framework introduced *evidence use mechanisms* as a means to structure and group diverse interventions for analysis and comparison. That is, interventions are assumed to work through underlying mechanisms of change which drive their effects and can be used to identify similar intervention approaches (i.e. approaches that trigger similar underlying *change mechanisms*). For example, a training programme for decision makers to appraise evidence and a match-making mentoring programme for decision makers with research methods specialists both work through the underling mechanism of building ability for evidence use. The framework identifies six such underlying mechanisms of change at play in evidence use interventions (see table 1) which are presented in the fourth element on the framework. Last, most evidence use interventions are likely to employ a range of mechanisms, and it is often the precise interplay of different mechanisms that unlocks change.

EVIDENCE USE OUTCOMES

The fifth and sixth components of the framework unpack the outcome of *evidence use*. A major conceptual innovation here is the use of an explicit behaviour change framework to assess evidence use. That is, for decision makers to increase their use of evidence requires a change in their behaviour. This behaviour change lens applies equally at an individual, organisational, and systems level. Conceptualising evidence use as a change in behaviour allows the introduction of intermediate outcomes facilitating such a change. Drawing on evidence-based behaviour change components (Michie et al., 2011), the *motivation to use evidence, opportunity to use evidence*, and *capability to use evidence* are presented as *intermediate outcomes of evidence use*. Evidence use interventions and their mechanisms, in the first instance, affect a change in these three intermediate outcomes.

The final outcome of evidence *use* itself is a function of the capability, opportunity, motivation interplay. Not all intermediate outcomes need to be met to achieve the final outcome, but interventions are assumed to have a higher likelihood of success if they target multiple intermediate outcomes. Finally, evidence use itself can

Table 2: Contextual influencers of evidence use emerging in the case studies

Significance of the policy challenge/ question	Commitments made to international or regional agreements
	High levels of financial investments
	Legal requirement for legislative review
Catalysts of change	Crises
	Pressure from development partners
	Pressure from civil society
Broader political and socio-cultural environment	Timing – for example, proximity to election period
	Space for public participation and civil society engagement
	Level of interest and engagement of stakeholders
Institutional environment	Systems and processes
	Evidence champions
	Leadership
	Mandates and capacities
	Culture – Learning and accountability
	Linkages and relationships

manifest in multiple forms and is best seen as a spectrum rather than a static outcome. Examples of different types of evidence use are *instrumental*, *conceptual*, *symbolic* and *process use*.

The seventh element on the framework explores the *development impact* of an increased use of evidence via changes in policy performance or wider systems change. This step is deliberately placed outside of the main framework on the far right. This separation indicates that the achievement of policy performance and subsequent improved socio-economic outcomes is out of direct control for the vast majority of evidence use interventions. For example, the legitimate causal link between a programme to train decision makers to access and appraise evidence and reduced poverty rates at a national level is thin.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Finally, the eighth element on the framework refers to the *context* in which this evidence journey, from evidence generation to designing an evidence intervention to effecting change related to evidence use and policy impact, takes place. The importance of the context for the space in which an evidence journey can unfold cannot be overstated and an in-depth exploration of contextual factors is required alongside an evidence use intervention. As per the Context Matters framework, the context is divided into an external dimension and an internal dimension. The external dimension comprises (1) the macro-context and (2) intra- and inter-relationships with state and non-state agents. Both these variables are external to an evidence use intervention and cannot be significantly affected by it; they depend on larger forces and a myriad of external actors.

The four internal dimensions of context can be more directly affected by an evidence use intervention. They include: (3) culture, (4) organisational capacity, (5) management and processes and (6) core resources. These internal dimensions only extend across the first five sections of the framework until the intermediate outcomes, while the external dimensions extend until the sixth section (final outcome of evidence use). This differentiation aims to capture that the internal dimensions of context usually are changed through the evidence use intervention itself. Last, none of the context dimensions extend to the development impact itself, as it is assumed that a different set of contexts, not linked to the evidence use intervention, affects these impacts.

Having reviewed these contextual dimensions in the empirical case studies, Table 2 highlights the most prevalent contextual influencers of evidence use identified.

Within the external context dimensions, the significance of the policy issue (e.g. commitment made to international agreements), the broader political and socio-cultural environment (e.g. space for public participation), and external catalysts of change such as crises and civil society pressures emerged as key contextual variables

affecting the evidence journey. Within the internal context dimensions, the institutional environment stood out as the most important influencer of evidence use. Such institutional factors referred to the importance of evidence champions, leadership for evidence use, and clear mandates and capacities, among others.

Policy implications & recommendations

As a conceptual device the analytical framework has few direct instrumental operational implications for policy makers and practitioners. Its main value and recommendation to the art and science of using evidence in Africa is two-fold: First, it highlights the benefits of and need to be purposive and proactive in intervening in decision-making processes in order to facilitate the use of evidence; without such active and purposive intervention a passive trickle-up of evidence is unlikely. Second, the framework introduces eight specific elements, each of which has now been validated in practice to be a useful conceptual device in planning and unpacking an evidence journey.

The collected cases studies provided a rich environment in which to test the usefulness and adaptability of the analytical framework. This empirical application facilitated both validation of, and adaptation of, the framework. In terms of validation, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners regarded the framework as helpful in understanding, promoting, and strengthening evidence use. Feedback particularly emphasised the benefits of the demand-led perspective, the mechanism structure, and the behaviour change conceptualisation of the framework. In terms of adaptation, the framework proved versatile enough to be revised based on the experiences in the case studies. These revisions included changes to the context and mechanism categories, a more nuanced unpacking of the final evidence use outcomes, and being more explicit about the reach and entry points of the applied evidence use interventions.

Going forward, the framework is intended to be a living conceptual tool to be applied, tested, and refined by EIDM stakeholders in Africa. It does not present a normative tool for how evidence use ought to be facilitated or evaluated; it presents a collection of conceptual elements suggested as relevant and beneficial when planning or evaluating an evidence journey. In this spirit, it is intended to facilitate cross-learning and joint deliberations on evidence use in Africa. Examples of stimulating such deliberations can be found in the spotlight that the analysis of the case studies has placed on the strong role of knowledge brokers and national evaluation systems in supporting evidence use. A case might be made to refine the framework to emphasise these interventions more prominently. Establishing such patterns in the evidence base and providing a common language to describe and analyse them is the main contribution of the framework to the art and science of using evidence in Africa.

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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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