



evidence-based policy in development network



# Politics of research-based evidence in African policy debates

Synthesis of case study findings

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# Contents

	<b>Contents</b>	<b>i</b>
	<b>Tables, figures &amp; boxes</b>	<b>ii</b>
	<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>iii</b>
	<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Country case study findings	2
1.2	Methodology	3
<b>2</b>	<b>About research-based evidence and policy: conceptual considerations</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Approaches to understanding research and policy	5
2.2	Research-based evidence, power and politics	8
2.3	The case for policy debates as a focus of attention	13
<b>3</b>	<b>Research findings: what affects the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates?</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1	What role for research-based evidence?	19
3.2	Debate-specific factors	20
3.3	Factors relating to discourse and understanding of evidence	23
3.4	Proximate agency-related factors	31
<b>4</b>	<b>Research-based evidence in African policy debates: conclusions</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>44</b>

## Tables, figures & boxes

### Tables

Table 1: Case studies	5
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### Figures

Figure 1: Research-based evidence in policy debate framework	20
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## Abbreviations

<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
<b>AMA</b>	Accra Metropolitan Assembly
<b>DFID</b>	UK Department for International Development
<b>EBPDN</b>	Evidence-based Policy in Development Network
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agricultural Organization
<b>GM</b>	Genetically Modified
<b>GMO</b>	Genetically Modified Organism
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>IDRC</b>	International Development Research Centre
<b>JCTR</b>	Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
<b>KATC</b>	Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goal
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PASGR</b>	Partnership for African Social and Governance Research
<b>PELUM</b>	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management
<b>PICOT</b>	Partners in Conflict Transformation
<b>RAPID</b>	Research and Policy in Development Group
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USAID</b>	US Agency for International Development



## Executive summary

This paper presents the findings of a year-long research project—‘The Politics of Research Uptake’—which contributes to the evolving discussion regarding the relationship between research and policy by considering the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates. The notion of a ‘policy debate’ in developed countries is directly associated with debates over evidence and its role in advancing political purposes, as a number of recent examples demonstrate. Applying this consideration to the African context, this paper takes a wider view of the policy process—in which policy debates are understood to be an integral part of policymaking—by examining the role of research-based evidence in four case studies on diverse policy debates in sub-Saharan Africa:

- The eviction of street hawkers in Accra, Ghana;
- The HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill, Uganda;
- The introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Zambia; and
- Reform of the chieftaincy, Sierra Leone.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To characterise the policy debates studied in order to provide a reference point for further work on policy debates in Africa;
- To identify what affects research-based evidence use, including a consideration of different types of evidence used; and
- To identify the implications for the research–policy discussion and ways to support the use of research in policy debates.

The use of evidence, and what evidence is used, cuts right to the heart of discussions of how policy—and in particular controversial policy—is formed, supported and framed. Policy in developed and developing countries is often considered ‘evidence free’ and instead formulated on the basis of political expedience, values or ideology. However, it is argued that research–policy discussion must recognise and actively engage with different ‘types’ of evidence which in the African policymaking context play a crucial role in the policy debates studied.

The concern with *research-based evidence* and the policy process is by no means new, but has been given added impetus during the past two decades; in the Western world, ideologically driven politics are thought to have given way to a pragmatism which values policy based on evidence rather than conviction. ‘Evidence-based policy’ has become a byword for policies considered scientifically sound, objective, long term in focus and—implicitly—‘better’ than policies not based on research-based evidence. This is increasingly an international development issue around which international donors are rallying, based on the belief that an effective policy (although what this constitutes is subject to some debate) requires a survey of the ‘facts’ informing its design and implementation.

There are a number of ways to interpret how policy is made and the role of research-based evidence in this process. This research principally makes use of two models which highlight i) the indirect, ‘framing’ role research can play in the policy process (Weiss, 1977) and ii) the political nature of research use. Based on an understanding of research-based evidence and its fundamentally ‘political’ use, it argues that political context is central to understanding the role of research-based evidence in policy. Further, policy encompasses competing claims to ‘legitimate’ knowledge, and the role of policy discourse and narrative in creating the parameters around research-based evidence is central to policy debates, as are different types of evidence or knowledge aside from research-based evidence, namely, practical and communal knowledge.

This relates directly to issues of knowledge and power (Jones et al., 2012), which highlight the different types of competing knowledge that can inform the policy process, drawing on theorists who tend to view the production of knowledge as an expression of power relations (see Autes, 2007; Foucault, 1991). Some argue that what counts—and should count—as evidence also includes evidence gained from practical experience and community-based or ‘citizen’ knowledge (Jones et al., 2012). This is as opposed to ‘scientific’ models which demand objectivity and claims to universal validity, which often fail to acknowledge the politicised, subjective nature of research findings. Thus, when thinking about the influence of *research-based* evidence in policy and within policy debates, it is necessary to account for *other* forms of evidence: no argument made in relation to policy is based on *no evidence*, so the task is to think about what evidence it *is* based on.

The valuing of other forms of knowledge reflects a turn in the democratisation agenda, which in the past two decades has increasingly favoured citizen-led approaches to development, reflected in a particular narrative which invests the poor and marginalised with the power to inspire bottom-up change. However, there is an oft-uncomfortable partnership between democratisation and good governance on the one hand, and the reality of citizen participation on the other, alongside a potential tension between providing space for citizen voice and quality of evidence.

### What are policy debates?

Here, **a policy debate is understood as a contested policy issue involving any number of actors** who contribute to the debate by offering an argument relating to any aspect of the policy, for instance the policy problem, policy options, means of implementation and monitoring and evaluation. A policy debate can take place in a single space as a one-off event (in which case the number of participants is limited), or can occupy a limitless participatory space over a period of time. This paper is concerned with the latter.

Policy debates are often conducted with reference to political interests and faulty evidence, with each participant in a debate coming to the table with a particular ‘ask’ and understanding of the policy problem. Debates are thus **unequal playing fields: they are made up of participants who possess varying objectives, expectations, capacities, understandings, motivations and commitment**. Importantly, only some of these may be made explicit, given the potential for some actors not to think and act in a unified manner. For instance, actions may not reflect stated values, or stated intent may not accurately reflect actual intent.

### Findings

The use of research-based evidence in the policy debates considered was relatively high, particularly in Zambia, where the contours of the debate on the introduction of GMOs into the country were defined—at base—by arguments referring to different sets of evidence regarding the safety and benefits of GM technology.

However, it would be easy to overestimate the *role* research-based evidence plays. Even when it is used, research is often poorly referenced and seemingly selective; the full implications of research findings are poorly understood; and the logical leap required to move from research cited in relation to a specific policy problem (e.g. HIV/AIDS transmission trends in Uganda) to the policy prescription or solution proposed (e.g. the criminalisation of HIV/AIDS transmission) is often vast. Sometimes, research-based evidence plays almost no role, and arguments on one or more sides of the debate are driven by personal prediction, assumption, reflection on past precedent and commitment to the idea of progress. The case studies each emphasise the role of different types of evidence, particularly that arising from citizens, or the grassroots.

To explain the role of research-based evidence, a three-pronged framework is suggested, wedding the framing role of discourse and dominant cognitive understandings of what constitutes knowledge or evidence with proximate, agency-related factors to explain the role of



research-based evidence in policy debates. The findings are organised around the three 'clusters' of factors:

- *Debate-specific factors*, relating to the locus of a debate and the perceived existence of a policy debate;
- *Discursive and cognitive factors*, relating to how policy debates are framed, how research and evidence are understood and research capacity at institutional level; and
- *Proximate, agency-oriented factors*, relating to the political, tactical and strategic factors that intersect with the nature of the debate and the discursive and cognitive aspects of policy debates identified.

Key findings to explain the role of research-based evidence are as follows:

1. The case studies indicate often limited awareness or cognition of self-participation in a policy debate. Given the non-linear nature of policy debates, it is difficult for individuals to locate themselves in any sort of linear narrative which could be said to constitute such a debate. This affects participation, and thus reduces the potential role of research-based evidence for actors who might use it. Meanwhile, perceptions of the existence of a policy debate, combined with interest in the subject of the debate, are not always conducive to research-based evidence use, and can in fact derail the debate somewhat.

2. While actors appeal to the labels of 'research' and 'evidence', there is scope to suggest that some do not understand or reflect on these terms well, and that what may be seen as a framing ('enlightenment') role for research-based evidence may in fact illustrate a failure to distinguish between research-based and other types of evidence or knowledge. Certainly, narrow 'Western' understandings of research-based evidence fail to account for much of the evidence actually used in the policy debates studied, with practical and communal evidence often taking centre stage. *Whose understanding of evidence* and who is presenting evidence therefore become central questions in understanding the role of research-based evidence in a policy debate.

This is explained with reference to the *framing* (rather than direct) role of research-based evidence, and the existence of popular concepts, ideas and narratives permeating policy debates which are often assumed to be based on, or to be interchangeable with the use of, research-based evidence.

3. The framing role of research and of popular concepts, ideas and narratives is also the result of active engagement by actors in which understandings of research and evidence are paramount. The discourse/s framing the policy debates studied need to be further qualified with reference to both other types of evidence and how they are differentiated (or not, as the case would seem to be), and how wider understandings of evidence are reflective of deep-seated capacity problems felt to varying extents in the case study countries. These relate to education, research and attitudes and practices which privilege oral over written evidence.

For instance, an interesting rationale in the policy debates studied is the importance of a common, shared experience rooted in history, tradition and culture, which has formed the foundation of an argument which runs: *I am/we are/do, therefore I/we should*. The conflation of 'is' and 'ought' employs the weight of history, tradition and culture to bestow legitimacy on a situation: evidence of the existence (in some sense of the survival) of a practice is deemed evidence that a practice *should* continue.

Further, the way in which research and evidence are understood and employed as concepts within a debate is symptomatic of much wider capacity issues which have meant the theoretical and conceptual theories underpinning the notions are ill-understood. At the least, there is an increasing consensus—and an emerging evidence base—that evidence 'literacy' among African *policymakers* is low (e.g. Banda, 2012; Uneke, 2012). However, what is being

argued here is that to focus only on the capacity of policymakers misses a more fundamental, structural lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence in Africa, leading to—as this paper details—little in the way of differentiation between types of evidence.

This is compounded by a privileging of oral testimony, which has arguably given rise to a culture of the spoken, rather than the written, word. This now presents an enormous challenge to African administrations, with little precedent for writing things down, leading to huge problems in terms of information management, institutional memory and of course documenting evidence. This results in personal testimony being given great credence and legitimacy, whereas written research is seen as something that 'white' people do. This very real dichotomy between being 'African' and employing the standards of seemingly 'Western' scientific reasoning acts as a barrier to incentives to improve capacity in the field of research and the employment of arguments based on research, acting on both an individual agent level and a societal (structural) one.

4. Proximate, 'political' factors relating to agency also explain not only why research-based evidence might play a role in a policy debate, but also why it may not. Research-based evidence was found to be used in a number of circumstances in which the following factors were influential:

**Coherence with policy position:** Is research-based evidence being used selectively? Is it being used by actors who support or resist reform? To what extent is it used to inform—rather than support—a policy position? What is the relationship between existing research and users of that research?

**Commissioning and undertaking of research:** Which actors have commissioned or undertaken their own evidence, and with what purpose (e.g. informing, supporting)? Who undertook the research, and why were they commissioned? What discrepancies might exist between a research product and a policy position, and how is this resolved?

**Use of popular ideas, concepts, and narratives:** How does research-based evidence use ideas, concepts and narratives which make up a discourse, and vice-versa? What other kinds of evidence are used? Which ideas, concepts and narratives are being used and/or supported, and why?

**Availability of research:** What research-based evidence is available? Who undertook and funded it? What gaps exist and why? What barriers exist to the generation and communication of research?

**Involvement of international actors:** What role have international actors played in funding and communicating research? How have they influenced policy and research priorities, questions and methodologies? What interests and incentives do they possess in influencing i) the debate and ii) evidence used in a debate? How do these interests and incentives intersect with those of national actors?

**Like-for-like evidence:** What different policy objectives and policy questions exist? How does this relate to the availability of research and the role of international actors in framing policy and research priorities? Are i) arguments and ii) research-based evidence used in arguments like-for-like? How has this affected the debate in terms of demand for evidence and development of the debate?

However, when considering why the role of research-based evidence is smaller, this paper argues that this cannot be explained in terms of a 'lack' (of capacity, of research, of funding, of space for dialogue, of ownership) which can be filled (more capacity, more funding, more dialogue, better access to research); rather, it is not being used *because there are significant incentives not to use it*. *Instrumentalisation of lack of capacity*—which makes itself known in areas other than research-policy in Africa—thus describes a situation where there are

significant advantages to a lack of capacity (assessed – in admittedly ill-defined – terms of the capacity to undertake, understand, and use research-based evidence), and/or significant disadvantages to improving this capacity (again, in this case, measured in terms of research-based evidence). The situation is thus sustained and in fact *instrumentalised* in order to fulfil a number of varied and interrelated objectives, including resistance to reform, the defence of national identity and autonomy and avoidance of scrutiny.

## Implications and recommendations

1. **Researchers are supported to promote ‘my’ research, with little acknowledgement of the inevitable political interests, constraints, pressures and incentives research is a product of, nor of its discursive context.** The research findings also support a wider, less short-term approach to supporting the role of research-based evidence in policy in Africa by focusing on the discursive and political context in which a policy is debated and research-based evidence understood.

2. Indeed, a more fruitful—and significantly more considerable—undertaking would be to move away from narrow attempts to support particular organisations and individuals, whose research ‘impact’ must be quantified, measured and assessed; and instead to turn our attention to **improving the quality of policy debates to enhance the ability of people to discuss policy using critical thought.** While this does not remove the politicisation of how research is undertaken, used and understood, it does provide greater scope to identify, acknowledge and challenge how policy arguments are formed and employed.

3. In relation to this, a central part of any effort to improve policy debates in Africa needs to **address levels of understanding relating to research methodologies and the philosophy of science**, in order to help users of evidence understand and appreciate the limitations of particular evidence and locate an approach to gathering evidence among wider discussions about what constitutes valid evidence and rigorous research. At first, this may mean more rigorous analysis of what constitutes ‘capacity’ to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence.

4. Further, approaches to supporting ‘better’ policy debate would also include **supporting the role of ‘mediators’ to analyse debates**, thereby creating something of linearity in a debate in which evidence gaps can be identified and public demands for research-based evidence made and filled.

5. However, the ‘more’ argument is not the full story. In some cases, what appears to be a lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence cannot be addressed purely through ‘more’: ‘more’ capacity, ‘more’ research and ‘more’ links between researchers and policymakers. **Based on recognition of the potential for the instrumentalisation of lack of capacity**, it seems the situation is often far more complex, and requires an honest analysis and assessment of the reasons why not using research-based evidence might be a desirable state of affairs.

This paper offers tentative conclusions open to critique and interpretation based on what is, I think, an attempt to provide an honest account of the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates. This has been done in a way that confronts head-on the potential limitations of policy discourse in many instances, as well as the serious capacity gaps which exist among actors engaging in policy issues on the continent. This paper has identified a variety of entry points for researchers wishing to pursue this further, and it is the aim of this paper that this will come to fruition.



# 1 Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a year-long research project—‘The Politics of Research Uptake’—contributing to the evolving discussion on the relationship between research and policy by considering the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates. The notion of a ‘policy debate’ in developed countries involves considerations of how research is being used for political purposes. Recent examples of such debates in the US and the UK have covered the use of research-based evidence in drug classification (Monaghan, 2011); the prosecution of sex workers (Wilson, 2012); and the effects of climate change (Park et al., 2010). Questionable evidence is, in these contexts, the catalyst for an issue becoming a ‘debated’ policy.

Applying this consideration of a policy debate to the African context, this paper takes a wider view of the policy process by examining the role of research-based evidence in four case studies on diverse policy debates in sub-Saharan Africa:

- The eviction of street hawkers in Accra, Ghana;
- The HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill, Uganda;
- The introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Zambia; and
- Reform of the chieftaincy, Sierra Leone.

Commissioned by the Evidence-based Policy in Development Network (EBPDN) and the Research and Policy in Development Group (RAPID) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Politics of Research Uptake project is attempting to initiate an open discussion on the relationship between policy debates, research-based evidence and the context in which policy debates take place. Policy debates here are treated not as external to the policy process, but as an integral part of it. By framing the discursive context in which policy is made, a debate directly and indirectly shapes it.

This emerging area of work represents an initial step towards understanding this relationship and developing a more robust approach to studying how research-based evidence is used in policy debates and formulating subsequent action in Africa based on the realities of how policy debates are conducted. The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To characterise the policy debates studied in order to provide a reference point for further work on policy debates in Africa;
- To identify what affects research-based evidence use, including through a consideration of different types of evidence used; and
- To identify the implications for the research–policy discussion and ways to support the use of research in policy debates.

Rather than attempting to trace the impact of a particular piece of research on a given policy or taking the formation of a policy as the primary focus, each case study aims to probe the ‘politics’ behind the role of research-based evidence in a policy debate in sub-Saharan Africa. It does this by identifying i) the role of research-based evidence in the policy debate; and ii) factors which account for or help explain this role. The research is predicated on the tacit assumption that in sub-Saharan Africa, where political institutions do not enjoy the precedent they do in many Western countries; where cultural, social and political norms have often curtailed freedom of speech; and where education systems face considerable challenges and critical underfunding at tertiary level, the role of research-based evidence is likely to be limited in comparison with that in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations.

This paper is an attempt to synthesise the research findings, largely through an assessment of the role of research-based evidence in the policy debates studied. While the study title refers to 'politics', it is important to note that the research found that the politics surrounding a debate was not the only set of factors affecting research uptake. During the course of the study, the focus came to encompass wider sets of factors relating to attitudes to and understandings of evidence, as this paper demonstrates.

## 1.1 Country case study findings

This paper is based on four case study papers, the principal findings of each summarised below.

In **Ghana**, research-based evidence was found to play a relatively weak role in the debate on the eviction of street hawkers from congested areas of central Accra, although claims to possess 'research' and 'evidence' abounded. Importantly, the policy follows a precedent set in the 1980s, and seems to have been transmitted with little reflection or questioning, despite the apparent existence of evidence to demonstrate the policy's failings. The lack of research-based evidence was attributed to the perceived limited capacity of the local authority (the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, AMA) to undertake, use or communicate its evidence; limited interest from the international community in supporting research in this area; and the prevalence of other types of evidence, namely, appeals to human rights and tradition on the part of those defending the presence of street hawkers and an assumed communal 'common sense', combined with popular notions of hawker 'backwardness' by those who supported the removal of hawkers.

This case study highlights an important dichotomy in the perception among those interviewed between people in Ghana/Africa and those in 'the West': the latter were associated with written evidence and the meticulous recording of detail, whereas the former preferred to rely on the 'word' of a person with power. The case study also shows a lack of agreement on the policy 'problem' in the debate, which has led to different research questions, and that, while the national government (allegedly) possessed road safety statistics which justified the removal of street hawkers, research-based evidence on other aspects of policy (e.g. the assessment of policy options and of the capacity for implementation; monitoring and evaluation) seems to have been absent.

In **Sierra Leone**, the provision and use of research-based evidence in the debate over the reform of the chieftaincy was found to be one-sided: an organised campaign, funded by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), commissioned a renowned British researcher to undertake a background research report which served to support the campaign's policy recommendations.

The report, which collated research on the subject over the past 40 years, was not met with a like-for-like undertaking: lacking an organised defence and the capacity to formulate research questions and to commission and use research, chiefs rely on personalised, anecdotal statements of their own experience; more widely, defenders of the chieftaincy appeal to tradition and the value of culture. Meanwhile, those who defend the chieftaincy, largely chiefs and government figures, tend to dispute the evidence gleaned from research or reject arguments *ad hominem* as politically motivated attacks on an African institution by foreign actors armed with Western concepts such as good governance and human rights.

Unsurprisingly, significant political incentives are thought to exist not to reform the chieftaincy. Considering the serious limitations to undertaking, using and understanding research-based evidence in Sierra Leone, this case study proposes that, at a more general level, lack of capacity to engage with research-based evidence is used instrumentally in Sierra Leone in order to 'stall' the debate and resist reform.

In **Uganda**, where the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill has been in draft form since 2008, the existence and use of research-based evidence on both sides of the debate is more widespread than in Ghana and Sierra Leone. However, research-based evidence was found to have both a framing and a political function, with appeals to research-based evidence vague and indirect or used to bolster a preformed position. Further, as in Ghana, research-based evidence appears to have played some role in understanding the 'problem' but little in informing the 'solution'. The debate itself has been characterised by different objectives on the part of the participants, leading to the use of evidence which is not like-for-like.

The role of research-based evidence is thought to have been limited by a number of factors, including a lack of communication from the HIV/AIDS Parliamentary Committee explaining its evidence base for the Bill, despite research having been undertaken; a lack of demand for this evidence base on the part of civil society; the dismissal of civil society's opposition to the Bill owing to a perception that it is 'foreign influenced' and not applicable to Uganda's reality; the influence of negative stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes against people living with HIV/AIDS, especially sex workers; and the application of the claim to 'research' to the collection of community perspectives and opinions, particularly in the case of the committee.

In **Zambia**, the debate over the introduction of GMOs following the government banning of GM foods in 2002 shows high use of research-based evidence among both supporters and opponents of GMOs. The analysis was therefore focused more squarely on why *particular* research-based evidence was not being used. Importantly, the question of 'legitimate' evidence in the Zambian context is paramount: a common refrain was that research used was not applicable to the country.

Influences over what research-based evidence has been used include the research questions asked or policy objectives being served (e.g. health impacts of GMOs, effects of GM technology on the agriculture sector) combined with wider perceptions and understandings of what the debate actually constitutes (i.e. what is being debated); international involvement in the debate, leading to support to both sides of the argument, with respective sides criticised for being in the pockets of international NGOs, governments or biotechnology companies; what research has been funded; and, relatedly, what research has been made available to the public. On this latter note, it was found that the government of Zambia's reluctance to talk about the evidence—aside from what is contained in the draft GMO policy—had led to the debate reaching something of a stalemate.

Overall, the case studies indicate that there is often little awareness or cognition of self-participation in policy debates. Given the non-linear nature of such debates, it is also difficult for individuals to locate themselves in any sort of linear narrative. Meanwhile, research-based evidence appears to beget research-based evidence within policy debates. Finally, perceptions of the existence of a policy debate, combined with interest in the subject of the debate, are not always conducive to research-based evidence use, and can in fact derail the debate somewhat.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study has not proceeded on the basis of any hypotheses regarding the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates, nor of the factors which influence this, but is—as suggested—based on a relational understanding of the policy process which considers policy debates a key part of the process (see Section 2 for a statement regarding the theoretical grounding on which this research question is posed). Further, in aiming to consider more thoroughly African policy debates and the treatment of evidence within them, this study implicitly suggests this is a fruitful yet relatively unexplored area of enquiry. The approach taken is therefore exploratory, using case studies to collect and organise data. In origin, this

method is strongly inductivist, although this is compromised significantly by the existing frames of reference that ground this research area.<sup>1</sup>

The fieldwork for each of the case studies took place over a period of three weeks (with the exception of the study on Sierra Leone, which was undertaken over a longer period of time in-country), during which time the author was hosted by an EBPDN or Mwananchi partner organisation which provided logistical support and initial contact information with interviewees when possible. The host organisations played no part in the writing of the case studies themselves, however, and are not responsible for the study's content.

The case study approach was adopted in order to provide in-depth information about a limited number of policy debates, spanning a varying time period depending on the specifics of the debate itself. Case studies, in some cases known as 'episode studies', are a way of observing a given unit of analysis in a specific context, over a specific period or at a certain point in time. While social phenomena cannot easily be 'isolated' in this way, case studies do offer a way of focusing on empirical issues in a single case in order to inform understanding of a larger set of cases (Gerring, 2007, in Booth, 2008). Case studies tend not to be used as part of experimental research designs in which variables are manipulated—which this research does not use—but are strongly aligned with exploratory research designs—which this research does use.

The four case studies were not selected on the basis of comparability; in fact, the studies are by their very nature incomparable. This does present some limitations in terms of the synthesis of findings and attempting to avoid falling into the 'one-size-fits-all' trap. The weaknesses of such an approach are manifold; while it may allow for the emergence of interesting and innovative perspectives relating to the subject matter, the comparability issue represents a significant challenge. This owes in part to the nature of the approach in itself, but also to the fact that the research set out with a very broad agenda, albeit directly informed by the research-policy literature, with very little in the way of a guiding data collection framework or checklist for researching policy debates.

Booth (2008) considers the comparability challenge with reference to Africa and recounts the ongoing debate between Patrick Chabal, whose approach to analysing the African state suggests that generalisation based on individual cases is, at the very least, the best option available to researchers, and Oliver de Sardan, who is sceptical of the generalising tendency among scholars on African politics. All that this research can do is articulate an awareness of the limitation; it cannot try to overcome it at this stage. However, further work in this area may make it possible to collect more comparable data, with a narrower subject focus. This could entail comparing policy debates in a country or sector; tracing the role of a particular set of evidence or specific actor in a policy debate; or further developing how a policy discourse is embedded in historical, cultural, socio-political and linguistic precedents.

The case study locations were selected on the basis of the researcher's interests and experience, and RAPID's engagement with organisations in the countries through either the Mwananchi programme (Ghana, Sierra Leone, Uganda) or EBPDN (Zambia). The case study countries are all Anglophone multiparty democracies, although there are obviously differences in the political systems of each. The policy debates themselves were chosen on the basis of their being relatively current, widely debated and largely controversial. The issues each relate to policies in different sectors, involving different actors, at different stages of the policy process. In only one case (Sierra Leone) was the policy debate (chieftaincy reform) aligned with the host organisation's programmatic work. The author was familiar with each of the debates investigated and their inclusion reflects this. However, the author had not undertaken any research work on the policies prior to the current project.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Section 2. For instance, the notion of evidence-based policy is not neutral, nor—it could be posited—evidence based.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, in Sierra Leone, the author had a greater degree of programmatic involvement with the policy debate under investigation, leading to more exposure for one side of the debate on chieftaincy reform.



This study used a mixed methods approach to data collection, relying on a review of relevant literature, including news items, to ascertain the contours of each debate and identify relevant interviewees. Each case study was informed by an average of 25 interviewees who bore some relation to the policy debate. Interviews were conducted largely using a semi-structured methodology, although unstructured interviews were also conducted. A handful of structured interviews were conducted via email. The purpose of the interview varied according to the interviewee, although the thrust of the questioning related to i) arguments being made in relation to the debate; ii) what these were based on; iii) and why they were based on this (vis-à-vis other factors). Interviews often also yielded previously unseen documents which were of vital importance to the debate.

**Table 1: Case studies**

Country	Policy debate	Sector	Fieldwork period
Ghana	Decongestion of Accra Central Business District: eviction of street hawkers	Urban planning/management; social welfare; employment; transport	October 2010
Uganda	HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill	Health; justice	December 2010
Zambia	Introduction of GMOs	Science and technology; health; trade	April–May 2011
Sierra Leone	Reform of the chieftaincy	Local government; justice; service delivery	May–July 2011

## 2 About research-based evidence and policy: conceptual considerations

This section aims to provide a basic framework for understanding the issues that inform the subject of the research by first introducing various approaches to understanding the policy process as it relates to evidence-based policy and the use of research. In this, it highlights both the political nature of how research is thought to be used to frame policies and the importance of claims to legitimate knowledge made through different types of evidence. This is followed by an attempt to better articulate the understanding of ‘policy debate’ on which this research is based, and why policy debates are important.

### 2.1 Approaches to understanding research and policy

In understanding *policy*, this research takes its cue from Anderson (1997: 172), who describes it as a ‘purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors’ over a period of time. This suggests that policy is a *process* or set of processes rather than a single act or document. This process is understood to consist of numerous aspects, including, for instance, the setting of an agenda, an evaluation of options and the implementation of a decision (Kingdon, 1984, in Carden, 2009). However, this research also recognises the political nature of policymaking and its inextricable link with power over material, relational, discursive and ideational resources, in that policy can both reflect existing power relations and propagate them. This is captured in Jones et al. (2009), in which policy is understood as a ‘plan of action, usually based on certain principles and decided on by a body of individuals [...] designed to administer, manage and control access to resources’ (4).

The use of evidence, and *which* evidence is used, cuts right to the heart of discussions on how policy—and in particular controversial policy—is formed, supported and framed. Policy in developed and developing countries is often considered ‘evidence free’ and instead formulated on the basis of political expedience, values or ideology. However, it is argued that research–policy discussion must recognise and actively engage with different ‘types’ of evidence which—as the findings in Section 3 demonstrate—in the African policymaking context play a crucial role in the policy debates studied.

*Research-based evidence* is a wide-ranging term used to describe the way in which findings are arrived at—scientific, independent, academic, rigorous, subject to validation and open to critique. The perceived objectivity of scientific enquiry, which arguably narrow understandings of research-based evidence is thought to encapsulate, is epitomised by Bertrand Russell, who describes the ‘scientific outlook’ as ‘the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes, and interests as affording a key to the understanding of the world (Russell, 1918 [1913]: 46). The debate over what constitutes a scientific method—and how this is related to the sphere of social enquiry—is directly relevant yet too vast to tackle here.

Research is undertaken by a number of actors, including university departments, research institutes and think-tanks associated with policy research. Following on from Crewe and Young (2002), *research* is understood to constitute a process which ‘aims to investigate, learn and produce knowledge by gathering information, contemplation, trial, and/or synthesis’ (3). Practically speaking, this could refer to action research or academic study ranging from: ‘a pilot project, to a laboratory experiment, a consultation exercise, a quantitative survey, a literature review, participant observation or a participatory evaluation. It might be led by beneficiaries, development practitioners or academics from scientific and social science disciplines’ (ibid.).

Research is undertaken for different reasons, with ‘academic’ research tending to be supply led (although this is increasingly thought not to be the case) and policy-oriented research largely demand led and often in the form of a consultancy.

The concern with research-based evidence and the policy process is by no means new, but has been given added impetus during the past two decades. In the Western world, ideologically driven politics is thought to have given way to a pragmatism which values policy based on evidence rather than conviction. ‘Evidence-based policy’ has become a byword for policies considered scientifically sound, objective, long term in focus and—implicitly—‘better’ than policies not centred around research-based evidence. This is increasingly becoming an international development issue around which international donors are rallying, based on the belief that an effective policy (although what this constitutes is subject to some debate) requires a survey of the ‘facts’ in order to inform its design and implementation.

The notion that policy should be based on—or at least informed by—evidence is not a novel suggestion, although in the past 15 years the evidence-based policy ‘mantra’ (Mendizabal, forthcoming) has increasingly permeated policy discussions. A pillar of the UK’s New Labour party project (see Monaghan, 2011), the evidence-based policy agenda has come to wield a critical influence in the area of international development in two principal ways:

- Ensuring donor policies and subsequent activities are based on evidence of ‘what works’, an approach galvanised by the recent recession and greater scrutiny of the impact of donor funding in developing countries; and
- Supporting developing countries to improve their use of research in order to achieve development objectives, encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Needless to say, much of the literature on evidence-based policy originates from OECD countries such as the UK, the US and Canada where—given that they have invested significant proportions of national budgets into generating research—there is an interest in ensuring a

tangible level of research uptake. Importantly, however, demonstrating that policy is based on evidence is not enough: governments in OECD regions have been criticised for the *misuse* of evidence in controversial areas such as nuclear power, medical vaccinations, climate change, food technology and the dangers posed by weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Decision makers have been accused of ‘cherry picking’ evidence and researchers favourable to their cause, and ignoring the rest. This criticism implies the existence of ‘other’ (more legitimate) evidence. Herein lies the crux of the matter: competing claims to what is ‘legitimate’ evidence provide the basis on which a policy debate plays out.

In order to understand the ‘received wisdom’ on which the evidence-based policy agenda in developing country contexts is based, it is useful to try to reformulate the generic argument underlying much of the work being done by organisations such as ODI and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in this area. As indicated, there is a near-unanimous agreement that evidence-based policy in developing countries is something to be supported and promoted through a number of strategies, including establishing links (sometimes in the form of networks) between researchers and policymakers; enhancing the amount and quality of research being undertaken; and equipping researchers and ‘intermediaries’ (such as NGOs and the media) with tools to help them influence policymakers—largely tantamount to improving the way in which research is communicated and disseminated.

As mentioned, the evidence-based policy agenda is premised on the belief that a greater use of evidence will lead to more effective (and, in a development context, more ‘pro-poor’) policies (e.g. Carden, 2009; Young, 2005). The evidence base for this claim is itself not overwhelmingly conclusive, given difficulties not only in asserting what is an effective policy, but also in dealing with counterfactuals (i.e. proving that evidence would have a particular effect), although Carden’s (2009) survey of over 20 case studies provides, it is argued, ‘hard evidence’ that research enhances policy in developing countries (1). On the whole, however, what exists are examples of where the use of evidence has led to the formation of policies deemed successful, as well as an identification of areas where policy that is not taking into account evidence is also not particularly successful (e.g. South Africa’s response to HIV; fiscal policies in many African countries prior to structural adjustment).

### Models for understanding how research-based evidence influences policy

There are a number of ways to interpret how policy is made and the role of research-based evidence in this process. It is unlikely that one model can account for all policy processes: the reality is that policy processes differ according to political context. ‘Traditional’ research–policy models were based on a ‘logical’ understanding of how decisions are made, characterised by a number of sequential stages controlled by decision makers. Traditional policymaking models imply that the question over whether a policy decision is evidence based is a foregone conclusion: in a seemingly rational sequence of events, it is assumed that available evidence would have been considered prior to any action being taken. This model has largely been discredited for being overly simplistic and lacking in appreciation of the political dynamics which underlie not only what evidence gets used but also what evidence gets produced (e.g. Crewe and Young, 2002).

However, the rational, linear policy cycle model ‘has given rise to the idea that policy engagement can somehow be relatively neutral’, whereas this is not the case (Jones, 2011a: 3). In direct contrast with the logical model, Clay and Schaffer (1984) refer to policy as an arbitrary ‘chaos of purposes and accidents’ (192) dependent on a multitude of actors in what is essentially an unpredictable context. Subsequent and less extreme ‘interactive’ perspectives have built on this insight, exemplified by Keeley and Scoones (1999), and retain an understanding of the policy process as unstructured, non-linear, pluralist and dependent on unforeseen changes in context. Emphasising the role of actors other than decision makers, the enduring contribution of the model has been to shift perspective from the point of view of the policymaker to actors previously understood to be somewhat external to the policy process

(e.g. the media, lobby groups, research organisations). These actors have differing resource bases and tactics, and therefore different levels of influence which can be subject to analysis.

The interactive model captures the fluid nature of policy making and its participants, although the question of how and when research influences policy is left relatively open. On some occasions, research finds little scope for influence unless it is being used as 'ammunition' to defend long-held ideas which effectively serve to help justify a pre-decided policy. This 'political' understanding of the role of research bears a close association with both 'tactical' and 'problem-solving' models. The former suggests that, while research can be used to demonstrate government action or responsiveness, it has had little bearing on the actual formation of policy. The latter suggests research is used to 'plug a gap' about a predefined policy area and problem. In both of these models, it is clear that politics comes first. There are many cases where this would seem to be the case, such as in the use of positive evaluations to demonstrate success or the commissioning of research within narrowly defined questions which lend themselves to a particular solution.

But research can also influence policy in a less explicit way, and here the insight of Carol Weiss (1977) is of prime importance. Weiss posits the 'enlightenment model' of research use as the most accurate way of describing how policy has been influenced by research. Instead of being the direct result of a study, set of findings or body of evidence which has a traceable, linear bearing on a policy, in reality the role of research is often to indirectly frame the context policy is formulated in, with policymakers more generally influenced by concepts, ideas or theoretical constructs. In this model, there is no assumption that policymakers even seek research in their decisions; instead, it is argued that policymakers have a 'sense' that research has influenced their ideas and approaches, even though they may be unable to cite specific pieces of work. This model is likely to have direct bearing on how policy debates can be read, particularly in terms of how policy discourse and policy narratives (see Section 2.2) are sustained.

Weiss's approach has influenced the emergence of a number of related approaches, including the 'incrementalist' model (e.g. Neilson, 2001), wherein policymakers are seen to 'muddle through' with incremental reforms rather than sudden, dramatic changes based on a rational assessment of self-interest, with research potentially contributing to a gradual shift in perceptions about an issue in a process of 'enlightenment'. Stevens (2007; 2011) has added to this mix the 'evolutionary' model, predicated on Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism, in which the survival of an idea is dependent on whether it is consistent with the ideas of those in power, thus creating a reciprocal relationship between the idea and the person who carries the idea. In response, Monaghan (2010) has articulated the 'processual' model which, in keeping with Weiss, argues that the role of research should be interpreted in a broad sense, with research that 'survives' the evolution process often being utilised, but not necessarily for its intended purpose (i.e. policy outcome).

While it is recognised that, at times, each of the above explanatory models may be employed accurately to explain the role of research in a policy debate, the discursive nature of what constitutes a debate (see Section 2.3) lends itself to the 'enlightenment' and 'processual' models of research uptake, on the basis that, if research has a framing and shaping function but not necessarily a direct impact on a policy outcome, a policy debate becomes the key locus for analysis. The following section provides a better idea of what is meant by discourse, and its relation to power and the policy process.

## 2.2 Research-based evidence, power and politics

Based on an understanding of research-based evidence and its fundamentally 'political' use, this section argues that political context is therefore central to understanding the role of research-based evidence in policy. Further, it is argued that policy encompasses competing claims to legitimate knowledge, and the role of policy discourse and narrative in creating the parameters of research-based evidence is central to policy debates, as are different types of

evidence or knowledge aside from research-based evidence, namely, practical and communal knowledge.

Despite the existence of numerous models to explain the interplay between research and policy, the relationship has proved difficult to conceptualise, particularly in developing countries, where ground-level data on how things 'work' are arguably lacking. That policymaking, and the use of evidence in policymaking, is highly political is widely assumed, as is the fact that the direct influence of research in policy is relatively low.

In sub-Saharan Africa, this has been attributed to low research capacity, which has historically been described as weak (e.g. Stolper, 1964) and a major factor in the continent's development problems. Central to this is political context, in which ruling governments may adopt a 'divide and rule' approach to policymaking rather than encouraging research-policy cross-fertilisation (Hansohm and Naimhwaka, 2005); research supply and demand may be affected by political support and interests, low capacity to communicate research (Pellini and Serrat, 2010) and attitudes of policymakers towards research (Surr, 2002, in Court et al., 2002); and, further, research may be subject to the demands of political life which call for short-termism and quick political wins, often driven by ideology, values and beliefs.

For instance, Phil Davies—former Deputy Director of the Government and Social Research Unit in the UK Cabinet Office—has argued that 'researchers and policymakers have completely different concepts of what constitutes good evidence' and in order to be influential researchers should bear in mind that policymakers 'will take more or less anything that can help them to make a decision that seems reasonable, has a clear message and is available at the right time' (Davies, 2005). This coheres with findings from research undertaken by Court and Young (2003) in which, although the role of evidence was found to be more important than Davies suggests, the authors argue that the 'key issue' determining whether research has had any influence is whether research provides a solution to a problem (akin to the problem-solving model), and further that research uptake is greatest when communicated and 'packaged' well in what amounts to a clear influencing strategy.

The recognition that the policy process and the role of research within it is political, and that for a researcher to influence policy this must be understood and acted on, points towards the need to understand political context to enable research (although in practice this tends to amount to a *particular* piece of research) to reach the right decision maker and subsequently be read, understood and operationalised. One of the most influential approaches to understanding the research-policy context as a basis for planning how to ensure research (or a particular piece of research) informs policy is the RAPID framework, first articulated 10 years ago (Crewe and Young, 2002) and reformulated more recently (e.g. Young and Mendizabal, 2010). The framework offers four variables in explaining the relationship between research and policy: i) political context; ii) evidence; iii) links between researchers and policymakers; and iv) external influences (including donor partners).

On paper, this may not appear too revolutionary, but in practice the realisation that, no matter how good evidence is, contextual factors need to be taken into account if that evidence is going to be influential has given birth to far more sensitive 'politically aware' influencing strategies. This has led to advice which includes ensuring new ideas are packaged in familiar theory or narratives (see below); using participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation; and effective and face-to-face communication (see Young, 2005). However, the framework demarcating political context from evidence, research-policy links and the external context is not straightforward; for instance, in many cases, distinguishing political context from external influence (e.g. aid, foreign direct investment) is a difficult task. More needs to be done to articulate the grey areas in between these elements, as this research indirectly sets out to do.

More recent work has focused on the relationship between knowledge, policy and power (e.g. Jones et al., 2012), leading to interesting insights regarding the different types of competing

knowledge that can inform the policy process, drawing on theorists who tend to view the production of knowledge as an expression of power relations (see Autes, 2007; Foucault, 1991). Foucault, for instance, famously surmised that there exists 'no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (1991: 27). This perspective leads to an interest in the discursive aspects of policy and how it is influenced, highlighting the importance of how policy is communicated and 'justified' in public discourse, in line with previous insights from Juma and Clarke which view policy 'as argument' (1995, in Sutton, 1999).

When it comes to research uptake, this approach has much in common with Weiss's enlightenment model, where policy arguments are seen to be framed by ideas and concepts arising out of research, but not necessarily arising directly from particular research. The enduring contribution of Weiss has been to emphasise that these ideas and concepts operate within particular paradigms, frames of reference and worldviews, often in ways that are not intended (Monaghan, 2011). Interestingly, here we see how research might indirectly influence the context in which subsequent research is undertaken, understood and used. The notions of 'policy discourse' and 'policy narrative' are important here, and have proved instrumental in informing the analysis of policy debates. Sutton (1999) offers a description of both terms.

*Policy discourse* refers to a particular way of thinking and arguing involving the political activity of 'naming' and 'classifying' and excluding other ways of thinking. Discourses are associated with manifest speech, language and communication, as well as the categories and labels used. Although neo-Marxist approaches have emphasised the need to deconstruct discourses which serve to act as tools of oppression, discourses have also been seen as akin to 'meta-narratives' such as Marxism,

in which a catch-all worldview which cannot be disproved excludes alternative interpretation or refutation (see Popper, 1959 [1995]). This originates from the work of Thomas Kuhn, who analysed scientific revolutions in terms of shifts in cognitive 'paradigms' arising out of changes in values presided over by power holders (Jones, 2009). Critics of the contemporary aid system, for instance (although by no means random), often refer to international development as a 'discourse' which has a monopoly on claims to the 'truth' (e.g. Abrahamsen, 2000: 21).

*Policy narratives* are distinct from policy discourses. While discourse refers to a wider set of values and ways of thinking, the policy narrative is an expression of discourse, providing a understandable narrative 'story' to furnish the discourse and practical examples which serve to confirm the broader set of values and beliefs embodied in a discourse. The story outlines a course of events which has gained the status of conventional or 'received' wisdom.

Evidence often challenges these narratives, but they are persistent, and not just because they simplify complex issues and ultimately function to reduce uncertainty, order and 'manage' development situations and thus reduce the 'room for manoeuvre' (Clay and Schaffer, 1984) for policymakers to search for policy alternatives or understand the complexity of a situation (Jones, 2009). On another level, policy narratives persist because they support and feed into broader discourses in the interests of decision-makers. The 'keep it simple' mantra in the field of research communications is a direct reflection of the existence of policy narratives: research findings are encouraged either to be packaged in familiar narratives, as discussed, or to be presented in a way which provides a new narrative to an existing discourse.

International development provides a rich source of examples of narratives, with the research-policy arena permeated by the keep it simple maxim. This state of affairs is not without its

*A discourse will define the set of cognitive tools available to approach a policy problem, as well as the channels through which to communicate this. This amounts to what has been described as a 'policy paradigm'.*

critics and challengers, with Francis Cleaver and Tom Franks (2008) reflecting critically on their experience of being compelled by policymakers to reduce the complexities of their research findings into simplified bite-sized in order to cater to policymakers 'too busy' to read long and detailed research findings. Enrique Mendizabal writes of the dangers of researchers being responsible for 'dumbing down the audience' by failing to resist demands for simplified research findings (Mendizabal, 2010). David Booth relays the difficulties that his research programme has confronted in challenging the dominant narrative which holds that bottom-up demands for service provision in Africa are effective (Booth, 2011).

The notion of a structuring discourse furnished by discourse and narrative has wide implications for the role ascribed to agency in the policy process, and also poses obvious questions as to how to best go about influencing policy in such circumstances. However, it is possible to argue too far that discourse (and its accompanying narratives) forms a totalising umbrella which determines all behaviour, thought and interaction. In its most extreme Foucauldian form, this line of argument—in which everything is discourse, and discourse is an expression of inescapable and inevitable unequal power relations, and that even resistance to a discourse remains a function and perpetuator of that discourse—leads to something of a dead end in terms of accounting for how discourse arises, evolves and changes, which it does.<sup>3</sup> While the agency–structure debate remains unresolved in the literature, in recognising the existence and importance of discourse and narrative in explaining the influence and persistence of certain ideas and concepts in policy discussion it is not the intention here to disregard the role of agency in interacting with discourse in the research–policy process.

*The evidence-based policy agenda is itself not value neutral or non-partisan, with attempts to help researchers influence policy in developing countries often amounting to an attempt to help a **particular researcher** and their **particular research** gain influence.*

### What constitutes evidence?

If international development discourse is infused with legitimating narratives, is research-based evidence—and *should* it be—the only form of legitimate knowledge in the policy process? It has been argued that a focus on research-based evidence is both descriptively inaccurate (failing to account for other types of evidence) and normatively biased towards evidence deemed objective, scientific and legitimate, thus trumping forms of evidence arising from both practice- or community-based knowledge.

Putnam Kumar, an Indian social scientist, describes evidence as 'competing knowledge claims' (Kumar, 2012), conveying the idea that evidence is essentially subjective and must compete to gain legitimacy as 'truth'. Indeed, the evidence-based policy agenda is itself not value neutral or non-partisan, with attempts to help researchers influence policy in developing countries often amounting to an attempt to help a *particular researcher* and their *particular research* gain influence. This is addressed by de Grassi (2007) who argues that 'practice-oriented literature' produced by organisations engaged in the area of research communications and policy influence seeks to 'provide tools that can

*Research does not take place in a vacuum: the commissioning, designing, framing, undertaking, communication and use of research are linked to power and claims to authoritative knowledge.*

be used by individual organizations to promote their own particular viewpoints, rather than a broader democratic reform in the way science and policy are approached in a society' (7).

<sup>3</sup> Stevens (2007) argues that to rely on Foucault in trying to explain the policy process is 'doomed' (25).

Categorising much of the work to support researchers to influence policy in both developed and developing countries as 'business and marketing models', this critique offers a pertinent critique of how the evidence-based policy agenda plays out in practice. This relates to the much wider issue of whether the promotion of evidence-based policy exalts 'scientific' research-based evidence without appreciating that even the most scientific of research does not take place in a vacuum: the commissioning, designing, framing, undertaking, communication and use of research are linked to power and claims to authoritative knowledge. Carol Weiss, for instance, has recently warned against conferring unquestioned legitimacy on research, questioning the 'apparent assumptions about the virtues of research' (in Carden, 2009: xiii) in which the label 'research' grants a seemingly automatic status of 'rightness' on a piece of knowledge.

*When thinking about the influence of research-based evidence in policy and within policy debates, it is necessary to account for other forms of evidence: no argument made in relation to policy is based on **no evidence**, so the task is to think about what evidence it **is** based on.*

The evidence-based policy discourse is 'increasingly permeating the entire discipline of policymaking' (Monaghan, 2011: 25), but in doing so is thought to potentially de-value forms of evidence (or knowledge) not seen as based on traditional forms of research, but which can play a significant role (e.g. Lomas et al., 2005). Some argue that what counts—and should count—as evidence also includes evidence gained from practical experience and community-based or 'citizen' knowledge (Jones et al., 2012), rather than scientific models which demand objectivity and claims to universal validity, which often fail to acknowledge the politicised, subjective nature of research findings. When thinking about the influence of research-based evidence in policy and within policy debates, it is necessary to account for other forms of evidence: no argument made in relation to policy is based on *no evidence*, so the task is to think about what evidence it *is* based on.

It is widely recognised that, whereas in areas such as fiscal policy, research-based evidence remains paramount, in some policy areas, such as natural resource management and agriculture, different types of evidence will be brought to bear on policy (Jones et al., 2009). While research-based evidence entails a process of research arriving at a set of findings, undertaken for a variety of reasons and audiences, and by a variety of actors, evidence (or knowledge) can also refer to the following.

*Practical or 'practice-informed' evidence*, derived directly from experience of practice in a particular field: practical evidence can be transmitted through an organisation or institution which has a history of, for instance, implementing policy and has built up a stock of know-how based on evidence of what has worked and what has not, and also gained on an individual basis through on-the-job learning. According to Jones (2011a), practical evidence is largely tacit but, when formalised and explicit, refers to knowledge on organisational processes and practices (including operational values and principles). Legal evidence or knowledge is also thought to constitute this type of evidence. Practical evidence can be made explicit through research, however, using approaches such as action research tools.

*Citizen knowledge* (also communal, grassroots, indigenous or traditional knowledge) is evidence deriving from people, both as individuals and in collective form. This evidence or knowledge reflects daily lived experience, is 'highly tacit' (Jones, 2011a: 9), and is unsurprisingly an area which has been subject to considerable debate in international development. Supporters of approaches which attempt to collect and use citizen-derived evidence, using tools such as participatory rural appraisals and citizen report cards, argue that 'indigenous' knowledge has huge potential in the reduction of poverty (e.g. Chambers, 1997; Herring, 2007), supported by work undertaken by anthropologists on how 'evidence' or



'knowledge' is conceptualised in non-Western cultures. In Africa, for instance, Powell (2006) describes the Kiswahili *ubuntu* and Gyekye (1995) explains the Twi notion of *nyansa* as collective and shared knowledge, based on a communal lived experience.

This reflects a turn in the democratisation agenda, which in the past two decades has increasingly favoured citizen-led approaches to development, reflected in a particular narrative which invests the poor and marginalised with the power to inspire bottom-up change. In turn, participatory development has become a popular *modus operandi* for development agencies, and *participation* therefore a powerful buzzword (Cornwall and Brock, 2004). Directly connected to participation is the notion of citizen *voice*, in which public preferences, needs, perspectives and *knowledge* are (descriptively and normatively) incorporated into development planning and national policy processes. Increasing participation in policy processes in order to ensure evidence from the grassroots plays a part in decision making is, therefore, a way in which the perceived domination of Western conceptual understandings of legitimate evidence can be countered, interestingly and importantly often at the behest of Western development actors themselves.

This type of evidence is not, however, without its problems and has been subject to considerable debate. Some question whether the drive towards valuing 'indigenous' knowledge may compromise the quality of evidence, and thus policymaking (e.g. Newman, 2011). Further, welcoming the contribution of citizen-based evidence may ironically fly in the face of democracy in providing a platform for traditional and customary knowledge to gain legitimacy and instrumental value. These are the very same type of claims to knowledge that the democratic agenda in authoritarian countries was thought to have eroded (e.g. Diamond, 1989). There is an oft-uncomfortable partnership between democratisation and 'good governance' on the one hand and the reality of citizen participation on the other,<sup>4</sup> alongside a potential tension between providing space for citizen voice and quality of evidence.

Further, as indicated, the space for participation is by no means neutral: they are often 'invited' spaces framed by a particular discourse or narrative; tokenistic; or manipulated by elites (e.g. Cornwall and Coelho, 2004). Gathering evidence at the grassroots provides significant scope for politicised (and not necessarily representative) demands and inaccurate knowledge, for instance in the case of needs assessments, which Fanthorpe (2003) describes as having created a 'moral economy of grievance' in Sierra Leone. Further, evidence emerging from citizens or communities can be collected and used through participatory research tools, and thus serve to become research-based evidence.

Hard-and-fast distinctions between different types of evidence are therefore hard to sustain. This is very important when considering how evidence becomes legitimate: *who* collects and presents evidence is a major factor in deciding what value is placed on types of evidence. With this in mind, the paper now turns to policy debates, in which these forms of evidence all play a part.

## 2.3 The case for policy debates as a focus of attention

At base, this section recognises that this research takes policy debates to be desirable, both in terms of policy and on a wider level, for the development of a critical and aware society. This section articulates how policy debates are being understood and why they are relevant to both understanding the policy process (and the role of research-based evidence in it) and, more widely, the political context in which policymaking occurs. An understanding of the role research-based evidence plays in policy debates is developed based on both enlightenment and processual approaches to the influence of research in policy, in which both the framing role of discourse and the political nature of policy debates are emphasised.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than viewing this as a fundamental and irreconcilable tension, however, the standard response to this criticism is that what is needed is more 'sensitisation' to ensure the expressed views of poor citizens cohere with those of the international development community.

Here, a **policy debate is understood as a contested policy issue involving any number of actors** who contribute to the debate by offering an argument relating to any aspect of the policy, for instance the policy problem, policy options, means of implementation and monitoring and evaluation. A policy debate can take place in a single space as a one-off event (in which case the number of participants is limited), or can occupy a limitless participatory space over a period of time. This paper is concerned with the latter. While the notion that policy, and thus policy debates and the evidence used in them, is highly politicised endures, this research is predicated on an understanding of debating as a positive practice in which society moves to greater understanding, as open debate leads to disproving of arguments and ultimately leads us to 'less fallible' explanations as Stevens (2007: 25) highlights.

'Policy debate' as a concept is not well-served in the literature, with even less attention being paid to policy debates in sub-Saharan Africa. While there does exist an extensive body of literature which describes what constitutes a formal debate, largely in the context of educational institutions, the literature on policy debates tends to approach the subject with a specific interest in the area of policy being debated rather than the form and function of the policy debate itself. This literature, largely from the US and the UK, extends the label of 'policy debate' to controversial issues with high political stakes, which are often well-covered in the media. The label therefore suggests a prior awareness of the politicised nature of the arguments at play in a debate.

Importantly, when anyone analyses and produces research on a policy debate, this means they have engaged with and contributed to it: in effect, they become part of the policy debate. Thus, through critical engagement and the translation of knowledge of the policy debate being analysed, the policy debate is conceptualised, made linear and indeed becomes a debate rather than a disparate set of arguments, events, publications and action. The media, for example, may report a policy debate in a relatively objective fashion, but in so doing turns a policy issue into a debate which the writer and/or media house is then wholly part of.

As well as being inevitably shaped and subject to constant reformulation as they are discussed, researched and analysed, policy debates are, by their very nature, closely aligned with debates over evidence. As suggested in the introduction, policy issues have tended to gain momentum and attention in the public eye, at least in OECD countries, when there appears to be a discrepancy over the evidence used to justify a proposed policy or policy change. Sometimes this occurs because new evidence emerges which is thought to disprove or at least cast doubt on the existing evidence base; sometimes evidence of political interference or interests emerges; and sometimes a policy is simply at the nexus of competing research findings. The escalation of a policy issue into a policy debate hinges on questions surrounding political interests and selective or faulty evidence. Most debates can be read in this way, and thus are a fruitful entry point for understanding the context in which policy is made and the way a society 'thinks' and 'speaks'.

*The escalation of a policy issue into a policy debate hinges on questions surrounding political interests and selective or faulty evidence. Debates are thus a fruitful entry point for understanding the context in which policy is made and the way a society 'thinks' and 'speaks'.*

Debating can be traced back to Ancient Greece, and has long been associated with the rational 'dialectical method' of arriving at truth, knowledge or wisdom promoted by philosophers such as Socrates and the Sophists, and later by G.W.F. Hegel (in the 18th century). Through its association with the dialectical method of resolving a disagreement, debating has also been associated with oratory, performance and rhetorical devices to convince and persuade others to a particular (the opposing) point of view. Debating retains a direct association with Western liberal democracy, whereby in a rational

process of collective deliberation a conclusion and/or consensus is reached. Debates are traditionally conceived of as constituting two ‘sides’ which engage in an adversarial face-to-face conversation, a good example being that of the UK Parliament.<sup>5</sup> In some debates, a ‘winner’ is declared after deliberation by an arbiter or set of arbiters.

Policy debates do not have a declared winner, however, in which the quality of arguments and supporting evidence are the assessed criterion for success. Indirectly, this may be because the winners of policy debates are those who, in time, a policy proves to benefit, favour or derive support from.

Policy debates, then, take place over a longer period of time, with ill-defined and fluid participants and sides, in which key questions and issues changing in accordance with policy context. However, the skills required to engage well in a policy debate, as well as the benefits bestowed on the participant, are arguably the same as or similar to those in a debate. An ‘intellectually rewarding’ process (Faules and Rieke, 51, in Parcher, 1998), debating or ‘forensics’—which largely refers to oral debating activities confined to a single place and time with finite participants—is widely considered a tool to gain skills in communicating arguments effectively, thinking critically and engaging with the arguments and evidence offered by the opposition. McBath (1984) has described debating as employing an ‘argumentative perspective’ which ‘involves the study of reason given by people as justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values’ (11). Creating an argument in a debate, he surmises, ‘is one of the most complex cognitive acts that a person can engage in. Creating an argument requires the research of issues, organization of data, analysis of data, synthesization of different kinds of data, and an evaluation of information with respect to which conclusion it may point’ (ibid.).

Critical thought is seen as an essential tenet of an enlightening debate, but also as an outcome of a well-evidenced and well-argued debate. Critical thinking (to be distinguished from the narrower critical thinking methodology, e.g. Ennis, 1996) and argument function to probe and discern ‘faulty arguments, hasty generalisations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth’ (Burbules and Beck, 1999: 1). Reflection and awareness are closely associated with critical thought, and therefore with debate. Paul, (1990) for instance, notes that ‘critical thought is the antithesis of irrational illogical, and unexamined living’, and thus: ‘explicating, analyzing, and assessing these “arguments” and “logic” is essential to leading an examined life’ (5, in ibid.: 2).

### Perspectives on policy debates

The implications of the practice of debate for political life differ. In one sense, engaging in debate which both employs and leads to critical thought has been viewed as tantamount to challenging the *status quo*, with neo-Marxist approaches emphasising social action and change as the *telos* of critical thinking. For theorists such as the Brazilian Paulo Freire, critical thought was directly associated with the development of *conscientizacao*, or ‘critical consciousness’, which enabled oppressed people to become critically aware of the power relations which perpetuated an unjust *status quo* (Freire, 1970). This perspective, in which to debate would mean to bring about monumental social change in what is essentially an adversarial battle between classes, is reflected—to an extent—in the work of other (more right wing) theorists such as Carl Schmidt, who saw public debate as an arena where the ideas and interests of elites ‘compete with each other for domination’ (Chambers, 1995: 247) in a zero-sum confrontation.

*Policy debates are made up of participants with varying objectives, expectations, capacities, understandings, motivations, and commitment; only some of which may be made explicit.*

<sup>5</sup> See the political commentator Jeremy Paxman’s *The Political Animal* (2003) which describes—not wholly positively—the Westminster style of debate and its origins in the Oxford and Cambridge debating unions.

For others, the employment of critical thought in debate can function to maintain social and political stability. Stability cannot occur, argues Jurgen Habermas, solely through force or manipulation: communicative practice—of which debate is a central part—is essential to stability. Similar thinkers such as Hannah Arendt—scarred by the horrors of World War II—have thus seen the function of public debate as a (desirable) democratic practice, which both helps maintain democracy (or ‘stability’) and is indicative of it. Conceiving of debate (or ‘discourse ethics’) as a ‘rationalization of public opinion and formation’, Habermas understood debate as a practice which brings about genuine public understanding based on a consensual political settlement (ibid. 236). Here, liberal democracy and stability are wedded: the former provides the basis for the latter, it is argued, by allowing citizens to ‘collectively and critically evaluate the institutions and norms of their society through the procedures of discourse’ (Chambers, 1995: 240).

This is linked to David Ricci’s (1993) normative metaphor of ‘the great conversation’, an inclusive mode of policymaking which Mendizabal (forthcoming) has interpreted as in support of an ‘open’ policymaking process in which think-tanks, for instance, play ‘an important role in mediating and improving the breadth and quality of [the] debate’. Using a similar language, Jones (2011a) in his advisory work on *policy dialogues* puts forth a more nuanced (and arguably realistic) understanding of policy conversation by describing the way in which consensus is reached by a (finite) number of actors wishing to influence the outcome of a policy. Engaging at this discursive level has proved effective and a worthy investment for donors, according to Jones.

Jones is, however, careful to remain descriptive, unlike Ricci, and identifies a series of ‘success criteria’ for successful policy dialogue, including *clarity of intent*, in which all participating actors share a clear understanding of the policy question or problem under discussion and the objective of entering into dialogue; and *negotiating capital*, which refers to a symmetry of information and appreciation of the values attributed to policy reform, that is, power and knowledge. Lastly, policy dialogues require a *robust evidence base*, although this will be affected by both intent and negotiating capital.

Ricci’s great conversation metaphor and Jones’s articulation of policy dialogue are immensely helpful here. The notion of a conversation turns attention to the policy process as something which is discussed, spoken of and thus framed by language and all the assumptions and confusion inherent within the use of linguistic concepts, phrases and devices, which is precisely what this research has sought to analyse. Second, conversation indicates linearity and like-for-like contributions and responses which, it has been suggested, are also assumed of debates. Policy conversations and policy debates are different, however, and offering a perspective on the latter contributes to a deeper understanding of the former.

Further, policy debates and policy dialogues are political processes in which participation (see Section 2.2) is—whether mechanically or organically—a key component: actors come to the table with an influencing objective, and debate/dialogue is not embarked on by a neutral, entirely open-minded set of actors. Every participant has an ‘ask’ and understanding not only of the policy problem/s, but also of which policy problem/s the debate is concerned with at that moment. **This directly informs an understanding of policy debates as fundamentally unequal playing fields: they are made up of participants who possess varying objectives, expectations, capacities, understandings, motivation and commitment.** Importantly, only some of these may be made explicit given the potential for some actors not to think and act in a unified manner. For instance, actions may not reflect stated values, or stated intent may not accurately reflect actual intent.

The complexities of a policy debate are further captured by Monaghan’s (2011) articulation of ‘adversarial policies’, which refer to politicised policies which are described as being *driven more by politics than evidence* in sensitive policy areas in which political expedience is often of paramount importance. From the typology provided, it appears that adversarial policies are

policies which are subject to debate: while not being synonymous with policy debate, adversarial policies provide its content.

A number of interesting points which refer back to the two principal ways of looking at the nature and value of policy debates emerge from Monaghan's typology. Whereas a policy dialogue implies moving towards consensus while downplaying the potential for conflict—despite recognising the fundamentally political nature of policy—adversarial policies, in Monaghan's view, are characterised by *prolonged conflict between interest groups*, which serves to support the view that the policy arena can be a space for contestation and 'winner-takes-all' politics rather than a means to arrive at common ground. However, this contested space is also occupied by a lack of consensus, not only on policy outcome but also on the *nature and direction of the policy issue* itself. This perspective intersects with that of the *clarity of intent* required for policy dialogue 'success'.

The lack of consensus is not helped by the adversarial policy issue *lying at the intersection of autonomous disciplinary boundaries*, which also affects the nature and use of evidence. Lastly, in keeping with how policy debates have been described thus far, adversarial policies are subject to *intense media scrutiny*, which in turn shapes the debate and reinforces the ideas, concepts and values which frame the policy. Indeed, the role of the media in framing the parameters of a debate, as well as influencing public opinion towards a particular position, is well-trodden ground (e.g. Born, 2008; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Monaghan, 2011; Reiner, 2007; Terkildsen et al., 1998).

The descriptions of policy dialogue and adversarial policies both encompass and to some extent intersect through the notion of *agenda setting* in policy issues, and thus bear direct relevance to policy debates. Agenda setting operates within a non-linear understanding of policy in which policy arises out of a complex interplay of 'issues, context, politics, policy advocates, and events' (Mazaar, 2007: 9). Found in politicised and controversial ('adversarial') policy areas in which different actors have particular interests to promote and defend, it involves an attempt to influence the policy agenda (discussion, or 'dialogue') through the communication of ideas which may call attention to an issue from inside or outside government (Cobb et al., 1976). The media unsurprisingly plays a critical role in this, often defining the parameters of a debate and the key policy problem and identifying the key proposals or alternatives.

Agenda setting has also been equated with the creation of a homogenising 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982, in Mazaar, 2007), where certain tenets of an argument are placed beyond the realm of debate; they are constants (e.g. the desirability of poverty reduction or participation) in a debate about variables (e.g. how this can be supported, how effective current attempts are). Agenda setting can thus be a successful strategy, as well as a way for a policy issue to gain enough attention to *become* a debated policy issue. Who 'sets' the agenda, how and why are central questions in analysing policy dialogues, adversarial policies and—given the link drawn between them—policy debates.

### **The value of policy debates: implications for influencing policy**

From the preceding analysis, it should be clear that the research-policy discussion is directly relevant to that of the role of research-based evidence in policy debates. Policy debates are part of the policy process, and largely reflect—in Western societies—concerns regarding the evidence base in a particular policy area. Catalysed by the media, policy debates entail the participation of actors who all bring different objectives, expectations, capacities, understandings, motivations and commitment to the table. Policy debates are also framed by (often competing) discourses and narratives which can serve to simplify and distil the evidence on which a debate relies. They are also furnished with different types of evidence which might have different (and again competing) legitimacy claims, in part depending on the policy are being debated.

Having emphasised the political nature of policy debates, in which it is implied that competing truth claims are difficult to arbitrate and preside over, it is still possible to conclude nevertheless that policy debates are—and engaging in a policy debate is—valuable. From an external perspective (including that of this research), a policy debate's form and function say much about a political context, a society and the (international) political economy of the ideas and concepts of the various discourses and narratives at play, which in sub-Saharan Africa is a rich and complex area of analysis. Policy debates are, of course, linked inextricably with evidence and the organisation of evidence, and thus serve as a further window into issues concerning education, research capacity, the value of critique and civil society dynamics, among others.

However, aside from additional material for analysis, policy debates also serve an 'internal' function, in the sense that they provide benefits to those engaging in the debate and society at large. A 'good' policy debate helps educate the public (both explicitly and tacitly) or raise awareness of previously unknown problems or solutions, and might have a direct or indirect impact on policy. Good public debates encourage decision makers to be more transparent and act in the interests of the citizens they represent, as well as providing an entry point for experts and knowledge holders outside government to engage in national policy processes. Those who engage in debates are likely to improve their capacity to employ critical thought, to articulate arguments in written and oral form and to deal with criticism in a professional manner.

At base, this research assumes that a good policy debate, or a good debate, is the hallmark of an educated, aware public which is aware of how decision makers make decisions that affect their daily lives, and how the expression of arguments can shape and change decisions. This state of affairs is considered intrinsically and instrumentally desirable.

But what is a 'good' policy debate? While this research bases the analysis of policy debates on set criteria or indicators with which to rank the policy debates studied, good policy debates (and debates) are understood to be characterised by the following: participants who possess knowledge of the subject being debated; a mutually agreed understanding of the issue; critical engagement with and use of evidence; and clearly articulated arguments and counter-arguments which engage with and respond to those put forward by the opposition (i.e. like-for-like arguments). The research findings, presented in the next section, are predicated on this appreciation of a good policy debate.

### 3 Research findings: what affects the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates?

Arriving at a catch-all theory regarding the role of research-based evidence in policy debates in Africa was not the objective of this study, given its relatively small scope and the limited amount of prior work in this area. This section synthesises the four case study findings in an attempt to arrive at a tentative, initial and, I hope, original answer to the research question *what affects the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates?*, while introducing a framework to analyse the role of research-based evidence in policy debates. This framework proposes three 'clusters' of factors to consider when analysing the role of research-based evidence in policy debates: i) debate-specific factors; ii) discursive and cognitive factors; and iii) proximate 'agent'-related factors.

### 3.1 What role for research-based evidence?

The use of research-based evidence in the policy debates considered was relatively high, particularly in the Zambian debate, where the contours of debate on the introduction of GMOs into the country are defined—at base—by arguments referring to different sets of evidence regarding the safety and benefits of GM technology.<sup>6</sup>

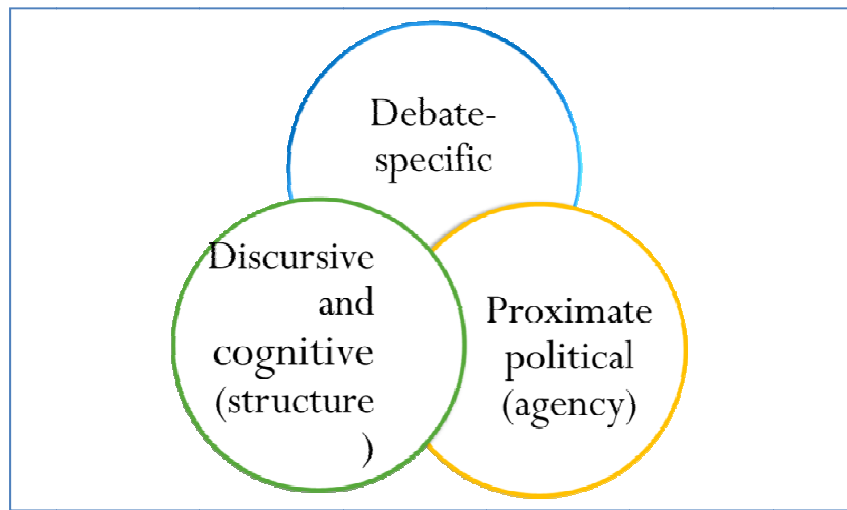
In spite of this, it would be easy to overestimate the *role* research-based evidence plays. Even when it is used, research is often poorly referenced; it is seemingly selective; the full implications of research findings are poorly understood; and the logical leap required to move from research cited in relation to a specific policy problem (e.g. HIV/AIDS transmission trends in Uganda) to the policy ‘prescription’ or solution proposed (e.g. the criminalisation of HIV/AIDS transmission) is often vast. Sometimes, research-based evidence plays almost no role, and arguments on one or more sides of the debate are driven by personal prediction, assumption, reflection on past precedent and commitment to the idea of ‘progress’, as the eviction of street hawkers from Accra’s Central Business District appears to exemplify; or by notions of tradition, communal values and a resistance to ideas deemed to be ‘foreign’, as those defending the institution of the chieftaincy in Sierra Leone demonstrate. The case studies thus point to the importance of different types of knowledge, as set out in Section 2.

The following section supplements this overall finding with a detailed consideration of when and how research-based evidence was used, and by whom. In terms of accounting for the role of research-based evidence, the overall presentation of findings attempts to identify three interrelated clusters of factors which build on the work of Weiss (1977), Stevens (2007) and Monaghan (2011). It does this by wedding the framing role of discourse and dominant cognitive understandings of what constitutes knowledge or evidence and proximate, agency-related factors to explain the role of research-based evidence in policy debates. This is not a new model as such, but provides an interesting application of the existing models of research uptake to policy debates in Africa, the character and dynamics of which also play a significant role in how research-based evidence is used. In order to explain what affects the role of research-based evidence on the basis of a cross-case study reflection, the findings are organised around the three clusters:

- *Debate-specific factors*, relating to the locus of a debate and the perceived existence of a policy debate;
- *Discursive and cognitive factors*, relating to how policy debates are framed, how research and evidence are understood and issues relating to research capacity at institutional level; and
- *Proximate, agency-oriented factors*, relating to the political, tactical and strategic factors which intersect with the nature of the debate and the discursive and cognitive aspects of policy debates identified.

<sup>6</sup> The Zambian example is interesting, because at the heart of the policy problem is the illegality of research into (strategic) GM crops on Zambian soil. This means all evidence in the debate originates from foreign sources, providing further ammunition to critics of GMOs, who argue that the efficacy and safety of GM technology is unproven—and therefore undesirable—in a Zambia-specific context.

Figure 1: Research-based evidence in policy debate framework



By explicitly recognising the mutually reinforcing role of structuring discourse and knowledge and agency, the following explanation attempts to demonstrate the viability of different models of research uptake.

The first cluster of factors provides a background, building on the understanding of a policy debate presented in Section 2 as a fluid interplay of actors engaging in a politicised policy discussion at different times, in different places and in different forms; and engaging with a variety of explicit and tacit motivations, objectives and capacities. The second cluster concerns how policy debates are framed and evidence is understood, arguing that both evidence and research frame policy debates, in accordance with Weiss' enlightenment model, alongside the permeation of ideas relating to modernity, democracy and progress often derived from international development discourse. The third cluster relates directly to agency, reflecting and demonstrating the relevance of the processual and evolutionary models, in which political factors—combined with the character of the debate and discursive and cognitive factors surrounding it—greatly influence the role of research-based evidence.

### 3.2 Debate-specific factors

As articulated in Section 2, policy debates need to be understood as a fluid, somewhat 'created', label given to a policy issue which has become politicised. By its very nature concerned with evidence and policy, an analysis of a policy debate provides a window into the politics of policymaking as well as the way in which policy discussions are being framed and policy is communicated. In identifying debate-specific factors which affect the role of research-based evidence, this section engages directly with methodological points about how to research a policy debate. The first layer of the analysis of what affects the role of research-based evidence in policy debates based on examples from Africa suggests that identifying the *location of the debate* and the extent to which participants *perceive there to be a debate* in which they engage guided by objectives are useful initial questions to answer.

#### Location of the debate

The location of a debate affects the role of research-based evidence in a number of ways, including the debate's discipline or sector, the perceived policy problems and objectives of the policy area and the relevant policies and policy events driving the debate.



Isolating a policy debate as a unit of analysis is difficult, however. As Jones (2011a; 2011b) in his reflections on policy dialogues and Monaghan's (2011) description of adversarial policies indicate, policy debates need to be understood as consisting of different (often competing) objectives and understandings of what the policy problem is about, often lying at the intersection of disciplinary boundaries. The case study findings build on this by demonstrating that analysing one discrete policy debate is rarely possible: a policy debate by its very nature constitutes a number of dovetailing policy issues which all raise different (yet interrelated) questions, evidence, policy implications and policy processes. For instance, the debate on GMOs in Zambia was framed by a number of relevant policies: the national biotechnology policy, the national food standards policy and regional agreements. Policy debates also incorporate varied forms of what constitutes an 'argument', some public, some private, some written, some oral, some alleged, some offered to the researcher directly.

Given the understanding of policy debates as relatively porous, with an unlimited number of participants and no unified place and time for the debate to take place, it is necessary to consider as wide a range of arguments and actors, and include as much background and contextual information, as possible. However, providing objective contextual or historical explanations is not entirely straightforward: these tend to come from actors with a vested interest in the debate. Often, therefore, contextual information is identical to arguments used in a debate. Ring-fencing the debate from the contextual 'facts' of the debate is nigh impossible, but it is worth reflecting on where the facts of a debate are coming from, and whose perspective within the debate they represent.

Locating the debate is important, not only to explain how the role of research-based evidence might be affected, but also to understand the arguments being presented. The location of a debate can be said to refer to:

- The *principal actors* involved, in terms of who a policy issue concerns, who is presenting and formulating an argument and who is playing an indirect role (e.g. in the citation of research). A pertinent question here will be how the principal actors directly relate to the following:
- The *status of relevant policies* (e.g. existing policies, new draft policies, revised policies, uncodified policies) and actors principally responsible for such policies (e.g. Parliament; select committees; ministries; local tiers of government);
- *Significant events or processes* which have led to the escalation of a policy issue (e.g. parliamentary debate, government statement, leaked news item, overt critique from an external actor);
- The *policy issues and areas* (including the policy problem) being subsumed under the 'policy debate' label; and
- The *academic disciplines* the policy debate lies at the intersection of.

These factors were found to affect the use of research-based evidence significantly. Although the policy debates considered in the case studies were organised around a particular policy, the form in which they appeared was very different: undergoing review (chieftaincy reform in Sierra Leone; GMOs in Zambia); coinciding with the potential introduction of a new policy (HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill in Uganda); or representing an existing policy (eviction of street hawkers from the Central Business District in Accra, Ghana). As a result, research-based evidence played a different role in each. When concerned with a policy which was not being subject to reform, as in Ghana, there was little opportunity to communicate for research, for instance in consultative forums or through parliamentary select committees. However, in the case of Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia, the policy around which the debate was organised was under review or scrutiny. This led to opportunities for the debate to support the role of research-based evidence, albeit in what were thought to be relatively pre-decided policy decisions.

Importantly, the actors responsible for the policy around which the debate is organised also affect the role of research-based evidence in it, by effectively determining how open or closed it is. In Ghana, the location of the policy with local government appeared actually to constrain the debate in terms of the participation of actors with clear policy objectives and a well-articulated argument to explain and 'justify' their decisions. Research-based evidence played a very limited role in this situation, attributable in no small part to the weak capacity of the Accra city authorities to undertake or use research-based evidence, leading to a reliance on pragmatic ('common sense') action. However, in Uganda and Zambia, while the actual decision-making was relatively closed, the 'event' of reviewing or drafting a policy did lead to the presentation of research-based evidence in the debate. This was the result of civil society consultations and instances where the media was able, to an extent, to report on the debate.

As suggested, there was a number of intersecting academic disciplines or sectors in which a policy issue could be located. This had an obvious effect on the way in which research-based evidence was used, with research often relating to different policy objectives, issues, problems and questions, ultimately leading to an 'exchange' of research-based evidence which was not like-for-like and failed (for a variety of reasons) to engage with the evidence of other participating actors. Having said this, a policy issue/s does have a sectoral or disciplinary bent, and this has a significant influence on the role of research-based evidence.

It is telling that the case study in which research-based evidence played the greatest role was that of Zambia, where the science-oriented nature of the policy issues the debate encompassed meant research-based evidence was more influential than in Ghana, where pragmatic, practical evidence was far more instrumental. However, aspects of each of the policy debates concerned the opinion and perspectives of citizens, for example smallholder farmers in Zambia and rural communities in Sierra Leone. This meant debates encompassed a great deal of citizen or communal knowledge but that—importantly—this was often integrated into research-based evidence, as was the case in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia (see Section 3.3).

The nature of the disciplines or sectors in which a debate can be located affects the role of research-based evidence, not only because of the nature of the evidence collected but also as a consequence of the availability of research-based evidence. Obviously, some policy issues attract a larger flow of research than others. The Zambian debate—the introduction of GMOs—had been subject to a large amount of research, not least because of the perceived 'researchability' of the kinds of questions relevant to the debate (e.g. cost-benefit analysis, field trials). In Ghana, what evidence would constitute was less clear-cut, and thus the debate appeared to lack research-based evidence.

### Perceptions of the existence of a policy debate

Perceptions of the existence of a debate to engage with and understandings of what that policy debate was about (including the policy problem being addressed and the objectives of the policy around which the debate was organised) were also found to be central to the dynamic of the debate, and thus the role of research-based evidence.

Overall, the case studies indicate often little awareness or cognition of self-participation in a policy debate. Given the non-linear nature of such debates, it was difficult for individuals to locate themselves in any sort of linear narrative which could be said to constitute a policy debate. This was found in some instances to have affected the participation of actors who could provide research-based evidence, and further to have meant that various actors—largely ones who can be characterised as 'defending' any change in policy—did not feel the need to articulate their position, and by implication did not articulate it using evidence. For instance, some research organisations and academic institutions did not agree there was much of a debate at all, and thus saw little space for their input unless specifically requested by the government, for instance in the debate over HIV/AIDS prevention and control in Uganda. In

Sierra Leone, those who defend the chieftaincy did not feel threatened enough by calls for reform to organise a formal defence of their position.

This line of argument suggests greater participation leads to greater use of research-based evidence in policy debates, but this needs to be qualified: *who* participates is as important as the scope for participation. Perceptions of the existence of a policy debate, combined with interest in the subject of the debate, are not always conducive to research-based evidence use, and can in fact derail the debate somewhat. This is arguably the case in both Ghana and Sierra Leone, where wider participation in the debate has led to the debate losing coherence, unlike in Uganda and Zambia (although that by their very nature policy debates are unlikely to constitute a narrative is a salient point to bear in mind).

Perceptions of the policy debate also encompass questions relating to why the debate has arisen, what policy problem is being discussed and with what objective. Actors participating in a debate often differ on these points, leading not only to a more fluid debate but also greater difficulty in using—as already mentioned—like-for-like evidence. In Zambia, the government denied that any policy debate existed and claimed it was maintaining its position on GMOs—despite the Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training being engaged in a review of the country's draft biotechnology and biosafety policy. In Ghana, the AMA's policy of evicting street hawkers was not seen to be subject to debate but rather as ill-informed attack. Who engages in a debate, then, not only reflects the perception of there being a policy debate but also actively influences that perception.

Ascertaining the extent to which there is a perception of an existence of a debate, and what impact this has on the role of research-based evidence, the following need to be considered:

- On *what grounds and whose terms* are participants engaging in the debate?
- Do participants seem *aware of the policy debate* as a policy debate? If not, why not?
- What is the *perceived status of the policy* around which a policy debate is organised?
- What are the *objectives of actors* engaging in the policy debate?
- How do *participants perceive each other*?

Some of the perspectives presented here will appear in the subsequent discussion, particularly in relation to proximate actor-oriented factors, in which the political function of research-based evidence is highlighted. The following section concerns the second layer of analysis: the role of research-based evidence in the policy debates studied is explained with reference to framing and structuring discourses and dominant (mis?)understandings of what constitutes evidence and research.

### 3.3 Factors relating to discourse and understanding of evidence

On the basis of the research findings, this section argues that i) the framing of policy debates and (ii) how evidence is understood are major factors in explaining the role of research-based evidence in policy debates. This layer concerns the structuring role of discourse and cognitive understandings, which are created and maintained through an interaction with agency (see Section 3.4). The findings indicate that policy debates are framed by expressed concern by participants appealing to research and evidence, as well as by ideas, concepts and narratives arguably inspired by research, involving notions of modernity, democracy and progress which carry 'foreign' or 'international' associations. However, while there is scope to argue that this is indicative of agency-constraining discursive *structures*, the discourse which frames debates is ultimately constituted by actors' understandings of the ideas, concepts and narratives which arguably make up a discourse/s.

## The framing of policy debates

*The framing of debates is not a purely top-down process in which developing countries are passive recipients, but involves participants' understanding of the concepts, ideas and narratives.*

The way in which a policy debate is framed refers to the dominant ideas, concepts, theories and narratives which operate to support its parameters, provide an 'anchor' for arguments and also act as a mode of identification between a participant and the institution/s with which an idea, concept, theory or narrative is associated. This section is informed by Weiss's (1977) enlightenment model of research uptake, in which research-based evidence has an indirect, tacit role in policy through the framing of ideas, concepts, theories and narratives derived (or thought to be) from research-based evidence. Rather than forming an association between a policy and a piece of research, therefore, the enlightenment model considers how a policy is framed in ways derived from research-based evidence.

This model is useful in helping to unpick the research findings in two ways. The findings indicate that, even though actors appeal to the labels of 'research' and 'evidence', some do not understand or reflect on these terms well, and that what may be seen as a framing (enlightenment) role for research-based evidence may actually reflect a failure to distinguish between research-based evidence and other types of evidence or knowledge, as outlined in Section 2. Certainly, narrow 'Western' understandings of research-based evidence fail to account for much of the evidence actually used in the policy debates studied, with practical and communal evidence often taking centre stage. *Whose understanding* of evidence and who is presenting evidence therefore become central questions in understanding the role of research-based evidence in a policy debate.

In part, this is because evidence-based policy has become the standard against which the international community—at least in theory—measures the formation of a 'good' policy. The concept is thus often used instrumentally, as Mendizabal (forthcoming) notes on the subject of think-tanks, arguing that the evidence-based policy mantra is readily deployed (with the support of the international development community) 'to defend their credibility and legitimacy in the policy space'. This is a very real question to contend with when considering how research-based evidence is being used, as the case studies demonstrate.

In Uganda, it was assumed by the HIV/AIDS and Related Matters Committee that the original Private Members Bill on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control in 2008 was based on research, despite this research seemingly not having been communicated. In Ghana, it was assumed that statistics on road traffic accidents gathered by the Ministry of Roads and Highways had made their way to the AMA to inform the decongestion policy. In short, although it might not be referenced well, be read or indeed even exist, *the idea* of research and evidence is important, and establishing its role—even if this is nominal—does function to pepper the policy debate with a concern for research and evidence. It is not all bad news, therefore, and we should be mindful that a stated concern for research-based evidence and evidence-based policy is better than none at all.

The terms research and 'evidence' are often brandished with satisfaction, in the near-certainty that an argument will be applauded as long as it uses the well-established concepts which are—according to Akam (2011)—thought to possess near-mystical powers, although, as Abrahamsen (2000) is at pains to articulate, international development discourse is not non-partisan or neutral, or in many cases evidence based.

Narratives dominated by notions of progress and 'modernity' were extremely influential in debate discourses in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Zambia, where a policy or policy reform was equated directly with national development and the need for the country to 'catch up' in a

rapidly globalising world. Modernity and progress were associated with a number of policy objectives, including biotechnology (Zambia), urban cleanliness and 'order' (Ghana) and democracy (Sierra Leone). Human rights were also used to frame the debate. Although the employment of such concepts, ideas and narratives might be seen to yield positive results on account of the powerful and enticing 'visions' they pertain to, their use can also lead to a discrediting of an argument on account of it being deemed 'foreign' (see Section 3.4).

In terms of research-based evidence, then, the framing of policy debates with references to donor buzzwords (Cornwall and Brock, 2004) is arguably predicated on the assumption that such terms are scientific and based on research. Says one former expat ministerial advisor in Sierra Leone:

*It is assumed that anything that comes from 'outside' is gospel truth, which here is tantamount to a basic scientific principle. No one wants to hear about the evidence base on empowerment, or 'bottom-up' change; as far as they are concerned, if it comes from donors it's established fact. The influence we [the international community] have on language, on what counts as evidence, is so powerful; I don't know if we realise it.*

Human rights is one example of a concept assumed to be based on evidence, or at the very least to wield the same authority as a well-researched scientific hypothesis. The human rights discourse, which Heinze (2006) claims is often misused by international NGOs to defend and promote particular groups, has had a palpable influence on each of the policy debates, most notably among the civil society opposition to the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill in Uganda. However, establishing the evidence base for the existence of human rights is difficult: human rights are arguably normative and no less self-evident than religious belief.

Using human rights as a basis for an evidence-based argument requires some sophisticated thinking—namely, why violating *x* right is undesirable and why upholding *x* right is of some benefit. In short, in order for human rights to sit comfortably with evidence, they must be framed in terms of their impact. National legislation, while arguably relying less on foreign-based discourse (the question of the origin of laws in former colonial Africa aside), is also invested with the trust the nation of human rights possesses: legislation is assumed to be based on evidence (e.g. road safety by-laws in Accra) and thus an appeal to 'the law' is understood to be tantamount to an appeal to evidence.

On the basis of this discussion, two principal questions can be asked when analysing policy debates:

- Are *discursive appeals to research and evidence* made, and are these supported by a substantive use of research and/or evidence?
- What *ideas, concepts, and narratives* frame the debate, and are they equated with research and/or evidence? Who employs these ideas, concepts and narratives?

The notion of a structuring discourse (of which the evidence-based policy agenda is part) provides a useful (and honest) way of analysing the concepts, ideas and narratives which intersect with appeals to evidence and research in policy debates. The next section argues that the use of research-based evidence presented here is the result not solely of a structuring discourse 'under' which policy debate occurs, but also of the active engagement of actors with that structuring discourse in which an understanding of research and evidence is formed, resulting in a situation characterised by a seeming lack of capacity to both use and understand how research can be used in a relevant and timely way in policy arguments.

### Understandings of research and evidence

It may be easy to argue that the international community is ‘playing God’ by moulding recipient countries in its own (imagined) image through discourse. However, this sub-section argues that the framing of debates—including the employment of research and evidence—in terms of concepts, ideas and narratives associated with international development discourse is not a purely top-down process in which developing countries are passive recipients; rather, it involves participants’ understandings of the concepts, ideas and narratives which are thought to make up a discourse/s. This draws on Giddens’s ‘structuration theory’ (e.g. Giddens, 1990), which argues that structuring and framing discourse cannot be viewed as purely external to actors but is produced and reproduced by actions in social processes. How the discourse frames the policy debates studied needs to be further qualified, with reference both to other types of evidence and how they are differentiated (or not, as the case would seem to be), and to how wider understandings of evidence reflect the deep-seated capacity problems felt to varying extents in the case study countries. These relate to education, research and attitudes and practices which privilege oral over written evidence.

### Differentiating types of evidence

As we have seen, the research findings show that, even though actors use the labels of ‘research’ and ‘evidence’, some do not understand these terms well, and that what may be seen as a framing role for research-based evidence may actually reflect a failure to distinguish between research-based and other types of evidence or knowledge. Narrow ‘Western’ understandings of research-based evidence fail to account for much of the evidence actually used in the policy debates studied: practical and communal evidence often take centre stage. *Whose understanding* of evidence and who is presenting evidence are therefore central questions in understanding the role of research-based evidence in a policy debate.

There are a number of issues to raise in relation to how research and evidence are understood, with implications for how we view research-based evidence. The principal problem concerns the conferring of these labels on the gathering of public opinion and on public opinion itself. Public opinion is appealed to as evidence in support of or as the basis of a policy argument. For instance, local consultations in three districts in Uganda on the causes of HIV/AIDS undertaken by the HIV/AIDS and Related Matters Committee identified *perceived* driving factors of the spread of the epidemic (e.g. the large number of sex workers), and this led to the formation of a policy solution. In Sierra Leone, grassroots consultation outputs were an influential part of the evidence base on the need for chieftaincy reform.

Interestingly, when public opinion (or citizen knowledge) is gathered in a systematised and formal manner, what is essentially community-based evidence gains the status of research-based evidence. While this is a legitimate and widespread approach to undertaking research (particularly in governance-related areas, where citizen’s perceptions are of vital instrumental importance), questions need to be asked with regard to whether those involved are considering, recognising and mitigating the limitations such an approach entails. In the case of Sierra Leone, principal researcher Richard Fanthorpe, who undertook numerous consultations on chieftaincy reform, was all too aware of the limitations of a participatory research approach, having identified during previous work the tendency for consulted citizens who found themselves at the nexus of the political economy of the sector to use consultations to their advantage. In Sierra Leone, this is called the ‘moral economy of grievance’ (Fanthorpe, 2003): citizens impart their knowledge

*Narrow ‘Western’ understandings of research-based evidence fail to account for much of the evidence actually used in the policy debates studied, although the concepts of evidence and research are arguably not well understood or reflected on.*

*The interplay between traditional, citizen or communal knowledge or evidence, which is often ascribed the status of 'common sense' or the 'received wisdom' of professional (practical) life, again suggests that African policy debates (and policy) are infused with a confused sense of what evidence is.*

(which then becomes evidence) to communicate oft-politicised problems, offering answers which the international community appears to have an insatiable appetite for.

As well as expressing a desire for personal or political gain, knowledge arising from citizens is often laden with stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, as was the case in public attitudes towards street hawkers and sex workers in Ghana and Uganda, respectively. The implication here is that the romanticisation of grassroots knowledge can mask the context in which evidence is derived, a context which is often politicised, conditioned and ritualised. Further, how the status of research is ascribed to gathered citizen evidence or knowledge is important: without the mediation of an assumed expert, it remains public opinion or traditional,

community or citizen evidence/knowledge.

The problem of what appears to be a failure to differentiate types of evidence and their limitations remains, and is compounded by a second issue: the boundaries between 'practical' knowledge and 'citizen' knowledge are blurred. In Ghana, government officials presented their own experiences as citizens in order to explain and justify the AMA's eviction of street hawkers; in Sierra Leone, resistance to the reform of the chieftaincy was explained with reference to the commitment some government figures had to traditional Sierra Leonean governance. The interplay between traditional, citizen or communal knowledge or evidence, which is often ascribed the status of 'common sense' or the 'received wisdom' of professional (practical) life, again suggests that African policy debates (and policy) are infused with what is an unclear or unreflected-on sense of what evidence is.

Again, *who* presents the evidence determines the status and legitimacy of evidence being presented. In this case, the wedding of practical and citizen knowledge serves to grant knowledge derived from a grassroots basis (opinion, preference, expression of grievance) the status of practical knowledge. Whether or not these distinctions exist, there is scope to suggest there is little awareness of the status of evidence and the implications of its origins.

Third, an interesting rationale found in the policy debates studied is that a common, shared experience rooted in history, tradition and culture forms the foundation of an argument which runs: *I am/we are/do, therefore I/we should*. The conflation of 'is' and 'ought' employs the weight of history, tradition and 'culture' to bestow legitimacy on a situation: evidence of the existence (in some sense of the survival) of a practice is deemed evidence that it *should* continue. This logic is strongly aligned with resistance to change, as demonstrated by street hawkers in Accra, whose (perhaps short) communal memory or *collective consciousness* sees street hawking as a tradition, the existence of which is synonymous with its reason for existing: street hawking exists as a practice because it *should*, its legitimacy self-evidenced by history. In Sierra Leone, similarly, the continued existence of the chieftaincy is supported: the existence of the chieftaincy is invoked as evidence that it *should* exist. In both of these examples historical facts are

*The logic of **I am/we are/do, therefore I/we should** employs the weight of history, tradition and culture to bestow legitimacy on a situation: evidence of the existence (in some sense of the survival) of a practice is deemed evidence that it **should** continue.*

sketchy, and what is exactly meant by 'tradition' is vague. The idea has currency, however.

In Ghana, the authorities supporting the eviction of street hawkers can be seen to be employing a similar approach to evidence, albeit in a less explicit form. The policy of evicting street hawkers seems to have followed a historical precedent on which the status of received wisdom has been conferred: the policy existed in the past, and therefore it should in the future. Reverence for the past intersects with, and in part further explains, the assumption that policy arguments (variously articulated) are based on evidence.

The research findings indicate that research-based evidence has played a role in policy debates, but also, significantly, demonstrate the paramount importance of practical 'common sense' and communal, traditional evidence (or knowledge), although the use of different types of evidence does not appear to be based on an understanding or reflection of what is meant by either 'evidence' or 'research'.

### The capacity question

While actors in a policy debate are actively engaged in shaping the framing discourse/s involved, the way in which research and evidence are understood and employed as concepts are symptomatic of much wider capacity issues, which have seen the theoretical and conceptual theories underpinning the notions ill-understood.<sup>7</sup> At the least, there is increasing consensus—and an emerging evidence base—that evidence 'literacy' among African *policymakers* is low (e.g. Banda, 2012; Uneke, 2012). However, here, it is argued that to focus only on the capacity of policymakers misses a more fundamental, structural lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence in Africa, leading to—as this paper details—little in the way of differentiation between types of evidence.

While various proximate, politicised factors explain lack of capacity (see Section 3.2), this subsection considers two of the principal ones: inadequate tertiary education and research institutions; and a precedent of privileging oral over written evidence.

The need to improve research capacity among graduates in Africa is well documented, and is increasingly being addressed by initiatives such as the Wellcome Trust-funded Africa Institutions Programme and the Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). These aim to support tertiary education institutions and research institutes across the continent, placing a significant emphasis on 'policy relevance' and connecting the research community with government (e.g. PASGR, 2010). Attempts to equip African researchers with the requisite research skills to inform policy are, therefore, predicated on the belief that research skills are currently lacking. This is often attributed to underfunded and weak tertiary education institutions, which lack basic infrastructure and fail to attract the most capable staff. Universities in Africa have seen undergraduate enrolments swell, eclipsing the importance placed on academic research (Harle, 2009; Yusuf et al., 2008).

According to a joint report commissioned by the British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (Harle, 2009), this problem is most prominent in the humanities and social sciences—where this research finds the use of research-based evidence to be the weakest. In agreement with a 2008 World Bank report which describes the quality of tertiary education in Africa as 'well below par' (Yusuf et al., 2008: 4), initial consultations to inform PASGR found that, while universities in Africa may run Master's programmes in the social sciences, these tend to have cursory training in research methods which compare unfavourably with international standards; meanwhile, private educational institutions tend to have an

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<sup>7</sup> While there are obvious questions as to whether research-based evidence should be privileged in this way, this research assumes that this privileging is both justified and desirable to some extent.



applied, commercial focus (e.g. business studies, business administration) with little or no focus on research methods.<sup>8</sup>

Further, the PASGR report found that cross-disciplinary programmes were increasingly favoured over 'traditional' social science disciplines, and that many courses did not have a disciplinary base and thus did not normally offer training in disciplinary methodologies. The implication of these findings is that African graduates who go on to public sector jobs—particularly those who go into policy development—are often ill-equipped to understand research or 'to distinguish "good" research from "bad" or to appreciate the benefits or limitations of applying various research methods to different kinds of policy problems' (12).

The research findings give weight to this insight, indicating that there is limited awareness of research methodologies and their relation to an evidence base. In addition, the findings suggest that, while research-based evidence may play a role in informing aspects of a policy debate, principally in the identification of a problem (e.g. HIV/AIDS levels in Uganda, urban settlers in Accra) and the presentation of alternative policy options (e.g. organic farming in Zambia, treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda), the recourse to research-based evidence is not consistent or uniform: such evidence plays a smaller role in discussion on the success or failure of a policy and in making the argumentative 'leap' between a policy problem and a policy option. This suggests that research-based evidence is not institutionally embedded; rather, its employment is somewhat piecemeal and—as Section 3.4 argues—often subject to political motivations, interests and incentives. The finding that research-based evidence is more prominent in science-oriented policy debates also gives weight to the need to strengthen research skills in the humanities and social sciences, despite an articulated need for science and technology strengthening in Africa (e.g. Chataway et al., 2005).

Levels of more general education also affect capacity. On the basis of a crude analysis, a link can be made between higher literacy rates and greater use of research-based evidence. Uganda and Zambia have literacy rates of 71.4% and 70.9%, respectively. Ghana and Sierra Leone, where the use of research-based evidence is more limited, have literacy rates of 66.6% and 40%, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The issue of literacy intersects with attitudinal issues relating to the primacy of oral evidence over written evidence in Africa, which has been attributed to oral 'African' culture and traditions (Gyekye, 1995).

The privileging of oral testimony has arguably given rise to a culture of the spoken, rather than written, word, which now presents an enormous challenge to African administrations. There is little precedent for 'writing things down',<sup>10</sup> leading to huge challenges in terms of information management, institutional memory and of course documenting evidence. This results in a situation in which personal testimony is given great credence and legitimacy, whereas written research is seen as something 'white' people do. This perceived attitude towards the written word, tantamount in this instance to research, was particularly evident in Sierra Leone and Ghana, where writing things down was viewed as foreign, un-African and not in touch with the grassroots. This is in spite of the existence of research-based citizen evidence gathered, for instance, as part of

*The recourse to research-based evidence is not consistent or uniform. This suggests that research-based evidence is not institutionally embedded; rather its employment is somewhat piecemeal and often subject to political motivations, interests and incentives.*

<sup>8</sup> These kinds of criticism s are not specific to Africa. Nearly a century ago, the philosopher Bertrand Russell lamented that the teaching of science in Western educational establishments was too practice focused and failed to allow students to learn about the 'intrinsically-valuable' aspects of science, the contemplation of which ferments the formation of a 'finer quality of mind' (Russell, 1918 [1913]: 39).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/default.aspx#>.

<sup>10</sup> Email correspondence, Paul Richards, 13 September 2011.

Fanthorpe's consultations on chieftaincy reform in Sierra Leone, where the uneasy pairing of community-based and research-based evidence casts questions on the limits of differentiation.

Further, the media—which often acts as a champion of the written word—is limited in the case study countries, largely failing (with a few exceptions, particularly in Uganda and Zambia) to demonstrate critical thought and a spirit of enquiry in relation to the debates studied. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the media is particularly weak: for example, media reports tend to give accounts of witchcraft equal credence to what is arguably more 'serious' journalism.<sup>11</sup>

These findings cohere with wider perceptions of Africa possessing its 'own' logic—tantamount to 'culture'—with those using 'Western' logic and rationality are criticised. The Nigerian writer Leo Igwe in a recent insightful and telling article lamented the tendency of Africans to lambast fellow Africans who used critical thought as 'not thinking like an African' (Igwe, 2011). There exists a real problem whereby the dichotomy between what is considered African and employing the standards of seemingly Western scientific reasoning acts as a barrier to incentives to improve capacity in the field of research and the employment of arguments based on research, on both an individual agent level and a societal (structural) one.

While the influence of the evidence-based policy agenda and the wider development discourse that surrounds it has undoubtedly been a force for positive change in African policymaking in many instances, the role of research-based evidence is affected by limited understandings of what constitutes evidence, how it is arrived at and what place it has within a wider schema of knowledge. In short, by Western standards, research and evidence are being understood in a loose sense, further confused by the ready deployment of ideas, concepts and narratives which form part of international development discourse. This state of affairs is explained in large part by capacity issues in the case study countries (and Africa more generally) which can again be traced to weak tertiary education and a limited research skills base combined with cultural precedents in which oral—rather than written—evidence has a central place. In order to probe this aspect of the role of research-based evidence in policy debates, key questions to ask on the basis are:

*There exists a real problem whereby the dichotomy between what is considered African and employing the standards of seemingly Western scientific reasoning acts as a barrier to incentives to improve capacity in the field of research and the employment of arguments based on research.*

- What *other types of evidence* are at play in the policy debate (practical, citizen/communal)?
- *How are evidence and research understood? Whose* understanding of evidence and research dominates?
- Is there an *awareness of the differences and complex interactions* between different types of evidence, the different roles they might play and their limitations/methodological problems?
- In which *aspect of the policy debate* does research-based evidence play a greater role?
- What can be said about the *capacity to undertake, understand and use* research and awareness of its role in the policy process, including attitudes to written and oral evidence?

On the whole, this section emphasises the role of framing discourse and of structural institutional and societal-level capacity problems. However, this is not the full story: as indicated, the role of research-based evidence in policy debates cannot be explained without recourse to proximate, agent-level decisions, strategies and behaviours relating to political incentives and interests. Having set out the framing context affecting how research-based

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<sup>11</sup> Email correspondence, Simon Akam, 11 December 2011.

evidence is used, Section 3.4 considers the various factors which interact with this in the policy debates studied.

### 3.4 Proximate agency-related factors

The analysis presented in this section is intended to develop models of research uptake which emphasise the political, tactical nature of research-based evidence use (e.g. Stevens, 2007; Monaghan, 2011). Importantly, while this paper emphasises the framing (and somewhat limiting) role of discourse and its relationship with the contours of a policy debate in identifying and explaining the role of research-based evidence, this section recognises that there is significant scope for agency in such debates. Following on from the insights in Section 3.3, which argued that actors are not passive recipients of discourse but rather are engaged actively in understanding, interpreting, creating and maintaining it, this section argues that the role of research-based evidence can often be explained with reference to agency-level motivations, interests and incentives.

The implication here is that, while the enlightening and framing role of the ideas, concepts and narratives associated with research-based evidence has been useful in providing a foundation for understanding the role of research-based evidence, an analysis of research uptake needs to go further by considering the proximate political factors which influence its role. This builds on further insights from Section 3.3, which identified the piecemeal, seemingly un-institutionalised nature of research-based evidence use within the policy debates studied, explained in large part by structural factors—notably the quality of tertiary education in Africa—but also by more micro political motivations and interests.

This section considers this issue in more depth, addressing agent-level factors influencing not only why research-based evidence might play a role in a policy debate but also why it may not. At this stage, this explanation does not pertain to a comprehensive model of research uptake in policy debates, and is intended only to highlight some of the key themes across the case studies.

#### Why is research-based evidence employed?

Across the case studies, there were numerous examples of research-based evidence being used. The GMO debate in Zambia was the best example of the use of such evidence by a wide variety of actors—although this seemingly excludes the government of Zambia, which had remained relatively silent on the issue. Section 3.2 identified a number of debate-specific factors which lend themselves to the use of research-based evidence, including the sector or academic discipline in which a policy debate ‘falls’ and the convergence of policy objectives and intentions; Section 3.3 suggested that understandings of what constitutes ‘research-based evidence’ were instrumental in shaping the policy debates studied.

The case studies indicate that the use of research-based evidence in a policy debate cannot be divorced from the politicised position of the actor involved. As Jones (2011b) notes in relation to policy dialogue, policy debates need to be understood as non-linear politicised discussions which by their very nature bring a complex and fluid swell of interests and incentives, some of which may not be made explicit. Getting to the bottom of why particular research-based evidence is used in a policy debate therefore means answering the wider question of why a particular policy position has been adopted and why *particular* research-based evidence is used in a policy debate.

*The ‘cherry picking’ of evidence is not confined to government actors. Policy debates in Africa are heavily influenced by non-state actors skilled at using evidence for influence as part of advocacy campaigns.*

While the following does not present a catch-all theory, it does identify a number of themes arising from the case studies.

### Coherence with policy position

Findings from the case studies are in many cases in keeping with Stevens (2007) and Monaghan (2011), whose evolutionary and processual models of research uptake argue that research is used when it supports a politicised policy position. The 'cherry picking' of evidence is by no means a revelation in research-policy discussions, nor is it confined to government actors. Policy debates in Africa are heavily influenced by non-state actors skilled at using evidence for influence as part of advocacy campaigns. This was evident in the Zambian GMO debate, where NGOs such as the Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Association and research centres such as the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) and the Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre (KATC) presented research-based evidence in a highly sophisticated way. 'Policy-based evidence making', a phrase used to describe the UK government's use of evidence to support the policy of the day under New Labour, is applicable here: participants in debates often hold the view that other participants are 'shaping' evidence to support pre-decided positions. For example, critics argue that DFID's research to inform its plans for local governance in Sierra Leone served to justify its existing plans.

Policy debates are largely framed around a debate on whether a state of affairs should change: thus, actors are oriented towards either supporting reform or resisting it, and thus research-based evidence is employed to support both reforming and maintaining agendas. In Zambia, actors both supporting and challenging the introduction of GMOs directly cited research demonstrating divergent evidence relating to economic and health impacts on farmers and wider society. In Uganda, research-based evidence undertaken by the government was used to justify a new policy. Research-based evidence has therefore been both generated and used to support positions relating to support or resistance to reform.

### Commissioned or self-generated evidence

Research-based evidence, unsurprisingly, is used by those it is commissioned or undertaken by. This was the case in Sierra Leone, where the same researcher was commissioned to undertake work for the Chieftaincy Reform Campaign and DFID, and in Zambia, where JCTR and KATC commissioned research to support their position in 2002. It must be noted that on both of these occasions policy positions had already been formed when research was commissioned: research was not being used to form a policy position but to support it. In much the same way, 'self-generated' research-based evidence is also inevitably used in a policy debate. In Uganda, the proposed HIV/AIDS Control and Prevention Bill, first drafted in 2008, was 'informed' by consultations conducted in 2009. Although seemingly seldom referred to by the HIV/AIDS Committee which is supporting the Bill, this research-based evidence has a degree of currency within parliamentary circles and, according to committee members, has been circulated.

However, the factors which lead to the commissioning or generation of research rely on policy positions which are thought to require justification, although in some cases the articulation of an evidence base is seemingly not thought to be needed. Chiefs in Sierra Leone, for instance, have so far not articulated a unified or comprehensive evidence base to support the argument against reform. In Ghana, the AMA has seemingly relied on their own evidence in evicting street hawkers without recourse to research-based evidence.

### Use of popular ideas, concepts and narratives

In agreement with existing insights which suggest that research is more influential when it is presented in a way that fits with existing ideas, concepts and narratives that are familiar and/or popular (e.g. Young, 2005), the case studies demonstrate that research-based

evidence is used in policy debates when it coheres with existing attitudes and accepted discourse. In Ghana, the 'research' in the policy debate relies on the concept of human rights; in Sierra Leone, the 'evidence base' for the reform of the chieftaincy employs a popular emphasis on the continued relevance of chiefs.

Here, agents engage actively with discourse by using and reproducing its ideas, concepts and narratives, and in doing so highlight the influence practical and citizen-based evidence wield. This poses a problem for supporting research-based evidence: while there are indications that some positions in policy debates are formed on the basis of a careful consideration of evidence, there is also considerable scope to suggest positions are formed on the basis of inherited 'wisdom' which takes practice- and citizen-based evidence as its anchor, which may often be rooted in ideas, concepts and narratives influenced by international development discourse, but also often draw on beliefs and values relating to tradition.

### Availability of research

The availability of research-based evidence is a prerequisite to its use. As indicated, *what* research-based evidence is available often depends on it being commissioned or undertaken by actors in support of a policy position. On another level, research-based evidence not commissioned or undertaken by actors in the debate was used for similar reasons. For instance, supporters of GMOs in Zambia referred to scientific trials conducted by biotechnology companies such as Syngenta and Monsanto, which points to much wider issues regarding the independence of scientific evidence.

The availability of research for the policy debates was affected by a number of interrelating factors, including the political will of government actors, the popularity of a policy area and policy question, the 'researchability' of a subject and funding. These factors all need to be understood in terms of a debate's framing discourse and capacity issues (see Section 3.3), and in relation to the political context providing incentives or disincentives to undertake research. In Zambia, although funding was available for the government to conduct 'country-specific' trials on GM crops, the government has—until recently—blocked this as a result of its vehement opposition to the introduction of GMOs. In Ghana, research was thought to be inconsequential for a policy question which could be answered using common sense: research-based evidence was not viewed as being able to provide any additional value.

### Involvement of the international community

The availability of research-based evidence needs to be understood with reference to the significant influence international actors have on funding, producing and making available relevant research which can be used in policy debates. At a very basic level, the case studies demonstrate that research-based evidence used in policy debates comes largely from international sources, and is either specific to the country (e.g. Sierra Leone) or referred to other countries (e.g. Zambia).

Not only this, but international interest in a policy area would seem to go hand-in-hand with research-based evidence playing a greater role: in Ghana, where research-based evidence use was scarce, the street hawking issue—like many policy problems under the banner of 'urban'—is barely on the radar of donors such as DFID; in Zambia, international actors—in the form of private sector companies and donor agencies such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)—have a high level of interest in ensuring not only that research-based evidence plays a role in the debate but also that *particular* evidence plays an instrumental role in the debate. International interest in a policy area might result from the personal interest of an individual or group of individuals (e.g. the Chieftaincy Reform Campaign in Sierra Leone), but also from overarching development objectives and priorities (e.g. biotechnology companies in the Zambian GMO debate).

The case studies demonstrate that international donors have played a leading role in:

- *Funding* research: Christian Aid, DFID and the World Bank in Sierra Leone; biotechnology companies in Zambia (allegedly); and (less directly relevant to the policy debate) HIV/AIDS research collaborations with Makerere University School of Public Health (Uganda); and in turn, directly and indirectly:
- *Framing* research priorities, questions and methodology, for instance DFID prioritising local governance reform in Sierra Leone and indirectly influencing the research agenda by focusing on HIV/AIDS as a policy priority in Uganda (despite the international community largely not being in support of the proposed HIV/AIDS Control and Prevention Bill);
- *Communicating* research, for instance by funding NGO advocacy campaigns using their own (Sierra Leone) or others' research (Uganda, Zambia).

While it is recognised that national development priorities have an influence over the conduct and availability of research (e.g. Vose and Cervellini, 1983), these priorities are largely articulated by international donors, particularly in aid-dependent countries such as Sierra Leone. The influence of the international community over the funding, framing and communication of research effectively establishes a link between the political interests and incentives of national participants in a debate and those of the international community.

Interest in a policy debate on the part of the international community often reflects incentives and interests to defend or promote. For donors, this is largely expressed in developmental terms and often encapsulated in country strategies, global development priorities (e.g. the MDGs) and recipient government plans. For instance, the involvement of DFID in chieftaincy reform in Sierra Leone can be viewed from the 'discursive' level—reforming the chieftaincy fits into wider attempts to promote good governance and uphold human rights—but also from this more 'proximate', political-tactical level, whereby DFID is seen as ensuring that the newly formed post-war government was able to maintain control in rural areas. For private sector actors, such as biotechnology companies (and allegedly donors such as the US Agency for International Development, USAID), involvement in the GMO policy debate is viewed overwhelmingly as a reflection of economic interests.

The same goes for actors at national level. While NGO and government actors' involvement in a debate can be said at one level to be framed by their strategic objectives and the principal policy around which the policy debate is organised, on another level this involvement is thought to be structured by international actors. As Section 3.2 argued, this structuring occurs discursively, but at the micro level actors are widely described as having incentives to attract funding on the basis of their alignment with donor priorities. The government was thought to be 'in the pocket' of donors in Sierra Leone (World Bank, DFID), Zambia (USAID, a shadowy private sector lobby) and Uganda (private religious foundations in the US), and in all the case study countries non-state actors were seen (in some cases by government actors) as somehow 'doing the bidding' of international actors, largely to carry messages relating to human rights, good governance and democracy.

This has had different effects on the role of research-based evidence. In terms of the government, in Sierra Leone, donor-funded research appeared to inhabit a space separate from that of the government, influencing pockets (e.g. the Decentralisation Secretariat) but seemingly having little overall impact aside from on the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. Both Uganda and Zambia demonstrated far more ownership of research (although the government of Zambia's alleged ongoing research is shrouded in secrecy). In terms of non-state actors, international involvement in a policy debate led to greater generation of research through direct funding in some cases (PELUM Association and JCTR in Zambia, Partners in Conflict Transformation, PICOT, in Sierra Leone) as well as greater communication of relevant research (PELUM Association in Zambia, PICOT in Sierra Leone, Civil Society Coalition in Uganda).

The influence of international actors, who themselves possess wide-ranging incentives and interests (as well as different levels of interest), can therefore be said to intersect directly with

the factors identified: international actors influence policy positions and the parameters of policy priorities; and fund, commission, provide and support the communication of research-based evidence.

### Like-for-like evidence

Despite (or perhaps in part because of) the undoubted role of the international community and clear instances where research-based evidence plays a role in policy debates, this evidence is often not like-for-like, nor are the policy arguments they support. Here, the non-linear nature of what is being labelled a 'policy debate' is demonstrated: as suggested in Section 2, actors participating in the policy debate were found to have differing understandings of what the debate is actually about; possess different policy objectives; and thus enter the debate at different points (e.g. Wilson, 2012). In turn, this means research was used to answer different 'questions'. As a result, research-based evidence was often relevant only to a particular policy objective or part of the policy process.

In Zambia, for instance, supporters of GMOs argued the debate was no longer about whether the country *should* accept GMOs, but rather related to how to go about introducing them in a responsible and beneficial manner. The lack of clarity over what is being debated, among other factors, has led to its stalling. In Uganda, participants in the policy debate were oriented towards different objectives: for the HIV/AIDS and Related Matters Committee, a reduction of HIV/AIDS in the country; for opponents of the proposed Bill, a respect for the human rights of people living with HIV/AIDS. Even when research-based evidence is not the principal form of evidence, arguments are still answering different foci and objectives. In Ghana, local government was looking to decongest the city in order to increase road safety and improve it aesthetically, while also formalising a segment of the population; street hawkers were looking to preserve their livelihood.

The case studies do showcase some exceptions to this characterisation, with the GMO debate presenting the clearest example of participants acknowledging and addressing wide-ranging evidence contrary to their position. Even 10 years on, the JCTR/KATC 2002 position paper remains the best survey of relevant and available evidence playing a role in the Zambian debate, and offers an example of sophisticated scrutiny of research demonstrating the desirability of GM technology from a number of perspectives (Lubozhya, 2002). In Sierra Leone, the Chieftaincy Reform Campaign commissioned a paper by Richard Fanthorpe which anticipated the arguments and counter-arguments of those against the reform of the chieftaincy, demonstrating the level of critical thought associated with a debate (Fanthorpe, 2011).

*The lack of comparability between arguments and thus research-based evidence means that i) research-based evidence is not answered, acknowledged or considered in depth, and may be disregarded on the basis of its seeming irrelevance to current policy questions; ii) identifying gaps in evidence and demanding these be filled is difficult.*

However, overall, the lack of comparability between arguments within the policy debates studied, and thus the use of incomparable research-based evidence, has two principal implications for the role of research-based evidence: i) research-based evidence is not answered, acknowledged or considered in depth, and may be disregarded on the basis of its seeming irrelevance to current policy questions (e.g. evidence suggesting why Zambia should maintain a ban on GMOs is arguably not taken seriously by supporters of GMOs); ii) identifying gaps in evidence and demanding these be filled is difficult— a meandering debate, where actors do not seem to be addressing each others' arguments in a

like-for-like manner, but rather are arguing in 'silos', is not conducive to arriving either at any agreement or at a greater role for research-based evidence. With so many gaps to fill, and

without a guaranteed audience, there is limited value in producing research-based evidence which may prove relevant to only part of a policy debate.

On the basis of the factors discussed, here the following questions are useful in establishing what is being described as the more micro-level, agency-oriented factors affecting how research-based evidence is used:

- **Coherence with policy position:** Is research-based evidence being used selectively? Is it being used by actors who support or resist reform? To what extent is it used to inform—rather than support—a policy position? What is the relationship between existing research and users of that research?
- **Commissioning and undertaking of research:** Which actors have commissioned or undertaken their own evidence, and with what purpose (e.g. informing, supporting)? Who undertook the research, and why were they commissioned? What discrepancies might exist between a research product and a policy position, and how is this resolved?
- **Use of popular ideas, concepts, and narratives:** How does research-based evidence use ideas, concepts and narratives which make up a discourse, and vice-versa? What other kinds of evidence are used? Which ideas, concepts and narratives are being used and/or supported, and why?
- **Availability of research:** What research-based evidence is available? Who undertook and funded it? What gaps exist and why? What barriers exist to the generation and communication of research?
- **Involvement of international actors:** What role have international actors played in funding and communicating research? How have international actors influenced policy and research priorities, questions and methodologies? What interests and incentives do international actors possess in influencing i) the debate and ii) evidence used in a debate? How do these interests and incentives intersect with those of national actors?
- **Like-for-like evidence:** What different policy objectives and policy questions exist? How does this relate to the availability of research and the role of international actors in framing policy and research priorities? Are i) arguments and ii) research-based evidence used in arguments like-for-like? How has this affected the debate in terms of the demand for evidence and development of the debate?

### **Africa works: why does research-based evidence often play a limited role?**

While asking how and why research-based evidence is used, it is also important to consider what proximate factors might explain why research-based evidence is *not* used. A number of explanations can be inferred from the previous discussion on why and how research-based evidence is used, including interest from international donors, availability of research and the commissioning and undertaking of research by participants in a policy debate. Further, Section 3.3 offered a number of structural reasons for the often-limited role of research-based evidence, largely centred around understandings of evidence and basic capacity issues in Africa.

However, this paper tentatively suggests that participants in policy debates in Africa are not ‘victims’ of structural factors over which agents have no control but, as already indicated, that these structures are actively engaged with and to some degree created by

*Research-based evidence is not being used purely because of a **lack** which can be filled by more capacity, more funding, more dialogue and better access to research; rather, it is not being used because **there are significant incentives not to use it.***



the actors concerned. Part of the reason why the structural factors linked with a lack of research-based evidence in policy debates exist is that they 'work'. In short, there are significant disincentives for altering a state of affairs which is of benefit to particular groups or individuals. At a very basic level, a political economy perspective helps interpret a lack of capacity in Africa as beneficial to power holders: a citizenry which lacks basic education and the power of critical reasoning is, as educational theorists such as John Dewey (1939) and Paolo Freire (1977) argue, an oppressed and powerless citizenry unable to challenge and change the structures of power that keep them so.

In the similar vein, what is being suggested here is that research-based evidence is not being used purely because of a *lack* (of capacity, of research, of funding, of space for dialogue, of ownership) which can be filled (more capacity, more funding, more dialogue, better access to research), but rather it is not being used because **there are significant incentives not to use it**. Thus, attempts to increase the use of research-based evidence in Africa on the basis of the 'more' principle need also to challenge a very basic (but uncomfortable) situation: in many cases, not using research-based evidence works for some—powerful—individuals and groups, including those who claim to be presenting and using evidence and/or research-based evidence.

This perspective is furnished with reference to Chabal and Daloz (1999) who, in their seminal treatment of corruption and the state in Africa, apply the principle that Africa works through the instrumentalisation of 'what appears to be' disorder. This perspective proves very useful, leading the authors to conclude that political disorder in Africa works to maintain and conceal the way power is distributed, in what is in fact a highly complex and logical system. This has produced, the authors argue, an 'Africanisation' of models of Western logic which embody what the Western world understands to be modernity. The African state, they further argue, is characterised by the existence of co-existent logic models: one African and one Western.

This logic is seemingly manifest in the case study examples of the labels of 'research' and 'evidence' (arguably terms derived from the influence of the evidence-based policy agenda and Western 'science' more generally) being applied to what is practice- or citizen-based evidence, as discussed in Section 3.3. What has been described as a confusion between or lack of awareness of different types of evidence relating to lack of capacity is no doubt an accurate and relevant insight, but, as this section suggests, 'lack of capacity' can sometimes be misleading.

The *instrumentalisation of lack of capacity*—which makes itself known in areas other than research–policy in Africa—thus describes a situation where there are significant advantages to a lack of capacity (assessed – in admittedly ill-defined – terms of the capacity to undertake, understand, and use research-based evidence) and/or significant disadvantages to improving this capacity (again, in this case, measured in terms of research-based evidence).

The way the instrumentalisation of lack of capacity manifests is identified in three ways in the case studies, although these forms are by no means exhaustive. It is tempting to name these 'strategies', although in doing so it is recognised that they are not comprehensive and are not consciously communicated—thus the term is employed in a wide sense. The first strategy, which has already been introduced, entails the seeming confusion or lack of awareness over what research and evidence are. A widespread and frequent occurrence, seemingly woven into the fabric of policy debates, heartened appeals to 'the evidence' or 'the research' are, as Section 3.3 argued, symptomatic of the enlightenment function of research but are also interpreted here as a deliberate way of infusing a statement with legitimacy, not only in the eyes of the West but also in a national context. The interpretation of this as a wedding of complementary logic systems, that deriving from national context and that embodying 'modern' Western rationality, may well be founded on a false dichotomy between 'the West' and 'Africa', but is useful less in illustrating this point than in highlighting how the confusion of different types of evidence reflects an often conscious attempt to 'modernise' through recourse to dominant and accepted forms of evidence.

The second example of a 'strategy' relates directly to the apparent confusion between different types of evidence. The use of tradition and culture in policy arguments is, as this paper has emphasised, widespread—particularly in Ghana and Sierra Leone. This is largely thought to be attributable to a lack of capacity as far as research-based evidence is concerned. However, recourse to tradition and culture in policy arguments is also of value in itself to those making the argument.

Each of the debates had elements of resistance to 'foreign' influence, defence of what was held to be national or 'African' tradition and culture and subsequent promotion of 'ownership' in policy issues. This is expressed by both government and non-government actors. For instance, in Ghana, street hawkers viewed the AMA's decongestion policy as being the product of foreign ideas about modernity, cleanliness and the visual trappings of development, while they claimed they themselves represented the 'reality' of life in urban Ghana. On the other side, the policy's critics were seen as being under the influence of the (international) human rights agenda, while decongestion was viewed as being a response to the 'reality' of the city's problems.

Further, in Uganda, the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill is presented as an African solution based on a more realistic and grounded understanding of a policy issue than scientific research can provide. In Zambia, resistance to GMOs is framed in terms of Zambians knowing what is best for Zambians, rather than being at the mercy of foreign biotechnology companies. The clearest example of the instrumentalisation not only of lack of capacity, but also of tradition itself, is in Sierra Leone, where appeals to tradition and culture anchor the defence of the chieftaincy. So far in this paper, appeals to tradition and culture have been taken at face value, and commitment to these societal pillars has been assumed to be genuine.

However, as suggested in relation to the Sierra Leone example, the recourse to tradition and culture can be read less in terms of a committed defence of tradition in itself, but more in relation to tradition as a label associated with a beneficial state of political affairs. This is not helped by the ill-defined nature of what is actually being referred to when the terms 'tradition' and 'culture' are used: Sierra Leoneans friendly to the chieftaincy reform agenda openly claim that tradition and culture are being used, in this debate, as ammunition against threats to the power of chiefs and the patrimonial relations which sustain their power. 'Tradition' and 'power' invoke powerful images and sentiment in post-colonial Africa, where a sense of national identity has been at the forefront of leaders' agendas.

A perceived attack on tradition or culture by foreign actors is therefore seen as an attack not only on the past but also on the contemporary 'modern' African state: the hybrid system in which Western values, systems and processes sit comfortably with the 'African' way is reflected in this curious reconciliation of the modern nation state with tradition and a shared sense of culture. Subsequently, the claim to represent reality by being close to the grassroots is a powerful way—some might say tool—of gaining instant legitimacy in a context where public opinion and the voice of the grassroots count, not least because of the value international development discourse places on them.

However, arguing that the recourse to tradition and culture (rather than research-based evidence) is in all cases an attempt at disguising narrow political and economic interests, a sense of identity cynically 'created', fails to account for instances where the idea of tradition and culture may be used instrumentally but for less narrowly defined interests. In Uganda, the defence of the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill employs the notion of a nationally owned and grassroots response to HIV/AIDS—in keeping with the government's previous and existing programme—arguably to ensure support for a policy undoubtedly thought to be a successful way to prevent and control the spread of a deadly virus that research indicates is on the rise in the country. The defence of the chieftaincy in Sierra Leone is also made on the basis that, because tradition and culture are so well respected among large swathes of the rural population, maintaining the role of the chiefs is a pragmatic way of maintaining law and order.

Given limitations in demand for evidence and a precedent for like-for-like arguments, the recourse to tradition and culture remains nominally valid in policy debates. There is little in the way of impetus to change what policy arguments are based on, particularly in the case of Sierra Leone: not using research-based evidence ‘works’. This relates to the third ‘strategy’, which works by using limited communication to effectively ‘stall’ a policy debate.

In the case studies, this occurred in different ways. In Zambia, the government’s refusal to comment further than on the text of the draft biotechnology policy, including on the subject of research, in effect halted the policy debate. Presumably, this was a desirable outcome for the government, which at the time was apparently facing tensions between politicians and civil servants over the GMO issue. In Uganda, the government avoided criticism of its evidence base by simply not communicating it. In Sierra Leone, a similar strategy was adopted, although this combined with defenders of the chieftaincy engaging in the debate but on terms which made it difficult to ‘answer’ them. The way actors communicate in policy debates reflects a more general, lower-level state of affairs in which a lack of communication is associated with avoidance of scrutiny, questioning and implied doubt. By halting a debate, either by not talking or by talking in a way that means other participants are unable to engage directly, potential questioning is deflected, and—on the face of it—any threat of change is quashed.

By introducing what appear to be irrational arguments or behaviours into a policy debate, actors are actually acting quite rationally: while debate is of value to many, a policy debate in Africa where freedom of speech does not enjoy a historical precedent embodies a threat to the *status quo*. Derailing, halting and effectively ‘killing’ a debate through non-aggressive means in which research-based evidence plays a limited role quite simply often works. In terms of research-based evidence, therefore, what is a seeming lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence (including its relationship with other forms of evidence) is in some instances better understood as a reasoned attempt to influence the outcome of a policy debate through a particular type of engagement. This has significant implications for how researchers and policymakers are supported, implying that in some cases the ‘more’ principle is likely only to scratch the surface of the research–policy interface in Africa.

Strategies and/or manifestations of the instrumentalisation of lack of capacity lend themselves far more to both generalisation and identification than do the political-economic factors which make not engaging research-based evidence beneficial. This discussion has developed an argument which proceeds on the basis that there is a lack of capacity in relation to research-based evidence, at least across the case studies, but that this lack of capacity is sustained and in fact *instrumentalised* in some cases in order to fulfil a number of varied and interrelated objectives. These include resistance to reform, the defence of national identity and autonomy and avoidance of scrutiny.

On the basis of this perspective, a number of overarching questions can be asked:

- Why would actors in a policy debate *not* use research-based evidence, and what is therefore gained by not using it?
- What strategies have been employed to instrumentalise a seeming lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence? Which actors have employed them?
- How do these strategies intersect with the more structural, discursive factors influencing the role of research-based evidence (Section 3.3) and the character of the debate (Section 3.2)?

*Derailing, halting and effectively ‘killing’ a debate through non-aggressive means in which research-based evidence plays a limited role quite simply often works.*

## 4 Research-based evidence in African policy debates: conclusions

A number of the arguments made in this paper are not likely not to find the softest of landings with regard to research-based evidence in African policy debates; nor do they lend themselves to neat answers with in terms of advising on how to influence policy through research-based evidence. The approach employed in undertaking this research has been to emphasise from the outset the politicised nature of policy, of research and of policy debates. In this respect, the case studies have contributed to the tentative development of an approach to viewing the relationship between research and policy as manifest—at least in ‘politicised’ policy areas—in policy debates.

The case study findings largely support research uptake models (including the evolutionary and processual models) which highlight the role of political incentives, interests and motivations in influencing what research is used. This is influenced in no small part by the framing (enlightening) role of research-based evidence and related discourse in shaping the cognitive and discursive context in which research is produced, understood and ‘chosen’ in policy arguments.

The politicised nature of research uptake in politically charged policy areas in Africa does have significant implications for efforts on the part of international donors to support researchers to influence policy using research-based evidence. The principal limitation of promoting the role of research-based evidence, as the case studies illustrate, is that what is being supported is far more than a neutral piece of *research* but a piece of research undertaken by *researchers* embedded in the political context in which they operate. Far from being isolated from politics (as the ‘ivory towers’ image would hold), the case study examples show that, in Africa, producers of research have ready audiences for what research is undertaken. In other cases, research originating from foreign sources ‘reaches’ Africa less through a complex distilling process and more because of the role played by international intermediaries who have done well to provide relevant research fit-for-purpose.

The problem here is the focus is relatively narrow: **researchers are supported to promote ‘my’ research, with little acknowledgement of the inevitable political interests, constraints, pressures and incentives it is a product of, nor of its discursive context.**<sup>12</sup> Having already emphasised the need to focus on the wider *policymaking* context in attempting to enhance the role of research-based evidence in policy, by adopting an approach which considers policy debates the ‘window’ to the politics of policymaking, the findings also support a wider, less short-term approach. This would focus on the discursive and political context in which a policy is debated and research-based evidence understood.

A number of obvious recommendations can be made with regard to helping particular researchers or policymakers ensure a piece of research gains some influence over policy. These include enticing interest from international donors, using standard buzzwords, emphasising the consultative and participatory nature of research, relying on citizen- and practice-based evidence and drafting research objectives and questions with decision makers. However, ‘going with the grain’ in this way is likely to do little to change the underlying

*Rather than focusing on promoting a particular piece of research, donors should concentrate more broadly on improving the ability of policy actors to engage in policy debates.*

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<sup>12</sup> This problem has been explicitly acknowledged by Kirsty Newman (2012), who has advocated for a review of how we approach supporting evidence-based policy: from focusing on the influence of particular research or particular research actors to a focus on encouraging and providing for a more research-friendly environment.

discursive and political context in which policy is formed and debated, and thus do little to enhance capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence in African policy contexts.

A more fruitful—and significantly more considerable—undertaking would be to move away from narrow attempts to support particular organisations and individuals, whose research ‘impact’ must be quantified, measured and assessed, and instead to turn our attention to **improving the quality of policy debates to enhance the ability of people to discuss policy using critical thought**. While this does not remove the politicisation of how research is undertaken, used and understood, it does provide greater scope to identify, acknowledge and challenge how policy arguments are formed and employed. The assumption here is that, in a ‘good’ policy debate, participants demonstrate an ability to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence.

Doing this rests on addressing the second major implication of this research, which is that, while research-based evidence often plays a role in an argument, this is only one of a cocktail of different types of evidence, largely drawn from two (conflating) sources: personal experience (practice-based evidence) and ‘the people’ (citizen-based evidence). However, evidence and research are often ill-understood, leading to a degree of what this paper has called confusion over what actually constitutes research and what kind of evidence is being used.

Thus, a central part of any effort to improve policy debates in Africa needs to **address levels of understanding relating to research methodologies and the philosophy of science**, in

order to help users of evidence understand and appreciate the limitations of particular evidence and locate an approach to gathering evidence among wider discussions about what constitutes valid evidence and rigorous research. At first, this may mean more rigorous analysis of what constitutes capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence. Promising models such as ‘evidence literacy’ diagnostic tests for African parliamentarians (Banda, 2012) provide initial guidance on how to form a baseline on this question.

The implications of needing to greatly improve the level of capacity in this regard relate principally to supporting tertiary education and the proportion of time allocated to this type of learning. It also requires supporting primary and secondary school curricula to provide space for students to gain skills in critical thought, the formation of arguments and the selection of relevant and credible evidence. At base, a number of critical areas of inquiry and learning need to be addressed before the concept of evidence-based policy is grafted onto policymaking processes in developing countries. These include:

- Different types of evidence and research methodologies;
- Debates relating to the philosophy of science, e.g. differences between natural sciences and social sciences;
- Approaches to scientific ‘proof’;
- Quoting and citing sources;
- The limitations of an evidence base;
- How to critique an evidence base (including your own);
- The formation of a logical argument;

*Efforts to improve policy debates in Africa must address levels of understanding relating to research methodologies and the philosophy of science, in order to help users of evidence understand and appreciate the limitations of particular evidence and locate an approach to gathering evidence among wider discussions about what constitutes valid evidence and rigorous research.*

- The difference between 'is' and 'ought' when using evidence in an argument (e.g. evidence which suggests the way things *are* is rarely sufficient as evidence on why something *ought* to be the case).

In time, this would likely help in abetting the unquestioned and widespread absorption of 'foreign' ideas, concepts and narratives without a far greater understanding and awareness of, and demand for, the evidence on which they rest. At present, the discourse of development frames policy debates in Africa. It is unrealistic to argue this is likely to change without a significant change in or usurping of the discourse itself. However, an educated and aware public, governed and scrutinised by people with greater capacity not only to undertake and use but also to *understand* evidence would be far more discerning when it comes to engaging with the ideas, concepts and narratives associated with development.

Second, this would help in improving the rigour of how practice- and citizen-based evidence is collected and presented. These forms of evidence are both influential and useful, offering insights often beyond the remit of the researcher and challenging the policy diktats inspired by research-based evidence and promoted by the international community. However, this evidence needs to be collected in a more systematic manner which ultimately constitutes research, for instance through interviews and surveys of expert practitioners, focus groups and opinion polls.

There are limitations to all evidence and approaches to collecting evidence; it is important that, when relying on evidence deriving from experience and/or from citizens, these are fully acknowledged. Further, using these types of evidence is not always sufficient to form an entire argument: supplementary evidence often needs to be used, for instance to demonstrate whether public opinions cohere with those raised at different points in time, or even the factors which contribute to the formation of public opinion.

Greater questioning of evidence, critical thought and awareness of the limitations of particular evidence for an argument are critical to what is thought here to be a 'good' debate. However, even when armed with rigorous evidence, policy debates have been found to lack comparability, with arguments and evidence not like-for-like. Improving capacity to understand what evidence is and its role in a debate would no doubt address this issue and lead to a far more cohesive, 'linear' debate.

A related approach to supporting 'better' policy debate is to **support the role of 'mediators' to analyse debates, thereby creating something of linearity in a debate**. However, in doing this, there is a risk of falling into the 'keep it simple' trap, which may serve to help researchers influence policy but do little to help promote and support research-based evidence on a wider, more fundamental, societal level. This consideration is by no means specific to the African continent, but is a pertinent one. Nevertheless, the presentation of a debate in a linear form is instrumental in identifying gaps in evidence, as the case studies in this research have arguably done.

*What appears to be a lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence cannot be addressed purely through 'more': 'more' capacity, 'more' research and 'more' links between researchers and policymakers.*

*A related approach to supporting 'better' policy debate is to **support the role of 'mediators' to analyse debates, thereby creating something of linearity in a debate** in which evidence gaps are identified, as well as focusing on improving public demand for evidence when it is not communicated in a policy debate.*

Identifying evidence gaps in a debate could help facilitate public demands for relevant research-based evidence, thus serving as a form of scrutiny of actors (state or non-state) in a debate. It also encourage actors who have evidence but are not communicating it (e.g. the HIV/AIDS and Related Matter Committee in Uganda) to do so. Further, by encouraging reflection and scrutiny of one's own evidence base, and ultimately the use of more nuanced, focused arguments, the like-for-like approach could serve to educate and build the critical capacity of actors in the policy arena.

The media would appear to be the vector point at which the analysis of policy debates might meet demands for particular evidence, and thus a good entry point for support. In the case studies, the media lacked demonstrable critical analysis or technical knowledge and, although it is no doubt influential in policy debates, its use of research-based evidence has been limited. In the policy debates studied, therefore, the media missed a significant opportunity to fulfil an educative function by demanding evidence and/or helping to create a linear, like-for-like debate.

Prioritising the building of skills and the adequate resourcing of the media in Africa would be an opportune way of providing space for the analysis and scrutiny of policy debates, the identification of evidence gaps and the encouragement of demand for evidence. In addition to this, in response to weak reporting it would be useful to encourage a reduction in the permeation of 'NGO news' (e.g. the occurrence of a workshop, the beginning of a new project or more flagrant advertisement of an organisation and/or donor) and more critical engagement with development issues. This would counter the situation found in some contexts, where policy-related reporting constitutes a roll-call of donor activities, framed by references to concepts that are gradually being rendered meaningless by their systematised overuse in public fora.

This paper was oriented to answer the question of why and how research-based evidence *has been* used, but it is argued that, on the basis of the case studies, the question of why research-based evidence *has not been* used is just as illuminating. Explained by discursive and basic capacity factors on one level, this paper has further argued that there are significant incentives not to use research-based evidence, amounting to an instrumentalised lack of capacity. In some cases, **what appears to be a lack of capacity to undertake, use and understand research-based evidence cannot be addressed purely through 'more': 'more' capacity, 'more' research and 'more' links between researchers and policymakers.** The situation is far more complex, and requires an honest analysis and assessment of the reasons why not using research-based evidence might be a desirable state of affairs.

At present, not using research-based evidence presents little in the way of disincentives. One strategy to navigate a situation in which particular actors do not use research-based evidence would be to ensure that a demand for evidence is being communicated, and is in fact expected. At base, however, evidence-based policy requires political will which moves beyond the nominal usage of its terms.

The analysis presented here will no doubt be considered pessimistic, or at least only partially representative of the African situation. However, this research was intended to challenge and inspire new and critical ways of thinking about the notion of evidence-based policy in Africa, which I believe it does. These are, as highlighted from the outset, tentative conclusions open to critique and interpretation, based on what is, I think, an attempt to provide an honest account of the role of research-based evidence in African policy debates. This has been done in a way that confronts head-on the potential limitations of policy discourse in many instances, as well as the serious capacity gaps which exist among actors engaging in policy issues on the continent. This paper has identified a variety of entry points for researchers wishing to pursue this further, and it is the aim of this paper that such efforts will come to fruition.

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