



Forum Report

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Introduction

This report captures the proceedings of a two-day Evidence Informed Policymaking Forum organised by the Think Tanks Initiative in collaboration with the Master Card Foundation on 6th and 7th March 2017 in Nairobi. The Forum, co-hosted with the African Leadership Centre, sought to address how best researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders can bring timely, relevant and reliable new knowledge to bear on policy decisions in Africa. The conference also sought to explore the place and role of different actors involved in evidence informed policymaking, the rules of engagement that govern these relationships and the steps being taken to develop a culture of using evidence to influence policymaking.

The two-day Forum was a sharing and learning space for different stakeholders involved in evidence informed policy making processes in Africa, and an opportunity to identify trends, opportunities and challenges in Evidence Informed Policymaking, and to understand how different actors engage in different policy processes in Africa and how they bring data and analysis to these policymaking spaces. This report highlights the key messages and recommendations from the thematic discussions during the forum.

The politics of knowledge in Africa and the role of research and evidence in policy-making

There are various gaps in evidence informed policy making on the continent including gaps in production of evidence, gaps in uptake of evidence and capacities gap in conducting rigorous research. These gaps are shaped by a complex context that is attributed to a range of structural issues including poor education due to the colonial legacy, the appropriation of resources by a political elite, weak institutions, limited resources, donor dominance in which donor priorities, systems and methods undermine country's systems, a bureaucratic state that is not responsive to its citizens, and a dominant political economy that has led to inequality.

Key Messages:

- While researchers should be aware of the political context as they conduct their work, it is important to separate political interests and find common interests that can be engaged in with governments.
- As countries increase their uptake of evaluation in their implementation cycle, caution should be exercised to ensure that evidence actually makes a difference and does not end up becoming another mechanical exercise in government.
- Providing credible and contextually relevant evidence timely and meeting social and political needs through identification of problems can ensure that evidence makes a difference.
- A variety of factors can facilitate the use of evidence including the availability and access to research, collaboration, clarity, relevance, timing and reliability of research findings, and relationships with policymakers and researchers.

- The diagnosis stage in the evidence and evaluation cycle (namely planning/design, outputs, outcome, impact and diagnosis) is an integral element of the evaluation process that is often lacking in policy implementation and programming. Programs often run year after year without evaluations and without a diagnosis of the root causes of problems and challenges inherent in programming.
- There is a clear demand and need for capacity building and training on the use and collection of evidence from government and policy decision makers as highlighted by the work done with parliamentary committees in the Twende Mbele program, projects by AFIDEP in Kenya and Malawi, as well as the Vako Yiko program in Ghana and South Africa.

Recommendations

- There is need to focus on building partnerships across the continent and on systems including building ecosystems, cooperation among government department, streamlining systems, and ensuring that systems are fit for purpose-not only donor-prescribed.
- There is need for donors to consider supporting ongoing systems and adopt their evidence systems to support local systems.
- Researchers should maintain focus on engaging policy makers, building partnerships among institutions, countries, different stakeholders and interest groups and creating buy-in from the government.

Researchers need to better understand the political agendas affecting their area of work, be wary of systems that are dependent on Northern expertise and concentrate on building partnerships and strengthening the African evidence informed policymaking ecosystem.

The evolving context for use of evidence in policy-making in Africa

While evidence based policies are becoming a significant resource used by government to inform on policies, stimulating demand for research evidence for policymakers remains a major challenge. To overcome this challenge, there is need for senior decision makers in public institution to understand relevance of evidence in order to ensure that policies are more centred on outcomes that are in form of social interventions. Because of the volatile nature of evidence, the process of research should be continuous, with researchers exploring ways of working together, especially when approaching donors for funding, and in order to share learning as issues to be solved are similar in nature. Policy making is an inherently political process; comprising of many political actors at different levels who abide by proliferations of rules and ‘paradigms’. Evidence evolves and so does policy and as such, there should be ongoing interaction between the two.

Key messages:

- There's a need to be politically aware and savvy. Members of Parliament don't always embrace information and therefore evidence needs to be politically aligned for it to be better welcomed. Working with politicians involves providing them with incentives based on what they are already working on.
- Evidence ought to be regarded as a win-win situation where the think tank and knowledge broker know and understand government priorities to ensure that their findings and evidence is embraced.
- Realization that governments vary. For a researcher to successfully engage, they should identify the area in governance they want to influence, and what value their evidence will bring to this area. Influence is not only at the top level, other lower cadre offices that are more operational based can work as well.
- Researchers have to know what, who, when they want to influence. Additionally, researchers should know how to go about such a process by understanding that the capacity to produce has both technical and financial elements. This goes a long way to ensure timely and effective evidence.
- It is also important for researchers to know how to communicate the evidence to better influence policy. In this regard, researchers ought to learn the art of building relationships and networks that can help in their communication of evidence.
- Evidence ought to be approached as a question of justice rather than a purely intellectual and technical exercise.
- There exists a lot of academic research that is often not utilised. Knowledge generators ought to be more strategic by producing research for both long-term and short-term goals as well as diversifying the ways to engage.
- Policy makers need strong evidence to inform policies. Significant progress has been made over the years with many governments choosing to have evidence influence country policies. A glaring challenge, often assumed but important, is the inability of many of these decision makers to understand and translate evidence into policy.
- Inability to understand and consume evidence among policy makers might be an indication of lack of a strong research culture among African countries. The paradox is that these same policy makers are ignorant of this challenge and still confess ability to use this evidence.
- Often the challenge is not the lack of evidence but its poor utilisation and implementation. The task for think tanks should therefore be how to translate evidence to outputs useful to different actors.

Think tanks and knowledge brokers cannot ignore the political context- it is often a necessary evil. The question that researchers should be asking is: how do you as a researcher maintain neutrality while also doing the job?

Recommendations

- There is need to prioritize capacity building among policy makers to train them of the place of evidence in policymaking process, and its benefits.
- There is need to stimulate the demand for research evidence among policy makers by making them acknowledge that research evidence can have a significant role in actualizing their political promises. There is need for researchers to scientifically evaluate the ability of policy makers to understand, access, and use research evidence in order to design appropriate interventions.
- Where policy makers and researchers have found a common ground for an evidence informed policy formulation process, factors like corruption, incentives and funding that might derail the process must be discussed at the conceptualization stage, and interventions sought.
- Knowledge brokers should ensure that evidence is shared, understood and used in ways that respond to needs of communities in efficient and effective ways.
- Researchers have previously been faulted for using evidence to back up existing political agendas instead of using evidence to truly inform these agendas. The researcher should always produce evidence that is ethical while maintaining political neutrality through a communicative partnership with stakeholders.

Experiences of building strategic partnerships to promote evidence informed policy making in the African context

Sustaining partnerships is a delicate task. There is a clear tension between a number of actors across sectors who should be collaborating with actors such as NGOs, CSOs, academic institutions and researchers. This is mainly due to different priorities and agendas and competing interests. This directly impacts opportunities for co-creation and collaboration. Researchers need to free themselves of the erroneous assumption that government is an evidence free zone, and thus leverage past and current engagement with research to push for policy, as well as evaluate current policy. It is important to correctly identify multiple actors at multiple levels and the different roles they occupy for example county vs municipal governments, private sector as consumers vs policy-makers. Evidence networks are an important source of information in understanding how evidence is being mobilized, circulated and used, and can be leveraged to initiate partnerships and collaboration across multiple sectors.

Key Messages:

- Irrespective of the structure of a shared partnership in a research program, productive partnerships require each partner to identify with a common purpose. Funders, policy research institutions, academic institutions, civil society

organizations and the private sector all come into partnerships with unique strengths. The researcher should ensure that these contributions are translated into actionable interventions that can achieve social change.

- In governance, evidence of a good collaborations between partners means public programs are operated more strategically, as a result of application of policies that were developed from rigorous evidence. The challenge of working strategically with government is understanding its procedures and strategically tapping into them.
- Partnerships with funders have changed over time with the latter assuming an advisory, thought leader and investor role for the organizations they work with. In such cases, for new engagements to work open communication and longtime relationship building is needed.
- Collaborative practices are moving from getting partners with matching skills to those who compliment the researcher's cause. The interests must be common but partners can approach these areas of interests from different perspectives.
- From the inception of partnerships, it is important to have a guiding framework but also to allow for enough flexibility for adaptation of the different partner needs and priorities.
- Communications and time are important elements in sustaining strategic relations and partnerships. Contact should be maintained through constant communications that goes beyond immediate needs.
- Researchers now have to think of ways of engaging strategically others in order to come up with focused evidence. Like any other relationship, strategic partnerships call for careful management for them to be productive.
- The role of the private sector in evidence based policy formulation process cannot be ignored as most organizations in the private sector deal specifically with issues that policy aims to address. Private sector is often characterized by efficiency and can perform better if involved due to less bureaucracy and red tape issues. Most are willing to invest in causes they can relate to, hence relieve financial burden from government and research funders.



There is need to foster interactions among communities of evidence based research work who often work in silos. Researchers ought to learn the art of building relationships and networks that can help in their communication of evidence to better influence policy. There is need for researches to find more inclusive ways of communicating evidence to policy makers.

Recommendations

- There is need to identify and engage different levels of government for collaboration and partnerships as different levels have different priorities and levels of engagement with citizens, civil society and researchers.
- As researchers seek to engage with different stakeholders it is important for them to anticipate and prepare to manage conflicts
- It is important for researcher to have some working knowledge on journalism both the personal work profile of the journalist and the style of journalism to ensure that all aspects important in the media world, particularly timing of communications is working to the researchers' advantage.
- There is a necessity to strategically identify exactly which levels of government to target to work with, as well as to understand the ways in which governments already use and engage with evidence to provide research that is relevant to decision makers.
- Impact Evaluation as an important tool for assessing and evaluating programs and policies already on the ground, and to improve them and make changes.
- There is necessity to build capacity of the private sector to make them more engaged in the policy production process. The private sector is heterogenic in nature and mapping them to get involved in relevant research areas is a good first step.

It is crucial to find the right partners to work with, one that bring additional expertise and provide opportunities that are important to make the program work. At the beginning of a partnership each partner involved should understand their roles and responsibilities. It is important as well to carry out monitoring and evaluation against the set goals in order to establish working and effective strategic collaborations.

Lessons from evidence producers and their contribution to positive change in Africa

A variety of evidence producers in Africa contribute to positive change in Africa whether this is in Ghana's Government use of evidence in promoting effective and efficient climate public finance delivery; Evidence-informed public policy decision-making in the agricultural sector and the role of the youths in transforming West African Agriculture; Youths' and women's financial inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa or Evidence-informed empowerment of Local Governments and citizens for effective decision making and tracking of public service delivery and accountability in Uganda. There are a number of promising practices and challenges that can be identified from this.

Most promising practices.

- Budgets have to accommodate the reality including being sensitive to the needs and realities on the ground.
- Responding to a clear window of opportunity both at the technical and high level.
- Citizen knowledge creates the opportunity for citizens to speak out, articulate their own lived experiences, center their knowledge, and to be experts in their own right.
- Multi country analysis is more productive as it pertains to production of 'higher' evidence. It creates a platform of learning and sharing of information. Studies ensure data collected is real time translating to evidence that is up to date. The success of multi country analysis is ensuring proper representation of all stakeholders at all the stages.
- Multisector approaches engage a variety of factors including citizens, local governments and civil society.
- Dissemination of findings is key to the use of evidence. This including Dissemination platforms in form of community meeting, signing of MOUs with media houses to disseminate findings at the end of the cycle.

Organizations need to maintain an awareness of the context of decision-makers as well as take advantage of windows of opportunity, working in coalitions and partnerships is also an important aspect of using evidence to influence policy. The question of power asymmetry when co-creating and working in partnerships also came up, however the importance of maintaining a level of autonomy even while working within alliances was underlines.

Significant Challenges

- There is a challenge in facilitating and getting key people in the discussion and process.
- The turn-around for such projects tends to be slow and therefore there's a need to recognise that such work takes time before the impact is clear
- Change in government is likely to further slow the process.
- Risks inherent in the use of citizen generated knowledge include: disparate methodological debates and methods, ethical dimensions of research on vulnerable people and conducted by non-researchers, private sector engagement for good or ill, manipulation of information (online information), and the promotion of negative perceptions of politicians.
- There exists an underlying assumption that citizen generated knowledge is not as valid or methodologically rigorous as other forms of evidence. There is need to center such knowledge, as well as prioritize the inclusion of citizens in knowledge production, not just as subjects but as experts.

Recommendations

- Policymakers should use language that citizens understand
- There is need to stimulate funding for participatory research
- Create spaces where citizens are invited not only as recipients of knowledge but producers
- Support partnerships that already exist between researchers and CSOs
- Engage with different stakeholders: religious leaders, elders, traditional leaders
- Explore tools such as opinion polling that might have an adaptive potential
- Amplify debate-present voice and conversation as measurable impact
- Target technical and financial partners who have a strong influence on the development of programs (FAO, World Bank, UN system)
- Develop research questions in partnership with decision-makers
- Strengthen the capacities of intermediaries (journalists, parliamentarians, advisers, managers)
- Think tanks invest more in data collection as compared to implementation and use of evidence to influence policy. Focus should shift to implementation by persuading policy makers to consume evidence produced as they formulate policies.

Current trends, opportunities and challenges that global, regional and national development agendas present for strengthening evidence informed policy

There are a variety of key practices, opportunities and challenges that global, regional and national development agendas present for influencing the use of evidence informed policy formulation and implementations.

Key message:

- There is need for generators of evidence to talk to one another. There is need to break down silos among stakeholders and examine areas for collaboration in seeking common goals. This communication should begin at design stage and flow to the end, bearing in mind the political context.
- While it is important to have ‘champions’ in government that are supportive of the use of evidence in policy, it is more sustainable to have systems that can ensure that the evidence informed policymaking culture is created in governments.

- Researchers should have no illusion that they will be able to influence policy simply because they have done good research. Policy is not about responding to one research finding but being sensitive to data available.
- It is important to identify who is producing knowledge. Think tanks are increasingly becoming consultants and their role therefore partisan. The funding that goes to knowledge production also influences the evidence produced.

Political buy-in is key and researchers should be aware and more nuanced in their understanding of political buy-in. Researchers and knowledge brokers should also identify entry points to political spaces and agenda such as at the African Union. Relatedly, to better engage politicians, knowledge brokers must co-identify problems with political leaders as they prepare their agendas and manifestos not when they are already in government.

Recommendations

- In addition to partnerships between governments and research institutions, there is need to pair identified champions with a systemic approach to dealing with the issues including locating champions at the local level.
- Organizations involved in evidence informed policymaking ought to apply an inclusive approach from the inception of any project in order to widen their net to include all vulnerable groups that are often left out in these policy influencing processes.
- Sometimes, the policies are decided before the evidence is gathered. There is therefore need for more capacity building in research in order to empower policy makers to understand the implication of certain actions and for them to understand what bad policies look like.
- Funding for evidence based policy as a field of study is starved of finances generally. All stakeholders including funding organizations should fund systems that can establish a culture of evidence informed policy.
- There is need to move away from the local level to a global level to understand areas of engagement and to understand the debate from a broader perspective
- There is need for Knowledge brokers to extend their work to inform policy makers of the consequences of their policies as policies are political decisions.
- Research needs to be home grown for it to better influence policy makers. There is therefore need to increase the capacity of the people on the ground, communities and evidence consumers.
- There's not enough learning from what is done. As efforts are made to ensure evidence informs policies, existing policies should also be evaluated to see what worked and what did not work.

- Researchers should embrace personal engagements as opposed to many written policy briefs. A good relationship can be an incentive to partners and also work towards making research more demand oriented.

Research based evidence needs to be politically aligned and researchers should align themselves with policies in the country. The work of researchers is not independent of the government. Depending on the context, there's need for political sensitivity.

Building collaboration between actors in the Evidence Informed Policy ecosystem that can better work together to achieve impact

Evidence informed policymaking in Africa is best done as a collaborative effort. Stakeholders involved are as diverse as the policy issues at hand. Collaborations over the years have proved to be effective in finding solutions to public policy issues. Policy makers might not have enough knowledge on policy issue, a vacuum that can be filled by vibrant research evidence. It is important therefore for researchers to assert themselves in the policy making processes by providing relevant research evidence. At the same time, a variety of incentives can support collaboration and the building of relationships among different actors.

Key Messages:

- Government and research funders want accountability for the resources they have put into research, in terms of impact achieved. It is difficult to measure social impact as compared to scientific impact. This is due to many different impact groups involved in the research and impact is different for all of them.
- There are new and previously unconnected actors around the table, which provides new opportunities for co-creation and collaboration, as well as the strengthening of the African evidence ecosystem. Despite this however, there are people missing around the table who might have an interest in how the evidence is disseminated, collected, and used. Such groups include: traditional elders, local government experts, religious leaders.
- The best way to understand incentives is by understanding how different actors collaborate in different ways for evidence informed policymaking. Once the problem is identified all stakeholders should be a part of the agenda setting to ensure better inclusivity.
- Often when looking at incentives, money is not the issue. Changing the actors' mindsets is more important and in cases where money has to be offered it should be provided within boundaries of the project.

- In overcoming disincentives, researchers should know when the relationship has run its course as after a while fatigue sets in and the goals and objectives change. Additionally, researchers should learn how to manage expectations and to let go of what did not work and learn from it.
- Institutional incentives are more sustainable than individual ones. Knowledge brokers should be wary of the fact that bureaucratic procedures often guard the paths of evidence. Moreover, engaging civil servants has the advantage of ensuring continuity.
- There are both financial and non-financial incentives. The non-financial incentives are as important as the financial ones. These include but are not limited to forums similar to the TTI/MasterCard Foundation African Evidence Informed Policy Forum to share experiences and for the cross-fertilization of ideas. Such spaces act like a market place encouraging collaboration and making clear the gaps in the relationship and efforts towards evidence informed policies.
- In addition to the tangible outputs, intangible outcomes such as the relationship forged between various actors should also be measured. Evidence can be in form of contributions to debates for example (intangible ways of evidence use); these are the more common uses of evidence.
- Rules or engagement between stakeholders involved enable complementarity, save on resources, and help in building resources through collaborations. Through working together evidence can be disseminated widely.

Recommendations

- The progress from evidence production to end-users needs to be further unpacked. As such, the role of knowledge brokers including the media, publics, as well as non-person issues such as politics and information ought to be acknowledged. When looking at incentives, all knowledge brokers should be considered.
- The issue is not whether evidence matters but the kind of evidence that is most useful to policy makers. As such, knowledge generators should take the end users approach- for example, if working with the African Union they should use and align their work to the African Union's agenda 2063. The knowledge generators' entry point should be to understand what they're trying to achieve and to locate the place of evidence in this goal.
- Evaluation should be included at the planning phase of the project instead of at the end of the programme in order to help them know how to report outcomes. Evaluators should also be able to understand the theory of change.
- There is a need to strengthen the relationship with funders. Think tanks should for example use the periods between funding cycles to build relationships with funders and avoid engaging funders only when receiving grants.

- Since impact is a long term objective and sometimes difficult to measure, defining the end game of a programme from the beginning is crucial in understanding what the outcome will look like.
- There is need to strike a balance between country needs and the needs of donors in order to address the accusation that donors set agendas in policy matters in African countries. This can be done by creating general rules of engagement.

Relationships matter as an incentive in evidence production and use. There are three points to bear in mind in building such relationships. First, often relationships disintegrate and as such there is need to pay attention to such changes. Second, integrity is central to building such relationships. Third, knowledge generators ought to have a track record that will ultimately guarantee collaboration.

Conclusion

The two-day forum affirmed the fact that evidence has always been important to policy makers and politicians, but the ways in which decision makers are engaged and brought to the table is key. At the same time, there already is a significant body of evidence produced through research. The focus should now move on how to ensure this evidence actively affects policies in African countries. Additionally, in carrying out of research to produce evidence that informs policies, including different stakeholders is key. Researchers need to make their research outputs accessible and understandable for ordinary people. This will allow them to better position themselves to engage with policy actors that seek to represent the needs of the general public. Moreover, there is need to utilize a variety of strategies and methods in building partnerships, advocating and collaborating with different stakeholder groups, and engaging in and stimulating policy decision-making.

This event was only the beginning of the conversation on how to better foster the use of evidence in policy in Africa. More events of this nature are being organized in the coming months and should bring the conversation even further. In this context, we hope that this forum will have contributed to the emergence of a culture around using evidence for policy making on the African continent.

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