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CASE STUDY

Key findings from four case studies on evidence-informed policymaking in Africa

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About this document

This document summarises key findings from a series of four case studies written by African think tanks, commissioned as part of a research project that aims to unpack and better understand the use of different types of scientific and expert evidence in policymaking.

Each case study explores how evidence is defined, understood, and used in different national and sectoral policy contexts. The four case studies look at (1) South Africa's professionalisation of the public service (2) South Sudan's national budgeting process (3) Tanzania's Urbanization Laboratory and (4) Benin's food security and nutrition sector.

Case studies vary in length, style, and approach. Each offers valuable insights into the factors and actors influencing evidence use within specific national and sectoral policy contexts. The case studies will also contribute to a research paper written by Dr Jessica Espey and Gaida Casarin at the University of Bristol School of Geographical Sciences, which seeks to inform how evidence is used in international deliberations, particularly within the United Nations General Assembly.

The project is led by the University of Bristol, in collaboration with OTT Consulting, and four think tanks: ACED, African Centre for Cities, New South Institute, and Samahi Research. It was generously supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The views presented in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the funding or partner organisations.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The four case studies: South Sudan, Benin, South Africa and Tanzania

Evidence-informed policy-making (EIPM) has gained prominence as governments worldwide seek to improve the effectiveness of their policies by relying on data-driven insights. This learning brief summarises the findings from efforts to improve evidence-based policy-making in four contexts: South Sudan, South Africa, Benin, and Tanzania.

The **South Sudan** case study examines the experiences of implementing evidence-informed policy-making in the national budget process, a highly technical and demanding process that requires significant resources and expertise. The International Budget Partnership (IBP), which works closely with national researchers around the world to collect data from government websites, worked with Samahi Research in South Sudan to conduct the Open Budget Survey (OBS), a rich source of primary data for South Sudan's financial policies. The case study produced by Samahi draws on this experience to reflect on how evidence is used in the Public Finance Management (PFM) sector within the national budget process.

The second case discusses the evidence-informed policy-making ecosystem in the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) sector in Benin, analysing its key components and drivers. Produced by the think tank ACED, and drawing on its experience in the sector, the piece includes an analysis of the key institutions and actors involved in managing the FSN policy domain and the existing evidence and science-advisory mechanisms in place. The case finds that a diversity of evidence types co-exist in the ecosystem, noting that translating evidence for policy use is important for EBPM.

The third case considers policy-making within the professionalisation of the public service project in South Africa. In December 2020, the National School of Government in South Africa published A National Implementation Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service, which considers the type of evidence used in the production of this framework document, a later version of which was approved by the South African cabinet in 2022. The case study by the North-South Institute focuses on the notion of expert communities, or 'epistemic communities,' to argue that the production of these policy documents on public service reform indicates that the policy process in South Africa has become increasingly insular and idiosyncratic.

The final case recounts the experiences of a policy lab in Tanzania, the Tanzanian Urbanisation Laboratory (TULab), in its efforts to innovate the way in which UK development assistance was used to support national urban policy in Tanzania. The case was borne from a general desire for a new evidence culture aimed at connecting global development discourses with national policies and for more robust and institutionalised systems for compiling evidence in inter-governmental deliberations. It shows that not only are a combination of academic and practitioner knowledge needed for effective

responses to issues such as urbanisation and climate change, but that express attention needs to be given to the processes that generate this knowledge.

1.2. Evidence-generation context

Each country had a unique evidence-generating structure. In South Sudan, the Ministry of Finance and Planning obtains data for resource envelope estimates from national institutions, ministries, and the Bank of South Sudan, which are primarily budget-related documents. The case highlights that bureaucrats at the Ministry of Finance face challenges when producing the budget documents due to technical capacity constraints and insufficient resources to undertake data collection, analysis, and stakeholder engagement.

Meanwhile, in Benin, there is a formal institutional architecture for evidence production and use. The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries (MAEP) takes the lead in developing and implementing policies and programmes related to food security and nutrition (FSN). This ministry collaborates with dedicated agencies and other ministries to ensure a comprehensive approach to FSN. The National Agricultural Research System (SNRA), coordinated by the National Institute of Agricultural Research of Benin (INRAB), plays a central role in shaping agricultural policies. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and development partners also contribute significantly to shaping FSN policies, creating a multifaceted policy landscape. A wide array of evidence is utilised within the FSN ecosystem, including data, research, evaluation, and expert knowledge.

In South Africa, distinct groups such as academics, officials, politicians, activists, lawyers, trade unions, clergy, and businesses are involved in evidence production. The emergence of an epistemic community within the National School of Government in 2019, detached from prior affiliations, has in particular driven professionalisation and reform in a unique direction, diverging from earlier evidence-based approaches. The evidence that they drew on was largely empirical and analytical. In the early 2000s, when links were forged between academic and epistemic communities and those in the Department of Public Service and Administration, a greater interest arose in engaging with research and with policy options.

Lastly, in Tanzania, the TULab accommodates both academic and practitioner knowledge. The Lab was not beholden to the ‘scientific method’ in the sense of trying to minimise subjectivity. Functioning as a platform for gathering and reviewing diverse strands of evidence, it facilitates the interpretation of this evidence to inform decision-making. This approach draws on the expertise of in-country researchers and practitioners, enhancing the quality of evidence-based policy-making.

1.3. Political context

In addition to unique evidence governance contexts, each of the cases is set in a politically unique context. First, South Sudan faced economic challenges following its 2011 independence mandate despite having oil resources and growth in the non-oil sector. Mismanagement of the economy, civil wars, and an unstable oil market hindered prosperity, leading to a mismatch between oil revenue and public expenditure. Development partners pushed for Public Financial Management (PFM) reform due to this discrepancy. However, a lack of accountability and transparency within the political environment posed significant obstacles for effective governance.

In contrast, Benin maintained relative political stability over three decades, nurturing socioeconomic development and improved governance, but still faced economic challenges with a poverty rate of 38.5%.

Third, South Africa, officially democratic, grappled with apartheid's legacy, ongoing corruption, and administrative inefficiencies that impaired governance. Specifically, the Zondo Commission, formally known as the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption, and Fraud in the Public Sector, had a lasting effect on epistemic communities and evidence generation in South Africa. The Commission was set up in 2018 to investigate the allegation of state capture and corruption involving various government officials as well as private sector individuals and entities. As the case illustrates, the effect of the Zondo Commission was to take arguments about the organisation of government outside academic circles and bring them to the attention of a wider audience.

Lastly, Tanzania, while striving to achieve middle-income status by 2023, displayed economic growth and high urbanisation rates. However, governance trends were leaning towards centralisation and autocracy. Despite adopting policies for urban population growth, service provision and land allocation struggled to meet demand. The government centralised property tax collection due to concerns about local government corruption. Although smaller interventions were centralised, the electoral system favoured rural voters and control over urban infrastructure and teacher appointments shifted toward centralised authority. Therefore, all four countries presented in this learning brief were relatively new or emerging democracies with challenging socioeconomic and governance challenges that affect evidence use in policy.

2. Key findings

While the four cases, each set in a different country and dealing with different policy areas- public finance, professionalisation of public service, FSN, and urbanisation policy- there are still overlapping key lessons that emerge from all of these cases.

First, in the presence of diverse stakeholders, effective trust-building and relationship-brokering is key to institutionalising evidence-use. Secondly, civil society organisations, especially local evidence producers, can be instrumental in advancing evidence-informed policy-making. And third, the cases highlighted the importance of building the capacity and expertise of policy-makers to use evidence.

Key finding 1: Relationship brokering between diverse stakeholders is key to institutionalising evidence use.

In all four cases, building relationships between the diverse stakeholders, especially between policy-makers and evidence producers, promoted a collaborative and trusting environment that is conducive to the use of evidence. Relationship brokering enables actors who do not have the political legitimacy that the government entities have nor the funds that the development partners have, to leverage the relationship that they have built while working with these actors to enable evidence use. Recognising the complex power dynamics and the influence of various actors in the policy process is critical for the successful institutionalisation of evidence use.

Similarly in **Benin**, fostering trusted relationships with key players can improve the institutionalisation of evidence use. The case highlights that it is essential to look beyond the formal architecture of evidence suppliers and users in the FSN ecosystem, noting that decision-making power may not just be with those who are formally mandated for it. It is also important to consider the influence of actors such as CSOs and development partners. As discussed in the case study, decision-makers prioritise messengers over types or methods of evidence and this messenger hierarchy highlights the importance of building relationships with key decision makers, as well as their advisors, to effectively communicate evidence and ensure its uptake. The collaborative approach observed in Benin's agricultural sectors can be replicated in other sectors, in other countries, and even in multi-country deliberative processes to ensure a diverse range of perspectives are considered.

Further, the **South Africa** case illustrates that the producers of evidence need to either lobby decision-makers directly by building personal relations or build coalitions with other parties, including activist organisations and the media to bring their findings to the attention of decision-makers. In the early 2000s, links were forged between academic epistemic communities and those in the Department of Public Service and Administration. This happened largely because the then-Minister was intellectually curious and the then Director General was a former academic. As a result, the initiative

around the public Administration Management Bill was an outcome of cross-pollination between epistemic communities. Relationship building between epistemic communities is important because otherwise, decision-makers form their own epistemic communities that are largely closed off to others, thereby leading evidence-making communities to be influenced by politics.

Similarly, in **Tanzania**, the construction of the final report, *Harnessing Urbanisation for Development: Roadmap for Tanzania's Urban Development*, drew from many different people, spanning different institutional affiliations and disciplines, and appears to have kept a small community of urbanists together. In instances where that research and evidence can be divisive, particularly when it seeks to be propositional about the need for change, research outputs can stray into arenas that are too political for many scientific researchers and too technical for many politicians. This results in a dissonance that sees decision-makers retreat into their status quo frames and assumptions. Taking this issue into consideration, the reflections from the TULab suggest the potential for better policy formulation when the interplay between science and policy is enhanced in policy formulation and multiple strands of evidence are accommodated. Building bridges between the science and political communities is key to this goal.

Key finding 2: Civil society organisations (CSOs) are instrumental in brokering evidence and advancing evidence-informed policy-making.

Civil society plays a crucial role in brokering between evidence producers and users across national evidence systems. Their participation enables the representation of segments of the community that neither international actors nor the government can easily access, and their ability to navigate power dynamics within local contexts allows them to engage effectively with stakeholders and establish trust through collaboration. Evidence-brokering involves conducting the necessary research, analysis, and synthesis as well as the 'invisible' relationship brokering to support the communication of evidence to policy-makers.

In the context of PFM in **South Sudan**, evidence-broker responsibility largely falls on these CSOs, including national non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, and others. They work closely with international non-government organisations and UN agencies, such as UNICEF, to carry out the actual work on the ground. In the realm of PFM, civil society is involved in activities such as research, data analysis of budgets and expenditures, and advocacy. The case further highlights that CSOs are not only partners in civic engagement, but can also be providers of technical research support, a function which is often overlooked by governments. This has created a situation where under-resourced CSOs, and research institutes struggle to play their part as key evidence brokers.

The **Benin** case also illustrates the role that CSOs can have in communicating evidence. Since scientific evidence can often be out of reach for the policy audience, intermediaries, such as CSOs and consultancy firms, play a crucial role in fostering evidence-informed decision-making. These brokering organisations are essential for bridging the gap

between evidence producers and policy-makers in the FSN ecosystem in Benin. For example, CSOs such as the National Platform of Civil Society Organisations in Benin (PASCIB) and the National Platform of Agricultural Farmer and Producer Organisations (PNOPPA) hold strong positions in the institutional architecture of the agricultural sector in Benin, making them valuable partners in promoting evidence-based decision-making. By collaborating with research organisations, CSOs in Benin use evidence to advocate for policy changes and communicate research findings to policy-makers.

In **South Africa**, CSOs were also a key part of epistemic communities that emerged in opposition to state capture during the Zondo commission hearings. These CSOs shared the concerns of academics and the senior officials in the Department of Public Services and administration in the 2000s. They largely drew on empirical and analytical evidence to advance reform for the public sector. The role of these CSOs and their networks were key to producing a political movement that gave impetus to convening official enquiries into corruption and state capture.

Also, the **Tanzanian** Urbanization Laboratory (TULab) was instrumental in brokering evidence and cultivating action on urbanisation policy. The launch of the final TULab report, *Harnessing Urbanisation for Development: Roadmap for Tanzania's Urban Development Policy* in 2019 reflected the way multiple strands of evidence gathered by the TULab had transcended traditional ministerial silos. It also bore testimony to the political capital that had been generated by the TULab. Additionally, the TULab was successful in convening an interdisciplinary community of urbanists who continued to interact and collaborate. TULab has been used by the Botnar Foundation and by UNICEF to review policy and research.

Key finding 3: Importance of state capability and expertise of bureaucrats to strengthen evidence-informed policy-making and de-politicise evidence.

The cases also emphasised the importance of building the capacity of policy-makers to understand and use evidence in policy-making.

For example, in **South Sudan**, the national budget process is a highly technical, dense, and complex exercise that demands significant expertise and resources. The budget survey approach also values the expertise of government officials involved in daily evidentiary processes, with their inputs contributing significantly to the report. While technological advances can make the budget process more efficient, bureaucrats still need to possess the technical and analytical skills necessary to use technology effectively and they must have access to the necessary resources to invest in technology infrastructure and training. Therefore, governments must invest in the necessary resources and capacity-building to enable their staff to use technology effectively. The case explains that in South Sudan annual budget review reports often go unproduced due to capacity constraints, including lack of staff and inadequate resources to carry out necessary review work. South Sudan's structural characteristics further contribute to

broader issues of state capacity, particularly in terms of technical capacity constraints that manifest daily in public administration processes such as budgeting and planning.

The **Benin** case further illustrated that institutionalising evidence use in policy processes requires a long-term approach that involves investing in individual decision-makers' capacity and awareness, understanding the constraints they face and creating appropriate institutional rules. The level of evidence use in policy-making is often influenced by decision-makers' awareness and understanding of evidence-informed practices. In some cases, decision-makers may initiate informal processes of evidence use by assembling a group of researchers and experts to support policy development. Therefore, investing in the capacity and awareness of individual decision-makers is crucial, as they can promote these informal practices of evidence use, which can later be translated into formal institutional rules. By fostering a culture of evidence-informed decision-making at the individual level, the institutionalisation of evidence use can be more effectively achieved and sustained over time.

Additionally, in **South Africa**, the role of expertise in government was emphasised in the public sector reform programme.

The Public Administration reform was specifically concerned with professionalising the public sector and de-politicising it. The government introduced a Senior Management Service in 2000, that sought to create a high-capacity leadership echelon in the public service. The Handbook developed by the Department of Public Service and Administration at the time proposed 'selection principles' for 'senior managers' including merit and job-related criteria, insisting that educational qualifications should not be the sole determinant of suitability. The December 2020 National Implementation Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Service apparatus makes a distinction between being professional and professionalism, and professionalisation. Being professional refers to "practices, conduct, values and behaviour" regardless of training, qualifications, and levels of responsibility. In contrast, professionalisation refers to developing a public service ethic amongst individuals, with corresponding behaviours, through a suitable programme of education and by "sharpening their 'know-how'" or capacity. The professionalising framework was essentially a proposal to place a National School of Government at the centre of public service recruitment and professional development. As such, it proposes a pre-employment orientation programme for would-be public servants, with tighter pre-entry requirements, and integrity tests to be included in an overall competency assessment.

While the **Tanzania** case did not discuss building expertise of policy-makers directly, it did note that drawing inferences from evidence can often be politicised. Therefore, the TULab, as both an epistemic community and a 'third space' provided one example of how investment in evidence gathering and evidence ownership can create space for new questions and new ideas when seeking to disrupt deeply institutionalised assumptions about urbanisation policy. Theoretically, building the capacity of policy-makers themselves to use and understand evidence can also help create evidence ownership that is important for building EBPM. The TULab's workshops provided a deliberative space

to ask important questions and encouraged participants to challenge norms and ideas in a protected and supportive culture. Unlike more rigid and traditional government workshops, the TULab's workshops began with a piece of performing art and ended with a meal to enable informal discussions and building of trust.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the case studies on evidence-informed policy-making in South Sudan, South Africa, Benin, and Tanzania have yielded valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities confronting governments striving for data-driven policy decisions. These instances have illuminated overarching lessons transcending their unique policy domains and political landscapes.

First, fostering relationships among diverse stakeholders has emerged as a cornerstone for successful evidence-informed policy-making. Collaborative ties cultivated through communication have been pivotal in establishing a climate of trust and for facilitating evidence integration. These relationships, whether between policy-makers and evidence generators, academic circles, or governmental entities, have enabled the effective infusion of evidence into policy processes.

Secondly, the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) as intermediaries and evidence conduits is of paramount significance. CSOs have demonstrated their capacity to bridge the divide between evidence generators and policy-makers, leveraging their distinctive position to engage varied stakeholders, navigate power dynamics, and cultivate trust. Their participation has been instrumental in championing evidence-grounded reforms and proficiently conveying research discoveries to decision-makers.

Lastly, the imperative of enhancing the capabilities and expertise of policy-makers has been underscored as a pivotal facet in the journey toward evidence-informed policy-making. Across all scenarios—whether intricate budgetary processes, policies concerning food security and nutrition, public service overhauls, or urbanisation policy—the proficiency of decision-makers in comprehending and employing evidence has proven indispensable. Investments in capacity-building endeavours have been pivotal in depoliticising evidence and enabling its efficacious application.

Moreover, these case-derived insights also spotlight the necessity for nuanced strategies that heed each nation's political backdrop. Whether grappling with a post-independence context, overcoming economic challenges, addressing legacies of state capture, or navigating centralisation tendencies, the unique contexts of each nation have engendered distinct hurdles in evidence-informed policy-making. Discerning these contextual factors is pivotal in tailoring strategies to seamlessly incorporate evidence.

As governments worldwide persist in seeking sound policy solutions for intricate challenges, evidence-informed policy-making endures as a bedrock of effective governance. The lessons distilled from these case studies extend practical counsel for nurturing collaboration between governmental and non-governmental institutions, cultivating trust, and augmenting decision-makers' proficiencies to leverage evidence in policy articulation. Notably, all these lessons point to long-term endeavours that can contribute to institutionalising EIPM. Acknowledging the significance of relationship cultivation, the involvement of CSOs, and capacity-building, governments can pave a trajectory toward more enlightened, efficacious, and sustainable policies.



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