

## Incentivizing Evidence-Informed Decision Making in Government

How are public sector officials incentivized to use evidence<sup>1</sup> routinely in their work, whether to inform major policies and decisions, design or alter programs, or guide implementation? The *Results for All Incentivizing Evidence-Informed Decision Making in Government* series highlights strategies, processes, and programs that government agencies around the world have used to create incentives for using evidence in government decision making.



### Incentivizing the Use of Evidence in Annual Staff Performance Plans

Department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa

#### Why it was introduced:

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- South Africa has a strong tradition of using evidence to set policy agendas in the environmental sector. Principle Four of the National Environmental Management Act of 1998 makes clear that decisions must be informed by all forms of available knowledge, and the Biodiversity Act of 2004 highlights the need for an evidence base to support regulations and other policy tools in the management of biodiversity. The Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) has long-standing partnerships with research entities and the Department of Science and Technology, which have also helped to promote the generation of science and evidence relevant to the environmental sector. Nevertheless, DEA recognizes that short-term policy issues can impact and impede longer-term research agendas, sometimes making evidence unanticipated and unavailable when it is required. In response, DEA has shifted to a more strategic approach to producing and managing its evidence base, one that helps balance short and long-term evidence needs. One component of this new approach involves incentivizing DEA branches and staff to more explicitly link evidence production and use with policy development, by incorporating new indicators in annual performance agreements.

#### How it works:

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- The Department of Environmental Affairs ([DEA](#)) in South Africa commits to and assesses its [annual performance](#) based on a set of approximately 20 strategic objectives. First DEA branches and subsequently each staff member select a combination of those strategic objectives to fill their branch annual performance plans and individual performance agreements. Each objective includes technical performance indicators and accompanying descriptions which specify how the indicators are measured, the responsibility and frequency

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<sup>1</sup> We define evidence broadly as the best information available to decision makers, which can include administrative and statistical data, research, evaluations, and citizen input.

of reporting, desired performance, and more. After identifying the priority targets and quarterly activities they will perform towards their selected strategic objectives, DEA staff sign the individual performance agreements with their managers and are rated on an annual basis, from 1 – 5 on each of their objectives and performance indicators, with 3 being satisfactory and 5 exceptional. High performing staff are eligible for bonuses or other incentives, while underperformers face disciplinary action.

- The performance plans have become a powerful tool for incentivizing evidence use throughout the department: in addition to outcome-oriented objectives such as “ecosystems conserved, managed and sustainably used,” and “threats to environment quality and integrity managed,” DEA now includes objectives that promote the use of evidence in the internal work of the department, such as “effective knowledge and information management for the sector” and “strengthened knowledge, science and policy interface.” The latter includes performance indicators such as “environmental sector evidence policy interface system in place,” “number of environmental sustainability research projects commissioned,” “number of interventions and research programs aimed at advancing the biodiversity science interface,” and “number of research/science based policy recommendations finalized.”

Strategic objective: Strengthened knowledge, science and policy interface

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	AUDITED/ ACTUAL PERFORMANCE			ESTIMATED PERFORMANCE 2016/17	MEDIUM-TERM TARGETS		
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16		2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Environmental sector evidence-policy interface system in place	Coordination and support provided for the development of the sector R,D&E thematic strategies	Sector diagnostic report produced based on R, D & E framework	Change strategy on R, D & E framework developed	8 change strategy advocacy workshops conducted (Phase 1)	Phase 2 of Change strategy on R, D & E framework implemented  (8 change strategy evidence-policy interface interventions implemented)	Impact report on implementation of change strategy for improved evidence-policy interface on R, D&E framework developed	R,D&E framework for evidence-policy interface reviewed
Number of environmental sustainability research projects commissioned	South Africa green economy modelling report published 4 policies researched (SD, GE and SCP)	1 environmental sustainability policy research project commissioned	1 environmental sustainability policy research project commissioned	1 environmental sustainability policy research project commissioned	1 integrated environmental sustainability systematic review research project commissioned	1 environmental sustainability policy research project commissioned	1 environmental sustainability policy research project commissioned

- DEA’s Director for Science-Policy Interface, Kiruben Naicker, and Senior Policy Advisor for National Sustainable Development Policy and Research, Mapula Tshangela, were among the first to create a strategic objective related to the science-policy interface and adopt it in their personal performance agreements. “In my case, science-policy interface weighs about 30%, so in that area, whether I get an assessment of 3 or a 4, it will make a difference in my overall performance,” says Tshangela. Mr. Naicker’s Directorate was created primarily to facilitate the science-policy interface for the biodiversity sector and thus his performance agreement and incentives respond directly to that strategic objective.

**What it has achieved:**

- Over the years, Tshangela and Naicker lobbied to make the objective a priority for the department, and to their credit, any employee in eligible programs in the department can now

add it to their performance plans. While she admits that some of the indicators in the objective lean too heavily on the number of research reports produced rather than assessing or facilitating the use of that evidence and its impact on policy development, Tshangela is optimistic about the progress made to date. “It may look easy, but the fact that we have a science-policy interface strategic objective, the fact that people choose to contribute to that objective, we never had that before.” And even that small change has made an impact on the approach towards incentivizing and institutionalizing evidence use within the department. According to Tshangela, formally committing to the objective helps departmental staff to make using evidence to inform policy into business as usual.

#### **What lessons were learned:**

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- The addition of explicit science-policy interface indicators in branch performance plans and individual performance agreements is helping to make evidence-informed policymaking the norm in the department.
- The approach to incentivizing and advancing evidence use in a department must be supported by the leadership. This requires tremendous effort and time, and is not always a straightforward process.

#### **What comes next:**

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- Government priorities are renewed or refined every five years; the current priorities fall within the 2014-2019 cycle, so the years 2018 and 2019 provide an opportunity to review and reprioritize the work to encourage the science-policy interface and evidence use going forward. This is also a chance for the department to continue to refine its strategic objective indicators, for example, to better assess the impact of research on policy development rather than the number of reports produced.
- Strengthening partnerships between evidence producers and policymakers remains a challenge for the department to address, particularly to better synchronize the policy and evidence production cycles.

#### **Resources:**

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- Annual Performance Plan 2017/2018. Pretoria, South Africa: Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), June 3, 2017. [https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/reports/environmentalaffairs\\_app2017\\_2018.pdf](https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/reports/environmentalaffairs_app2017_2018.pdf)
- “Technical Performance Indicator Descriptions for the Annual Performance Plan (2015/2016).” Pretoria, South Africa: DEA. [https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/environmentalaffairs2015-16\\_performanceindicatorprofiles.pdf](https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/environmentalaffairs2015-16_performanceindicatorprofiles.pdf)
- Interview with Mapula Tshangela, Senior Policy Advisor, National Sustainable Development Policy and Research, DEA, South Africa, December 15, 2017.
- Inputs from Kiruben Naicker, Director, Biodiversity Science-Policy Interface, DEA, South Africa, February 9, 2018.