||| RESULTS FOR ALL

A global initiative dedicated to helping policymakers demand
and use the evidence they need to improve the lives of citizens

Institutionalizing the Use of Evidence in Decision Making: What Do We Mean?

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 three-part series reflect observations from this work.

Background

Between January 2016 and March 2017, Results for All conducted a landscape review of the mechanisms – policies, programs, processes, and operational practices – governments are creating to promote evidence-informed policymaking[1]. We document over 100 mechanisms in the report, classified according to the role they play in advancing the use of evidence:

- Improving access to quality, timely, and policy-relevant evidence;
- Enhancing policymaker knowledge, skill, and motivation to find and use evidence; and
- Promoting partnerships that build trust and collaboration between policymakers and key stakeholders in the policy process, including the research community, media, and citizen groups.

---

[1]By evidence-informed policymaking, we mean that governments are using high quality, timely, and policy-relevant evidence to inform policy decisions. The evidence can include qualitative and quantitative information, such as research, context-specific information such as administrative data, and experiential evidence such as citizen feedback, that is collected in a systematic, rigorous, and transparent process. We used the term evidence-informed policymaking when we started this research but switched to evidence-informed decision making after a workshop in our second phase of work, to reflect practice-level decisions associated with policy implementation. Coinciding with this evolution, we use evidence-informed policymaking in this brief and switch to evidence-informed decision making in our other briefs.

We also duly acknowledge the political, social, and economic factors that influence the complex and often messy nature of the policy process. One critical insight from our research is that governments need interventions at multiple levels of an organization or system – individual, organizational, and institutional – to gain traction in advancing evidence use. To illustrate – a policymaker who has technical expertise (individual capacity) but limited access to a reliable source of evidence (organizational systems and processes) and no mandate to use it (institutional requirement) isn't likely to routinely seek and use information in policy decisions. We offer some reflections on these levels below, with a focus on institutions and what we think it means to institutionalize evidence use in policymaking.

Reflecting on What We Learned

Mechanisms that illustrate how governments are strengthening policymakers' ability to routinely access and use evidence – the individual and organizational levels – tend to be specific and tangible. Such as a training course on Evidence for Policymaking and Implementation that is designed to build buy-in for evaluations among senior managers in the government of South Africa. Or the Australian government's support for the Productivity Commission, an independent advisory body that conducts research and public inquiries on issues affecting the welfare of citizens – in effect generating a body of evidence for policymakers to consider in a decision process. As we look back at the landscape review, we notice that our discussion of institutional level mechanisms is a lot less specific. In the spirit of reflection, learning, and growth, next, we explain how we currently understand institutions and the role they play in advancing evidence use in government.

Although often used interchangeably, institutions are different from organizations. They are the formal rules – laws, policies, and constitutions, and informal norms that guide how people, systems, and processes interact, and serve as a kind of glue for the policy system. Mexico's Social Development Law is a formal institution that seeks to promote evidence-informed policy- and practice-level decisions in government programs by requiring all social programs to be evaluated. In many contexts, the power to enforce legal institutions – through incentives and sanctions, rests with the political state. The awards program for good practices in monitoring and evaluation created by Mexico's National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), is an example of an incentive designed to encourage compliance with a law – in this case, the Social Development Law.

The six principles of the International Open Data Charter, on the other hand, represent a globally-agreed set of norms for how to publish data. These norms incorporate the values of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity that define the open data community. Informal institutions, such as social norms, are usually self-enforced; that is, they are enforced automatically without a specific intervention. It's how in Washington, D.C., we move to the right side of an escalator to make way for climbers and descenders on the left. Other than being called an escalefter – and there are worse things – there isn't anything enforcing or sanctioning this behavior.

Power and political dynamics influence the rules and norms that govern evidence use. Leaders in government have the power to create and enforce laws and regulations about evidence use and influence the performance of an office. In the Philippines, the Results-Based Performance Management System (RBPMS) was established with an [administrative order issued by the highest level of government,](#) to streamline performance monitoring, evaluation, and reporting across agencies. An [executive order, again from the president](#), incentivizes individuals, and organizations to use the RBPMS as a tool for tracking progress in achieving commitments, promoting fiscal transparency, and improving management practice. Authority figures can influence the adoption of norms as well, and as we are witnessing in many countries, including the [U.S.](#), they can also undermine long-established codes of conduct.

Without support and buy-in from leadership, it's challenging for staff to remain committed to consulting evidence in policy decisions. Instead, when a training program on evidence-informed policymaking for civil servants in Ghana [adapted its curriculum](#) to include senior leadership, trainees reported that they received more support from their home agencies in implementing follow-up action plans. Power dynamics unquestionably have a complexity that extends beyond the administration of a government office – the point here is that power and institutions are linked. And that to understand how institutions – whether formal rules or informal norms – influence evidence use in government, we have to examine power.

To achieve progress in evidence-informed policymaking, behavior in government must shift toward greater evidence use. To do this, we have to consider mental models, values, and norms. Mental models are the beliefs and assumptions we form about using evidence – is it too time-consuming or costly to consult evidence or, are the incentives for using evidence unclear? These mental models inform the extent to which we value using evidence in policy decisions.

Shared assumptions and values about evidence use influence what becomes convention or norm in a government office; in other words, the [culture of evidence use](#). If the assumptions that inform values and influence norms suggest that using evidence is too costly or time-consuming, a government office is not likely to make progress in establishing a practice of routine evidence use regardless of its organizational structures and policies. The converse is also true. In the absence of policymakers who are trained to use evidence, reliable access to quality evidence, and formal guidance on using evidence – norms alone are not likely to motivate evidence use.

Norms interact with formal institutions in different ways – [complementing, substituting, competing, or accommodating them](#). As one example, in contexts where laws governing evidence use may not yet be in place, leaders can promote evidence use through their actions – giving staff agency to consult evidence and [recognizing those who do so](#). Guidance for documenting [evidence in a policy proposal](#) or a lunch-time learning club on evidence are other ways in which government offices can communicate the value of using evidence in policymaking and create norms that fill the place of formal laws. In a different circumstance, a law mandating a government office to document its evidence can be met with resistance if it completes with existing norms. But with guidance and support in applying the new requirement, staff [behavior in the office can be expected to shift toward increased evidence](#) use over time.

Coming back to our understanding of what it means to institutionalize evidence use, we are now more precise about institutions – formal rules and informal norms – and their contribution to strengthening evidence use in government. To institutionalize evidence use in a government office is to ensure there are rules and norms governing its use in policymaking – both are needed to make evidence use stick. But we want in particular to call attention to the significance of norm change, which often takes a back seat to formal rules and systems.

Practical Insights

The motivation to create a formal law or rule governing the use of evidence in policymaking – for example, establishing how often to conduct evaluations and creating incentives to ensure evaluation recommendations are used – varies in different political contexts. In South Africa, rising inequality and service delivery challenges influenced the introduction of the National Evaluation Policy Framework. The incoming political party at the time saw a monitoring and evaluation framework as a way to improve government performance and service delivery outcomes. In the U.S., the recently enacted Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act is a rare achievement of bipartisan support in an especially divisive atmosphere. Consultations and learnings from other contexts influenced both examples. A study tour to Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and the U.S. informed South Africa's evaluation framework, while expert witnesses, public hearings, and a survey of federal agencies helped shape the law in the U.S.

In addition to authority figures, peers, and broad-based support from different communities can drive norm change. Promising strategies for shifting norms include city mayors who publicly commit to using evidence in policymaking. A dynamic statement that staff are routinely consulting evidence can also be a way to model desired behavior change and encourage conformity in using evidence. The Africa Evidence Network is an Africa-wide learning platform for citizen groups, academics, government policymakers, and funding partners designed to foster learning and provide individuals with the support they need to change behavior spread the use of evidence in their respective communities. Diagnostic tools for assessing current practices and identifying the obstacles that impede routine use of evidence can help decision makers identify context-appropriate solutions for shifting norms. How committed is leadership? Are staff skill levels, organizational systems, and incentives aligned with evidence use? Giving staff time and space to reflect on their evidence use challenges and to engage with the research community, citizen groups, and other partners to help answer policy and research questions can also create favorable conditions for norm change.

Sudden changes in behavior are rare, but with the right leadership and level of prominence, dramatic change is not unheard of. What's important to emphasize about these approaches is that governments need to be deliberate and intentional about creating rules and establishing norms to increase the use of evidence policymaking.

Abeba Taddese is the Executive Director of Results for All.