

Evidence-Informed Decision Making: Moving Forward

About Results for All

We launched [Results for All](#) in January 2016 as a knowledge building and learning initiative. Through research and consultations, we aimed to develop a better understanding of how governments in low- and middle-income countries are building a foundation for evidence use in policymaking and explore how to accelerate these efforts. The briefs in this series reflect observations from this work.

Background

To make progress in routinely using evidence, governments must demonstrate capacity at multiple levels of an organization or system – individual, organizational, and institutional. They need trained and motivated staff and the backing of robust systems and processes that make it easy to find, share, and use information in decision making. Formal rules that enforce or incentivize the use of evidence and the social norms that influence a decision maker's behavior and attitude toward evidence use are also essential. Trusting partnerships with citizen groups, the media, and academic communities who provide feedback, co-define a policy question, or amplify a key message are needed too. Collectively, these foundational elements or building blocks represent what we have at times referred to as an ecosystem or holistic approach to strengthening evidence use in decision making. This focus on foundation building calls attention to the need for deliberate and accountable measures to accelerate evidence use in government.

Reflecting on What We Learned

Results for All's knowledge building and research activities included research to explore the [demand for a global evidence network](#) – a platform that could help to spread lessons about practices aimed at strengthening public sector capacity to use evidence. Organizationally, our focus on building a foundation to support the effective use of evidence in government decision making has had a transformative impact in U.S. cities through the Bloomberg Philanthropies funded [What Works Cities](#) initiative. We share below some considerations about this approach in the context of the low- and middle-income countries where we focused our research and learning.

A discussion about systems, policies, and processes for evidence use resonates most when grounded in decisionmaker priorities. Results for All's July 2018 [peer-learning workshop](#) on using evidence to improve implementation drew decision makers from different sectors and domains. Although workshop participants engaged in lively discussions about research and evaluation capacity strengths and weaknesses, we found it hard to sustain interest in a conversation about evidence use that was not anchored in a specific policy or service delivery challenge. Participants were most interested in practical guidance that could help them realize better program results for citizens – improved capacity for using evidence would help them achieve this goal, but it wasn't an end in itself.

Funders recognize the importance of foundation building but strengthening capacity for policy engagement is a hard sell even in the sectors they support. We spoke with representatives from [23 bilateral, multilateral, and philanthropic funding organizations](#) to understand how they support evidence use in government decision making – concretely, how they prioritize and invest in activities aimed at improving policy engagement capacity. And we learned that although many funder initiatives support evidence use or uptake, it's often specific to a sector, policy area, or type of evidence such as impact evaluations and intended to inform an internal strategy rather a government's policy choices.

Further, strengthening broad public sector capacity to promote routine and systematic use of evidence in government decision making is rarely an explicit objective of a funder's programmatic activities. For example, establishing knowledge translation and management policies and systems outside of a particular program, or developing inter-agency data-sharing agreements to aid future initiatives. Based on what we heard in our interviews, we think it is unlikely that funders will commit to investing broadly in systems, processes, and policies to advance the use of evidence across government in the near term. But we are encouraged that nearly everyone we consulted is interested in a continued dialogue to explore how best to strengthen a government's capacity to use evidence in policy- and practice-level decisions.

Efforts to promote evidence-informed decision making are gaining traction in many sectors. They include initiatives such as [EvipNet](#), a network established by the World Health Organization to promote the systematic use of research evidence in health policymaking. [EVIDENT](#) aims to strengthen the evidence to policy pathway by translating local needs into nutrition policy recommendations that are specific, actionable, and informed by the best available evidence. In Benin, ACED's [Evidence-Policy-Action \(EPA\) Network](#) facilitates knowledge exchange and learning between evidence generators (researchers, data specialists, consultants, and citizens) and users of evidence (policymakers and practitioners) in the food, nutrition, and environment sectors. In Europe, the [EIPFEE Network](#) is a platform for government organizations, academic partners, and individuals working together to advance the use of evidence in education.

These initiatives align with the policy priorities of government members and the sectoral interests of funders and reflect a promising shift from research production and passive dissemination of findings at the end of a project, to learning, knowledge exchange, and partnerships for moving from evidence to policy change. What's missing is a coordinated way of consistently capturing and sharing stories

across sectors – a forum for passing on lessons learned, for analyzing accomplishments and failures to minimize reinvention, and where it makes sense, for pooling or combining efforts.

Practical Insights

We began our work on an optimistic note about the commitment to using evidence that governments at different levels, across sectors, and contexts are demonstrating by building a foundation to support regular use of evidence in decisions that ultimately aim to improve the lives of their citizens. We remain optimistic and encouraged by the progress we continue to witness. The excitement around initiatives such as [Africa Evidence Week](#), [Latin America Evidence Week](#) are testament to this momentum. We would be remiss not to mention the fantastic partners we've worked with over the last four years, who are leading the charge in taking action to strengthen systems for evidence-informed decision making. To name a few: [AFIDEP](#), [PACKS Africa](#), [INASP](#), [Politics and Ideas](#), and the [Africa Center for Systematic Reviews and Knowledge Translation](#). While there still is value in strengthening broad public sector capacity and systems needs for evidence use in government, we question whether the timing for this approach is right now and below share our final observations.

We need more stories to better understand what it takes to advance evidence use in government. Participants at Results for All's peer learning workshop asked several questions that touched on the challenge of taking a foundation-building approach to evidence use: How do we know that a systems approach is beneficial to evidence-informed decision making? And how does an evaluative culture contribute to successful policy implementation? These types of questions make a case for more stories to demonstrate the value of a foundation-building approach for strengthening evidence use in government.

[Thailand's progress in achieving universal health coverage](#) – an enduring source of inspiration for many countries – is one such story. In 1992 the government established the Health Systems Research Institute, an independent but publicly funded policy unit operating at arms-length from government, creating a structure and process for ensuring that evidence is consulted systematically in health policymaking. This unit paved the way for two other prominent research partners, IHPP (International Health Policy Program) and HITAP (Health Intervention and Technology Assessment Program), that also inform and influence health policy decisions. The country decided to adopt universal coverage in 2001, and with the evidence and expertise from these influential research bodies, rapidly extended health care to 98 percent of the population, just ten years after launch.

Thailand's story illustrates how an appropriate combination of technical expertise, organizational systems, and institutions can lead to better health policy decisions. We need these examples to understand what works and what doesn't in strengthening capacity to use evidence government, in what context, and why. What would it take to knit stories like this together across sectors, to form a body of lessons that makes a case for future investments in evidence systems?

Policymaking is an inherently political and complicated process. Let's give evidence champions who remain committed in the face of obstacles, the recognition they are due. The

perception that government is an ineffective and monolithic bureaucracy has fueled a growing distrust in the public sector that is familiar in many parts of the world. New post-truth language, on its part, suggests that facts have become less influential in shaping public opinion than personal belief and emotion. Because of these types of sentiments, it is now more critical than ever that we shine [a spotlight on the progress governments at all levels are making in advancing the use of evidence](#). And find opportunities to [publicly recognize](#) evidence champions who are driving change and inspiring others in government through their actions.

Moving forward, let's not underestimate the power of [storytelling](#). Let's use it to share accomplishments, reflect on challenges, highlight champions, create a collective narrative, and build community in strengthening capacity and systems for evidence use. And let's start where these stories are already beginning to take shape.

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