



PSPPD

PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT PRO-POOR POLICY
DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA



POLICY BRIEF 1

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Evidence-Based Policy-Making (EBPM): enhancing the use of evidence and knowledge in policy making

Evidence-based policy making (EBPM) is advocated internationally for its potential to contribute to effective policy. EBPM aims to increase the use of scientific research, including research from the social and economic sciences, as a source of evidence for policy making, asking questions about the nature of the problem under scrutiny, how it has been addressed elsewhere and the cost, benefit and effectiveness of interventions. Such evidence needs to be integrated with policy makers' expertise, experience and judgement in order to ensure its relevance and applicability in specific contexts. While EBPM is increasingly talked about in South Africa, it is not sufficiently recognised by policy makers and in some cases evidence building is not effectively linked to real policy engagement. An exception is the Department of Health where research evidence is generated and used on a systematic basis. Increasingly, in South Africa, there is evidence of political will to use EBPM to develop and evaluate effective policy. The Presidency has committed itself to using EBPM in promoting clear development outcomes and targets. The Presidency is also building its own institutional capacity through its Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), which has an explicit mandate to build capacity and systems around EBPM. This policy brief draws from a series of workshops and activities supported by the PSPPD.

Policy implications

In developing an agenda to take EBPM forward in South Africa, some policy implications include:

- **Principles for good policy-making** - while there is no standard policy development process, there is a need to understand the principles that constitute good practice in relation to how evidence should be used and how stakeholder participation in policy making should be managed. These principles ought to be followed in flexible ways according to the demands of the policy question in hand, and the judgement of policy makers and service providers and users. A good example includes drawing out lessons from some case studies of actual processes.
- **Policy reviews** can assist with developing an evidence base for policy. Systematic reviews and rapid evidence assessments are examples of methodological approaches that have been used to clarify the key policy issues and find appropriate high quality evidence that can help make better policy.
- **Policy implementation** - it is important to see policy implementation as part of the process, and to open up an

implementation-oriented policy debate in government.

- **Policy research and development section** - each department needs a policy research and development section which has the mandate to commission suitable research and evaluations, develop high quality and implementable policy, monitor and evaluate how it is working out in practice.
- **Cross-government coordination** - there is a need for improved coordination in relation to commissioning and using research across government.
- **Parliamentary portfolio committees** in their oversight capacity need to be able to question the evidence base of policy proposals submitted to them, and should have the capacity to commission suitable research or research syntheses where they perceive a need.
- A **short, medium and long-term research agenda** needs to be developed and implemented, ideally in harness with short, medium and long term policy making and strategic planning.
- **Knowledge management systems** need to be improved so that knowledge

that is generated is quality assured, shared and used.

- **Incentives for EBPM** - incentives are needed to motivate people to take EBPM seriously. For instance, the analysis and use of evidence should be included as a competence criteria in an individual's performance agreement. Promotion and career advancement should be based on the ability to analyse and use evidence in day-to-day policy making. A clear accountability framework would be another incentive.
- **Capacity development** - it is necessary to build capacity in EBPM among researchers and policy makers at national and provincial levels. There is also a broader need for more social scientists who are skilled in quantitative research methods to undertake primary research for government, particularly in the social sciences including Sociology, Development Studies and Social Policy. Note that PALAMA is developing an introductory course on performance monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and the analysis and use of evidence.

PSPPD is addressing many of these areas within the Presidency and through working with other government departments.

What is evidence-based policy making?

Evidence-based policy making (EBPM) is a process that assists policy makers to **make better decisions and achieve better outcomes**. It is concerned with using existing evidence more effectively, commissioning new research and evaluation to fill gaps in the evidence base, and assisting the integration of sound evidence with decision makers' knowledge, skills, experience, expertise and judgement.

Evidence refers to the knowledge base, or the body of knowledge, that is being drawn on and used to inform policy decisions. People often use a number of sources of evidence to make decisions, including their own experience and judgement, informal networks, information from lobbyists and other purveyors of evidence. The most popular and easily accessible sources of evidence for policy-makers are articles from the internet where the credentials of the author and the validity of information are unknown. In many policy environments peer-reviewed scientific research is often the last source of evidence that is used. This trend needs to be reversed if the evidence that is used in policy making is to be authoritative.

Evidence can be drawn from a range of sources such as research in the natural, social and economic sciences, from think-tanks, professional associations, lobbyists, pressure groups, ideologues, belief-based organisations, scientific media, general media and the internet.

In examining the evidence around an issue, useful questions which need to be asked, include:

- What is already known about this problem?
- What is the nature, size and dynamic of the problem?
- What has been shown to work elsewhere?
- How are different policy options supposed to work?
- What is the expected cost, benefit and effectiveness of potential interventions?
- What are the ethical implications of the policy?

Different types of research evidence may include:

- **Research synthesis** including systematic reviews of evidence, meta-analyses, and rapid evidence assessments;
- **Statistical evidence** from surveys, official statistics, and administrative data, each of which can indicate the size, nature and dynamics of the problem in hand;
- **Descriptive and experiential evidence** which would illuminate the nature, size and dynamics of a problem;
- Evidence of **proven effectiveness** which builds on what has been shown to work elsewhere;
- **Economic and econometric evidence** which refers to the cost benefit and effectiveness of interventions;
- **Implementation evidence** indicating how similar policies have been successfully implemented, and how barriers to successful implementation have been overcome;
- **Ethical evidence** in terms of questioning or understanding the ethical implications of the policy, including issues of equity, fairness and justice.

Why does public policy need to be more evidence based?

Some of the reasons for this include:

- **Effectiveness** – in order to ensure that policy interventions achieve more good than harm;
- **Efficiency** – in order to use scarce public resources to maximum effect;
- **Service orientation** – in order to meet citizens' needs and expectations;
- **Adaptability** – knowing when a policy is not working as planned, and that changes to the policy and/or its implementation are due;
- **Accountability, trust and democracy** – to ensure that what is being done and why is transparent, and in the process, build trust in service providers and the democratic process.

Use of evidence in practice

Research and policy is not value neutral and it is important to understand the ideology on which it is based. Policy making is a social process grounded in theory, values, ideology and practice, and is a domain for political contestation.

From a bureaucratic point of view, evidence 'inclusion' or 'exclusion' is often based on the content expertise of the policy maker, and the active policy area interests of senior managers. At times the research that is commissioned, or available, is of questionable quality, value and relevance. In many instances, when research is undertaken within government, the information remains in silos and is not coordinated within or across departments. Even where evidence is produced, the evidence is sometimes ignored as it does not suggest a clear implementation path, the ideological position of the researcher is not acceptable, or the evidence does not fit with preconceived positions (sometimes called 'policy-based evidence making').

A policy-making process is subject to its

- **Organizational context** – which can favour or inhibit the policy-making process e.g. operating in organisational silos makes it difficult to address cross-cutting problems, and the lack of incentives and professional development around EBPM can limit its use;
- **Political context** - where beliefs and ideology play a role, as does the influence of lobbyists, donors, constitutional commitments, and international entities and agreements;
- **Wider public context** – policy makers have to engage with the real world and convince the diverse public and stakeholders.

Policy researchers must be intelligent providers, prepared to undertake and communicate the results of research in a way that the messages can be heard. Incentives for researchers are beginning to shift from solely valuing academic papers to valuing other forms of research output such as research reports, contributing to policy and practice, and recognising engagement with the public, the voluntary

sector, and the private sector. This can be seen in the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, where 20% of the assessment of higher education institutions consists of making an impact on policy or practice.

Policy makers (both technical and politicians) need to be intelligent users of evidence, able to understand how to ask answerable questions, use research effectively, and assess the quality of evidence available. Furthermore, politicians also need to accept that implementation is often complex, with no simple answers. Policy-making processes need to:

- Recognise that societal problems are complex, and so a diversity of stakeholders need to be included to give multiple perspectives on an issue;
- Include high quality, rather than anecdotal evidence relating to the problem;
- Consider the reality of implementation as part of the process;
- Consider evidence that may contradict or challenge narrow political positions
- Consider the extent to which the evidence coheres with the high-level goals of the country such as are to be found in the Constitution

There are generally four key stages to building EBPM into the policy process, as part of an ongoing cycle, which entail:

- **Conceptualisation** – understanding the problem;
- **Policy development** – developing solutions;
- **Implementation and delivery** – putting solutions into effect;
- **Monitoring and evaluation** – ensuring feedback on whether policies are delivering anticipated outcomes

The South African Context

In South Africa, some examples of EBPM include the Presidency promoting the use of evidence to support sensible cause and effect logic in the outcome delivery agreements, and to inform outcome indicators and targets. Other departments, such as Basic Education, Social Development, National Treasury and Health, are also using evidence to guide policy choices. In general, the health sector is the most advanced in implementing EBPM.

‘Wherever health care is provided and used, it is essential to know which interventions work, which do not work, and which are likely to be harmful. This is especially important in situations where health problems are severe and the scarcity of resources makes it vital that they are not wasted’
(Chinnock P, Siegfried N, Clarke M 2005:1)

Tools and methods in evidence-based policy making

Systematic reviews

One of the reasons why the use of authoritative evidence is so important in the health professions is that they are generally more research focused, and for more than three decades or so there has been an acceptance that many medical interventions can have negative outcomes. This led to the development of systematic reviews as a tool to provide a broad analysis of all of the available research evidence. A systematic review has been defined as follows:

‘A review in which bias has been reduced by the systematic identification, appraisal, synthesis, and, if relevant statistical aggregation of all relevant studies on a specific topic according to a predetermined and explicit method.’ (Moher *et al*, 1999: *The Lancet*).

Thus, systematic reviews seek to find all the available evidence on a question, appraise the quality of the evidence, and then synthesise the results emerging from that evidence in a way that is transparent and reproducible, so seeking to avoid selective bias. The use of systematic reviews has revolutionised health care.

The champion and custodian of systematic reviews in the health sector has been the Cochrane Collaboration. The South African Cochrane Centre (SACC)¹ is the only Cochrane Centre in Africa and serves as the reference Centre for individuals in other² African countries. The PSPPD has been funding training in systematic reviews.

Rapid evidence assessments

A shorter version of a systematic review was developed in the UK, called a rapid evidence assessment (REA), which was designed to better serve the pressurised timescales of government. REAs typically take 3-6 months (and sometimes less time), but can still be very authoritative. South Africa is experimenting with REAs. Researchers and policy-makers have been trained to use the methodology and the PSPPD has commissioned an REA on the subject of why crime in South Africa is so violent. The results are now available at www.pspdd.org.za

Systematic reviews and rapid evidence assessments usually identify where there are gaps in the evidence base and where new research may be needed. Government needs to have the capacity and the systems for commissioning and managing quality research. The Department of Science and Technology has overall responsibility for research in government. There are examples of government institutions collaborating with research providers eg the Gauteng Provincial Government with two universities has created the Gauteng City Region Observatory, and the South African Cochrane Centre is a collaboration with the MRC and University of Stellenbosch.

1 See (<http://www.mrc.ac.za/cochrane/cochrane.htm>)

2 The South African Cochrane Centre is also a reference centre for individuals from the following countries who would like to contribute to the Cochrane Collaboration: Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Monitoring and evaluation

Another key tool for EBPM is the systematic use of evidence from monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring involves the collection of real-time data and information so that the progress of policies, programmes and projects can be assessed. Where lack of progress is identified a review of the policy, or its implementation, may be warranted and remedial action taken. The Presidency is currently piloting the monitoring of progress of the twelve outcomes using delivery trajectories and policy review methods. The PSPPD has also funded the revision of PALAMA's M&E curriculum to take better account of the analysis and use of evidence.

Evaluation can be defined as

'the systematic collection and analysis of evidence on the activities, characteristics, value for money and outcomes of public policies, programmes, functions and organizations to make judgements about their relevance, performance and/or alternative ways to deliver or manage them' (*Draft Evaluation Framework, Presidency, 2011*).

Evaluations contribute to the improvement of public policy interventions and expenditure programmes by providing evidence-based assessments of their relevance and performance. As such they are a critical component of effective

policy, programming and budgeting cycles. Evaluations also serve to strengthen accountability by providing reliable information on progress in the achievement of public objectives to stakeholders, often identifying the key factors driving success or failure. Evaluations can be undertaken at any stage in the policy or programme cycle, from the policy development stage through to the policy implementation stage, through to the policy outcome stage (assessing the impact of the intervention). An example of an evaluation at the policy development stage would be investigating the need and relevance of a proposed policy intervention.

Developing an agenda for taking forward EBPM in South Africa

Some issues in taking forward EBPM in South Africa include:

- The need to further open up policy making in government such that knowledge, communication and training can be used to create spaces for reasoned debate within government;
- The need for incentives to encourage the use of EBPM within a clear accountability framework;
- The need to define the policy-making

process and develop a template for good quality policy-making processes;

- The need for each department to have a policy research and development section that can take forward policy making, and which can use evidence effectively;
- Recognition of the value of policy reviews, including systematic reviews and rapid evidence assessments, as well as commissioning new research;
- The need to define a medium and long-term research agenda;
- Improving linkages and dialogue between researchers and policy makers;
- The need to translate research into readable documents;
- The need to improve knowledge management systems to systematically store research and make it accessible;
- The need for capacity building to develop both intelligent research providers and intelligent users of evidence;
- The need to see research as part of an organisational development process that aims to build a pool of expertise in areas such as social and economic policy. Research is too often commissioned as policy questions arise and not as part of a larger strategic knowledge-building process within a specific policy area.

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