

Evidence-based policy development in South Africa: the case of growth and development strategies

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There was a time when 'evidence' was what detectives looked for in making up their minds. As Sherlock Holmes said, "It is a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement". But nowadays, seemingly, 'evidence' is as necessary to political conviction as it is to criminal conviction (Solesbury, 2001:4).

Davies et al, (1999) quote JM Keynes in saying: "There is nothing a politician likes so little as to be well informed; it makes decision-making so complex and difficult."

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1. Introduction

The notion of evidence-based policy has over the past decade become conventional wisdom in especially the United Kingdom (Solesbury, 2001; Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2002). The Labour Party victory in 1997 and other subsequent electoral victories have played a crucial role in this regard (Solesbury 2001). Tony Blair's comment, "what works, counts", has been the basis for such evidence-based policy approaches in the UK (Sanderson, 2002). It would be possible to argue that policy development in South Africa in the post-apartheid era has to date been influenced largely by a liberal antithesis of the apartheid policies on race. However, continued policy development has also been influenced by other factors.

As policy development has evolved, the need has arisen to feed more evidence into the policy-development process – probably also largely influenced by similar trends in the UK and the global North. Interestingly enough, in a book edited by Pillay, Tomlinson and Du Toit (2006) the editors came to the conclusion that even if individual authors on key development aspects in the book concluded that research had played scarcely any role in policy change in South Africa since 1994, the editors themselves could see indirect influences. It is against this background that this paper aims to assess the level of evidence-based decision making in respect of provincial growth and development strategies (PGDSs) in South Africa. The decision to consider PGDSs was based on two reasons: these documents were readily available and secondly they portrayed a regional (read *provincial*) planning and development approach as opposed to a national policy assessment applicable to all provinces. However, such an assessment of PGDS could only be done against an understanding of the concept and how it was translated into practice in other parts of the world. The evolution of the concept in the UK has also meant that a large number of papers and books on this topic have in the past ten years originated from there – although not exclusively – in that the concept is commonly used especially in the US.

Against the above background, the paper starts off with a literature review of the concept *evidence-based policies*. The literature review tries to deal briefly with the following aspects:

- The origin of evidence-based policies
- Conceptualisation of the concept

- Lessons to be learned from international experience

The literature review is followed by an assessment of evidence-based approaches used in the compilation of PGDSs. This assessment is conducted at two levels: first, we have attempted to conduct a quantitative assessment of the use of evidence in these PGDSs (a more detailed explanation of the methods is provided in Section 2); second, we provide a more qualitative assessment of the processes, the amount of evidence, and the obstacles to using evidence in both policy and practice.

However, before we embark on a more detailed discussion, it is important that we state a number of assumptions related to this report. This is especially important in that evidence-based approaches are not value free. Against this background the following assumptions are thus made:

- We accept that evidence-based approaches are not value free and/or neutral.
- Despite there being legitimate criticism against evidence-based approaches, we readily acknowledge that such approaches do have significant value that should be understood and applied within specific contexts.
- We also depart from the point of view that evidence is but one aspect of the policy-making process (see Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2002).
- We also acknowledge that policy-making processes are inherently political in nature.
- We also acknowledge that research evidence has other ways of influencing policy than merely establishing a direct link between research results and policy issues. For example, the research conducted by academics themselves, is usually taught to their students and those students ultimately become practitioners. Another example relates to the observation by Pillay, Tomlinson and Du Toit (2006) to which we earlier made reference. The fact that the researchers could not see the direct link between evidence and policy did not however mean that evidence was not considered in the policy-making process. Yet, for this study we have focused more on the potential *direct* influence of research.

Against the above background, the paper starts off with a description of the methods employed in the research. The literature review is followed by, first, a quantitative and then a qualitative assessment. Finally, a number of recommendations are made to improve the levels of evidence-based approaches in policy making in South Africa.

2. Method

Four main methods have been employed in executing the research. First, a literature review was conducted. Although there is some reference to the theoretical underpinnings and theoretical criticism, the aim of the literature review was essentially to learn from international experience in this field.

The second method involved a quantitative assessment of the extent to which evidence was used and of the nature of the evidence that was used in the development of PGDSs. In this respect the following framework was used:

- All PGDS were assessed in terms of the specific reference used.
- The first level of assessment categorised evidence in terms of the following three criteria: does it reference data or government policy or does it reference something else.
- In the case of data/Where data were referenced, an assessment was made in terms of the origin of such data: StatsSA, Government M&E systems, the private sector, NGOs or universities.
- Where the answer to the first assessment was *other*, the following criteria were used to further categorise such data: Government M&E systems, the private sector, NGOs or academic sources.
- In addition to the above categorisation, the nature of the reference was also addressed. Further analysis asked the question whether it referenced the current status, a scenario or projection; whether it linked a specific decision to some or other piece of evidence.

The third method employed in the research involved qualitative interviews with the officials responsible for the PGDSs in the various provinces, and, where possible, the responsible

consultants. In the process, 12 interviews were conducted with officials and consultants (see Annexure B for these interviews).

The fourth method involved a range of stakeholder commenting, which significantly enriched the report.

3. A review of literature

After discussing the origin of evidence-based policy making, this section proceeds to a brief reflection on the theoretical underpinnings related to evidence-based approaches. Next there is a more detailed discussion of the critical factors and barriers related to policy-based approaches and of the reasons why research is not employed more often in policy making. Finally, there is a discussion of how to find middle ground despite some of the problems related to evidence-based policy making.

3.1 The origin of evidence-based policy making

Evidence-based policy making was given added momentum by the rise of the Labour Government in the UK at the end of the 1990s (Solesbury, 2001; Parsons, 2002; Black, 2000). Tony Blair's comment that there should be a focus on "what works" and an urge to modernise government have been central to this new surge towards evidence and policy research in the policy-making process (Sanderson, 2002). The 1999 White Paper on Modernising Government in the UK emphasised a focus on better ideas, on using evidence and research to develop policy and on using evidence and research to secure long-term goals (Solesbury, 2001).

The said approach to policy making is however by no means new in the USA where a range of earlier waves has been noticed in the relationship between policy and evidence. Nutley, Davies and Walter (2002) notes that the relationship between research and policy making was, generally, functioning extremely well during the 1960s (see also Bulmer, 1986). However, in the UK this relationship disappeared in the 1970s and 1980s in that policy development was progressively based on experience, anecdotal evidence and tradition (Gambrill, 2010) on the basis of what Nutley, Davies and Walter (2002) views as a "doctrine of conviction politics". In

direct opposition to these notions on which policy making was based, the new surge towards evidence-based policies emphasised concepts such as *anti-ideological* or *ideologically free*, *pragmatism*, *forward-looking*, *strategic*, *more responsive*, *effective*, *efficient*, *scientific*, and *quality services* (Davies *et al*, 1999; Sanderson, 2002; Solesbury, 2001). Essentially, this new Labour Party agenda required new forms of knowledge.

In terms of disciplines, the origin of evidence-based policy approaches can be traced directly to the field of evidence-based medicine (Black, 2000; Solesbury, 2001). Although we shall return to this point later in the report, it should here be noted that medical policies have an unambiguous goal, namely to extend life. Other areas of society and reality are somewhat more complex and the overall intent and final goal of policy are seldom agreed upon and they usually remain a bone of contention throughout the entire policy-development process.

Nutley, Davies and Walter (2010), with regard to this historical perspective, rightfully notes that Labour Government's intention with evidence-based policy was not an attempt to support social science research. Rather, the overall intent was part of a broader goal to modernise the state and to ensure strategic policy-making processes. Despite government's declared intent, this was seen as a renewed opportunity for social scientists who had felt ignored for many years to influence the policy environment in Britain (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2010).

3.2 The theoretical roots of and the criticism regarding evidence-based policies

The aim of this section is to reflect briefly on the theoretical roots and the criticism of the roots on which evidence-based policies are built. Our intention has not been to provide an extensive discussion of the theoretical debates involved. However, some understanding of the theoretical debates is important in that it has serious implications for how to manage processes in respect of evidence-based policy approaches. Theoretically, evidence-based approaches are closely related to the modernisation agenda and they also have rationalised principles at their foundation. The underlying assumption in these ideas is that there is huge scope for improved policies - provided that policy makers can understand how policies influence social systems and the expected policy

goals (Sanderson, 2002). Social science, according to this discourse, should thus not only provide reflections on policy but also provide evidence on which policy can be developed.

From the available literature it should be noted that this relationship between research and policy development has always been contested terrain as a result of what Solesbury (2001:2) refers to as a resistance “to the influence of rational knowledge”. This rational intent of evidence-based approaches has been criticised severely on constructivist and post-modern grounds (Davies *et al*, 1999; Sanderson, 2002). Knowledge, according to the constructivist world view, is socially and culturally constructed and varies accordingly. Claims towards generally accepted aspects of policy for all people and in all conditions are thus clearly unfounded. According to this point of view, the rational model of policy development does not question the beliefs and assumptions on which policies are built – something that is crucial to understand in the policy-making process. From a post-modern perspective, the criticism against the evidence-based policy process hinges on the notion that no evidence can provide final certainties. All research is highly subjective and is more likely to reflect the metatheoretical assumptions of the researcher rather than its own ability to make policy decisions.

Regarding the above-mentioned criticism, the question is whether there is any space for evidence-based policy approaches in practice. Giddens (1990) in Sanderson (2002) probably summarises the situation best in arguing that - despite the uncertainties related to social research - systematic knowledge of the human system is possible and that such knowledge could be *helpful*.

3.3 Critical aspects and barriers in respect of policy and research

If there then is some doubt about the relationship between policy and research from the theoretical perspective provided above, this thus begs the question as to how this relationship should be contextualised. In this regard, a number of concerns and barriers should be considered. The following points are made regarding the existing concerns:

First, some concerns are continuously expressed about what precisely is meant by evidence-based policy making (Davies *et al*, 1999) and what the evidence is (Nutley, 2010). Plewis (2000:96), in terms of the UK experience, offers the following description: “New Labour

proclaims the need for evidence-based policy, which we must take to mean that policy initiatives are to be supported by research evidence and that policies introduced on a trial basis are to be evaluated in as rigorous a way as possible.” However, there seems to be some agreement that *evidence* does not only imply research. In practice, evidence is more plural than research. In the UK, evidence is viewed as expert knowledge, published research, existing statistics, stakeholder consultations, previous policy evaluations, the Internet, outcomes from consultations, costing of policy options, and outputs from economic and statistical modelling (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2002).

Second, the danger exists that government might simply use the evidence approach selectively and when it supports the political career of the politician (Rosenstock and Lee, 2002; Sanderson, 2002). Essentially, the main aim of the majority of politicians is to be re-elected. Should evidence make this difficult, the available evidence might be used selectively to extend the political career of individuals or merely to promote such politically-driven goals.

Third, there is some concern regarding how decisions are made on the basis of evidence and that evidence/research and the policy-making process could easily be seen as a linear process (Black, 2000). However, policy making is essentially a political process – one driven by the need to be re-elected. Also, research is seldom extensive enough to provide all the answers in policy-making processes. Though Davies *et al* (1999) readily acknowledge this, it is not that simple in that research, in general, is patchy and the link to how such research could influence policy is moreover fairly murky. Nutley (2010), in fact, makes the same observation and argues that many research studies are ad hoc, of limited scale and of dubious quality.

Fourth, Solesbury (2001) rightfully notes that achievements are not all that matter in the policy-design process: a range of other questions should also be considered (see also Nutley, 2010). According to Solesbury (2001), there is a range of other preliminary questions that should first be answered: for example, What is the problem? What is going on? Is it better or worse? What caused it? What are possible remedies? At what cost? The important lesson in this respect is that policy design cannot be built only on the available evidence.

Fifth, there are also methodological concerns related to evidence-based policy making (Davies and Smith, 1999). It is obvious that this rational model of policy making favours quantitative techniques and empirically tested research used as a form of social technology (Sanderson, 2002). It is therefore not strange that evidence-based policy approaches have reinforced quantitative methodologies, while spawning concerns around reliability and validity. In the UK this emphasis was reflected in the need for better data, better modelling and longitudinal and experimental research (Sanderson, 2002). The fact that the medical field was one of the first to make use of evidence-based policy approaches has also supported the utilisation of more quantitative techniques (Nutley, 2010). Medical studies have an historical relationship with clinical studies and experimentation. The main concern in this regard is that qualitative research might easily be seen as inferior. Consequently, the use of evidence is restricted to disciplines in which quantitative techniques have historically been strong (for example economics and statistics). However, if the nature of policy development is well understood, policy-development processes based on evidence in addition to evaluative research probably also call for descriptive, analytical, diagnostic and theoretical research (Solesbury, 2001). Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that not all policy can be developed by means of trials. Experimental research is just too expensive (Davies *et al.*, 1999).

Sixth, the danger exists that governments could easily capture the notion of evidence-based approaches through monitoring and evaluation systems only (thus focusing only on issues of performance). Therefore, ex post evaluations are built into both project design and budgets, which enable governments to receive adequate feedback on their programmes. However, Solesbury (2001) rightfully notes that such evaluations are not the only way of building evidence and that they have some shortcomings. One of the major shortcomings in this respect is that such evaluations are usually one-off engagements or, if the evaluation is continuous, usually reflecting only one methodological approach. Pawson (2002) also argues that policy evaluations are usually very long processes that do not consider the policy cycle. As a result, many governments have turned to the notion of systematic reviews. These reviews have as their goal the inclusion of contemporary and historical research in the process of policy development. However, much of the concerns around evidence-based policy development remain valid, also in the case of systematic reviews.

Finally, Nutley (2010) argues that the majority of research is supply-driven, designed beyond the ambit of practice or with the intent of providing policy answers. Though this, in itself, is not necessarily only negative, it seldom assists policy makers in directly addressing the problem.

3.4 Reasons why evidence has little impact

Regarding the barriers and problems discussed above, a number of researchers have noted that evidence has - despite having been paid lip service - only played a marginal role in policy development in the UK (Nutley, 2010; Gambrill, 2010). Black (2000) sites a number of reasons in this respect:

- The goals of policy makers are complex and mostly difficult to test.
- In many cases, research evidence is being labelled as irrelevant. Common reasons are that it was done for a different sector or that it is not applicable to a specific locality.
- There is seldom consensus about research evidence.
- There is a range of other competing evidence, such as personal experience and local information.
- The social environment will not welcome policy change.
- The existing knowledge is of poor quality.

3.5 Towards the middle-ground

The above concerns notwithstanding, researchers involved in the field of evidence-based policy making are of the opinion that there is ample space for evidence-based policy-making processes. Sanderson (2002) in fact argues that there is possibly room for some form of middle-ground between absolute rationalism and the high levels of uncertainty that post-modernists propose. Having considered the main concerns related to the relationship between evidence and policy, the question remains how it is possible to build on this relationship in a nuanced way so as to ensure better policies.

First, regarding the criticism above, it seems that any evidence-based approach to policy development should acknowledge that research findings are but one factor contributing to policy development (Nutley, 2010). Second, there should be acknowledgement that evidence is used in different ways by different role players in the policy process. Third, some kind of agreement is

required on what evidence is, and on how it will be used in policy development or in practical implementation. Key to the process is an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological and epistemological aspects involved. As Nutley (2010) rightfully argues, such an approach needs to understand the above strengths and weaknesses and then attempt to emphasise methodological pluralism over paradigmatic conflicts, i.e. looking for complementary ideas from a range of methodologies rather than focusing on various competing metatheories. Nutley (2010:13) thus articulates the imperative: “The many stakeholders within given service areas (e.g. policy makers, research commissioners, research contractors, and service practitioners) will need to come together and seek broad agreement over these issues if research findings are to have wider impact beyond devoted camps.” Fourth, there seems to be a need for research to be more demand-driven. Fifth, literature seems to be in agreement that integrated research over longer periods, conducted in a multi-disciplinary way and within various epistemological frameworks has the best chance of influencing the policy agenda (Huberman, 1987).

3.6 Lessons South Africa can learn from the international experience

This section turns to a reflection on practical lessons that can be learned from the international experience. It is possible to distinguish between lessons for research institutions, for government/policy makers and for research partnerships. However, the section starts off with an overview of reasons why research evidence has little impact on policy.

3.6.1 Research institutions and researchers

In the context of this report, the concept *research institutions* refers not only to universities. However, in reality, universities are a major role player in social sciences research. Nutley (2010) remarks that the available research is scant and that there is a dire need to increase the available research. It is in this context that this section reflects on lessons for research institutions and researchers. Given this background we should note the following lessons (Gambrill, 2010; Nutley, 2010; Black, 2000):

- Much closer links can be fostered with governments and NGOs in developing strategic institutional research strategies and priorities.
- Build a balance between supply-driven and demand-driven research.

- Researchers seldom understand policy process and there is a need for researchers to have a much better general understanding of such processes.
- Research packaged in terms of theses and lengthy reports is seldom helpful. Research reports should be brief and concise.
- Publications should be user friendly.
- Use language and style that will generate interest.
- Specific materials might be developed for specific audiences and have specific events to disseminate these – in essence, a combination of dissemination methods might be more appropriate (including the media).
- Develop the ability to extract the policy and practical implications of research.
- Understand the barriers in uptake of research findings.
- Be able to prioritise research.
- During the research, methodological limitations, paradigmatic frameworks and alternative viewpoints should be explained in detail.
- A real danger is that the value of research results could be inflated. This should be avoided.
- Many researchers are naive in terms of basic politics and of policy-making processes. They could have unrealistic expectations.
- Researchers should understand that their research contributes to a wider range of knowledge and not think of a linear relationship between their research and the policy requirements.

3.6.2 Government/policy makers

The available literature also mentions a number of prerequisites from the side of government should it wish to create an enabling environment for evidence-based policies (Davies *et al*, 1999; Gambril, 2010; Nutley, 2010):

- There seems to be wide-spread agreement in the UK that evidence-based policy approaches have been assisted in the UK through the Labour Party's declaration of government as an ideologically free zone. Although the notion of an ideologically free zone can be challenged, it would nevertheless seem that, at the very best, a willingness to

consider research from various perspectives could be viewed as a starting point for the use of research evidence in policy design and practice.

- The political will to utilise evidence-based approaches to policy making is essential (Davies and Smith, 1999).
- A significant amount of time could be spent on developing appropriate research questions.
- Governments should involve researchers and research institutions in developing strategic research plans to inform policy.
- Get departments at various levels of government to budget for the evaluations and research. Essentially, R&D strategies should be a core part of departmental business plans.
- Involve external experts to engage with evidence and plans.
- Make information freely available.
- The co-location of policy makers and internal analysts could generate mutual understanding.
- Make sure that analytical staff is involved in policy/strategy/decision making.
- External researchers should be viewed as partners rather than contractors.
- Second university staff into government.
- Train staff on how to use evidence both in the policy environment and in practice.

3.6.3 Research partnerships

The literature on evidence-based policy development emphasises the viewpoint that governments and research institutions should create research partnerships (Rosenstock and Lee, 2002; Nutley, 2010). Nutley (2010:12) argues that, “The traditional separation between the policy arena, practitioner communities and the research community has largely proven unhelpful”. Not only do such research partnerships provide a basis for determining research agendas, but they could also serve as a clearing housing for many of the methodological and epistemological differences. Other functions could include the effective timing of research, the coordination of research, the building of capacity for research, ensuring that research is relevant to the policy-

development need, the sharing of resources, the synthesis of research and the overall evaluation of research - including the development of criteria for quality research (Nutley, 2010)

However, creating a common understanding within a research partnership is difficult. There are a number of aspects in the existing literature regarding which research partnerships should develop some form of consensus (see Davies *et al*, 1999; Nutley, 2010):

- Such partnerships need to agree on what precisely constitutes *evidence* (Davies *et al*, 1999).
- There needs to be consensus on what research designs are the most appropriate for specific types of research questions.
- What are the methodological requirements for robust research?
- What is the required balance between new or primary research versus the utilisation of existing evidence and research?
- How can time and the depth of research be balanced?
- How should the research be managed in terms of gap identification, prioritisation and commissioning (including potential conflict between “independent” and politically aligned researchers)?
- How can research capacity be increased in order to ensure more evidence related to policy dilemmas?
- How does such a partnership ensure that research findings can be applied?
- How is research being communicated?
- Though it is also argued that research partnerships should be careful to develop hierarchies of research, an approach that allows the emphasis to fall on different ways of understanding the reality would however be more appropriate.

4. Provincial growth and development strategies: an overview

PGDSs are seen as the development planning response at the provincial level. Since 2005, much effort has been spent on improving the quality of these strategies. Two aspects were central to attempts to improve the plans. First, the CSIR was appointed to help in this process, and, secondly an attempt was made to link the PGDS more directly to the National Spatial

Development Perspective (NSDP). The involvement of the CSIR was aimed at ensuring that the systematic process of planning would be applied more thoroughly and that planning could be based on reality and trends. Second, it should also be borne in mind that there is a degree of conflict between sectoral policies and the cross-cutting nature of the PGDS. For example, how could provinces deviate from mainstream policy in education and, if so, to what extent? One of the reasons for a decision to investigate the level of evidence-based policy making by means of an assessment of PGDS was the fact that it was not a national policy or strategy but a provincial one. Furthermore, it was possible to trace a significant quantity of institutional memory in respect of the previous round of PGDS development.

This section starts by providing a quantitative assessment of the level of evidence used in PGDS. This is followed by reflections based on the in-depth interviews.

4.1 The nature of evidence in PGDSs

The overall method in this respect was explained in Section 2. It should be reiterated that a method focusing on references only has some serious shortcomings. One major shortcoming is that planning documents vary in respect of the scale of referencing and acknowledgement. Sometimes both the evidence and the research are located in documents that were not made public. This method was thus not used to claim that this was the only approach to be followed; the intent was rather to gain an overview and then to follow that up with qualitative interviews.

It was initially thought that some provincial comparison would be possible and that it would add value to the exercise. A decision was however taken not to include such comparisons in the report in that such comparisons would lead to competition between provinces and, moreover, that some strategies might well be sufficient without references.

4.1.1 Macro overview

This section provides an overview indicating whether data, government policy or other forms of evidence were referenced. The results are reflected in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: An overview of the main forms of evidence per reference in PGDS in South Africa, 2010

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------------------|---|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Total number of references | 524 (100%) | | | | | | | | | |
| Percentage | 62.6% | | | | | 6.9% | 30.5% | | | |
| Nature of references | Data | | | | | Government policy | Other reference (neither data nor government policy) | | | |
| Origin | StatsSA | Gov M&E | PS | NGO | A | | Gov M&E | PS | NGO | A |
| Percentage | 21.6 | 35.4 | 29.3 | 3.0 | 10.7 | | 36.3 | 26.3 | 1.3 | 36.3 |

Gov M&E = Government; PS = Private sector; NGO = Non-governmental organisations; A = Academic

Three different sets of references were identified, namely references referencing data, government policies and other evidence. Table 5.1 suggests that referencing data is seen as the most prominent form of referencing. Nearly 63% of references referred to some form of data or another. The obvious attendant danger is that it might, in many circles, be seen as the only form or, at best, the most important form of evidence – something that was confirmed during the in-depth interviews. Interestingly enough, the breakdown of the data category shows that Government M&E systems and reports were the most prominent provenance of data sources (35.4%), followed by StatsSA (21.6%). Private sector data were used in 29.3% of the cases, while NGOs and academic sources respectively contributed 3% and 10.7%.

Reference to existing government policy suggests that PGDSs have a specific link with policies of the national sector. Nearly 7% of the references fell within this category. This begs the question as to what precisely the relationship between national policies and local knowledge is (an aspect which also surfaced during the in-depth interviews).

Relating to the category *other*, just over 30% of the references fell within this category. As regards subcategorisation, 36.3% of these originated from government M&E systems, 26.3% from the private sector, 1.3% from NGOs and 36.3% from academic sources.

In addition to the types of references used, the question could be extended to what these references in the category *other* actually referenced. Nearly 41% of the references merely explained the current situation, while 10.7% provided evidence for a scenario. Fewer than 1% of the references were referenced to indicate that a specific decision had been made. The remaining 48% of the references were mostly used to explain concepts.

Two concluding points should be made in this respect. First, from this purely quantitative assessment, it does not seem that research by university staff members has played a significant role in building the knowledge base on which PGDSs were developed. In fact, there seems to be a bias towards data and government M&E systems – a specific danger mentioned regarding the UK experience alluded to earlier in this report. Second, it does not seem as though research results were used in the taking of development decisions. These points both suggest that research institutions and government could probably derive mutual benefit from closer cooperation.

4.2 Analysing the results of the quantitative questionnaires

The emphasis in this section shifts to an assessment of the in-depth interviews conducted with the various provincial department representatives and - in some cases - consultants. Virtually all the interviewees claimed that their own PGDSs were based on evidence. Obviously, the first question that begs an answer is whether there is a uniform understanding of the concept *evidence*. In fact, one interviewee suggested that an adequate definition is an important point of departure to the topic. This section therefore starts off by categorising the different forms of evidence reflected in the answers of interviewees as well as some general notes. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the factors inhibiting or promoting evidence-based policy making.

4.2.1 Origin and types of research/evidence

Annexure A contains an overview of the main sources of evidence listed by respondents. It is possible to categorise the origin of evidence in Annexure A into five categories. The above section - on the nature of referencing - has made the point that data seem to be the most prominent aspect in considering the term *evidence*. This was largely confirmed in the in-depth interviews. Data from StatsSA were commonly used as an example by most of the respondents who answered the question regarding the data that were used. Comments such as “The most helpful information was obtained from StatsSA” and “The economic overview provided valuable insights in understanding the province” were plentiful and confirmed the importance of basic data. The over-emphasis on data also had a bearing on the types of discipline that provided evidence. In at least two provinces, the availability of an economist was instrumental in ensuring a more specific culture of evidence-based decision making. Yet, this reality also has the inherent danger that more qualitative research could easily be ignored, or worse, be seen as inferior to the notion of evidence-based policy making.

In addition to data, government policies were commonly used as a source of evidence. In this regard, the NSDP was seen as an important guiding document. As already noted, it is important to understand that PGDSs are compiled at the provincial level and against the background of national policy guidelines. Stated differently: it is a decentralised areas-based strategy - but the basic policy decisions have been made within sectoral line functions. This conflict was articulated by one of the respondents: “...the priorities were determined internally following the examination of evidence and different planning documents”. Another more bluntly noted: “We mostly did what the national government said we should do.” There is thus potential conflict between national policies and local evidence. More importantly, the question for this study is whether the high dependence on national policies inhibits local/provincial processes to ensure a large degree of evidence in strategies and programmes.

Third, government M&E systems were “often used” to provide evidence. However, some doubts were also expressed regarding the accuracy of the information provided in this way. One respondent argued that, “[T]he review of the PGDS 2005–2009 found that government monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of PGDS programme implementation was weak and outcomes

cannot be shown and/or accounted for”. This respondent indirectly wanted to know whether it was possible to use such information.

In the fourth place, internal research units (within government) were also mentioned as a common source of research and evidence. It seems as though two of the stronger provinces had adequate capacities in this respect. Research conducted or initiated by the population units of the various provincial Departments of Social Development was also mentioned a couple of times. These units helped specifically in developing an understanding of the state of the population in one or two provinces. It should also be mentioned that the quality of research by some of these units was commonly questioned.

A fifth origin of evidence was related to research conducted at universities and by NGOs. There seem to be different frameworks against which research evidence in these cases were sought. It is possible to distinguish between general outsourced research, research outsourced specifically for the PGDS (Western Cape) and research partnerships (Gauteng, North West and the Free State), and the appointment of academics to be involved directly in the compilation of the PGDS. What seems to be absent from this list is a long-term arrangement in which the value and the implications of socio-economic research and also aspects related to technology and innovation are considered on a continuous basis. The North West Research Coordinating Committee seems to be the one body that probably came close to such an approach.

In addition to the types of evidence described above, a number of additional comments can be made about the types of research/evidence. First, linked to the over-emphasis on data as the main source of evidence, the danger exists that evidence is something you need to enable you to describe your current situation as opposed to something you need to enable you to make strategic decisions. One respondent confirmed this argument: “There is nothing in the situational analysis of the PGDS that is not based on evidence.” There were also other similar responses and this could probably be ascribed to the role played by the CSIR in improving the overall quality of PGDSs in the country. In addition, the use of data contributed significantly to an understanding of the province and its economy. For example, in one of the provinces university research resulted in a thorough understanding of migration trends in that province; in another, it broadened the understanding of how people cope under severe conditions of poverty. Both these

aspects are crucial to the design of provincial development strategies, and the migration study was essential to determine resource allocation. Although one should not ignore the importance of either evidence or data in understanding the status quo, there are also dangers inherent in such a narrow approach. For example, it probably impedes the use of evidence other than data and in areas other than describing the current situation (for example with regard to strategic decision making). In fact, it was difficult to assess the extent to which research evidence was used in making strategic choices. This reality might be attributed to the fact that the interviewees could not make the link between the evidence and strategic decisions, but it might also point to a general capacity problem in the policy-making arena in respect of determining the consequences of research results. .

Second, a number of interviewees noted the fact that StatsSA “is the official source of credible and accurate data and information for the country”. Although there are good grounds for such an argument, a number of critical questions can be asked in this regard:

- To what extent is the emphasis on StatsSA data only, preventing other data or evidence from being considered in respect of key policy issues? Surely, data provided by StatsSA have their own limitations and can probably not provide answers to all types of complex policy issues, just as one piece of academic research would be unable to provide such answers.
- Is the emphasis on the exclusive use of StatsSA data a means of excluding other evidence and research?
- An approach such as this does not acknowledge that StatsSA data and the assumptions on which it is built can also be questioned.

Third, interviewees mentioned the involvement of a number of universities not only in the finalisation of the PGDSs but also in providing research or interpreting data. Names that have been mentioned are the universities of Limpopo, Pretoria, Witwatersrand, KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State, Cape Town, Stellenbosch, South Africa and the Western Cape. Most of these relationships were with either individuals or units within the said institutions but, except for two provinces, there was no further institutional commitment from the universities.

Fourth, interviewees were asked what institutions had made the most prominent contribution towards the evidence used in the PGDSs. In general, the responses reflected that a combination of pieces of evidence from various sources had been helpful. The important point about this reality is that it suggests that evidence-based policy-making processes should be in a position to consider a wide range of research and evidence and make strategic decisions in this respect. But more importantly, it requires a process in which all available research is considered and the implications determined. Once again, it seems that two or three provinces have a limited yet active process in action to try to build research partnerships that can satisfy this need.

A final question sought to determine how national government decisions and policies were influenced by provincial evidence.- Here the emphasis fell largely on the relationship between provinces and central government with regard to research and the results of such research.

4.2.2 Factors inhibiting the use of evidence/research

The emphasis in this section falls on the factors inhibiting the use of evidence and research in the policy-making process as identified by the respondents. An attempt is made to categorise the barriers in terms of general concerns, barriers at the policy-making level and barriers at research institutions. One interviewee summarised the inherent conflict related to research for policy making in the following words: “We are talking of two camps here. On one side, you have academics who base their assumptions on hard evidence found after a series of strict scientific standards and methods and theory. On the other side, you have government officials and politicians who are, in all fairness, only interested in practical issues and solutions.”

4.2.2.1 General concerns

A number of general concerns were expressed. These cannot necessarily be categorised either as barriers at the policy-making processes level or barriers at the research institution level. The following should be noted:

- There were some questions around what the evidence-based policy-making process entails and what an appropriate definition would be.

- This brings us to the third point concerning the relationship between policy makers and planners. One respondent summarised the problem quite well in stating that “[T]he interface between academic research and government challenges are [*sic*] not well managed”.
- Although the report will return to this point, the issue of how research (whether from government units or other research institutions) should be communicated to have an impact on decision makers was mentioned.

4.2.2.2 Barriers at the level of the policy-making process

The following points should be made regarding the barriers at the level of the policy-making process.

A limited culture of research engagement

Despite some exceptions, it does not seem as if research and evidence-based policy making are deeply entrenched in government. One government respondent said, “We need to change our attitude about research”, while another argued that “research is given low priority in the province”. The institutional gaps in this respect are reflected in the following words: “It is also the responsibility of HODs to ensure that officials understand why evidence is needed for policy making. There is also a need to create a common understanding among all provincial departments about the relevance of research.” As one interviewee suggested, the argument also applies to politicians: “Politicians and government officials may find the critical evaluation of previous and current decisions uncomfortable.”

Limited understanding of the links between policy making and research

A second aspect is that it is not only academics but also policy makers too who think about research and policy making as a linear process. Comments such as “research is of no use if you cannot implement the findings” were common. One respondent was a bit more specific in this regard: “... since 1994, I can say that only 50% of the recommendations from studies were implemented. That’s a waste of resources. There is no justification for the government not to use the recommendations of research that it has funded.” The assumption in comments such as these is that there is a linear relationship between research, policy or programme implementation.

Although there is a need to ensure that research is better aligned in this respect, research should also be seen in a much broader perspective, namely to develop an institutional memory of different findings – even though they cannot be implemented. Given that 50% of all research findings were in fact implemented - as alleged in the quote - implementation may be considered to have been extremely high.

Limited capacity to reflect on the policy implications of research

Accepting the fact that there are no linear linkages between policy, dedicated capacity is thus required to iron out the policy implications of research. The available capacity in this respect seems currently to be limited.

Relevance of academic research for policy making

Third, at the policy making/strategy-design level there is concern around academic research not always being relevant to the policy-making process. Among the comments commonly received were: “Academic research is pointless if it does not permeate government policy”, and, “Many academics fail to move beyond theory and unfortunately government is guided by evidence, which is measurable and practically feasible to implement.” Others argued that theory had no place in government and that universities produced graduates who were not suited to government. It is easy for a university to brush aside such allegations but some serious institutional self-reflection is required in this regard.

Another respondent summarised the dilemma concerning the relevance of academic research in the following words: “... [There is] considerable skepticism among government officials regarding the appropriateness of research methods and findings, which ultimately leads to reluctance to adopt research recommendations.” A statement like this one obviously confirms the earlier point about the unlikely linear relationship between policy and research and it assumes that all social science research should be policy orientated. Despite legitimate concerns about these assumptions, the fact remains that government officials often regard research by research institutions as being too academic, impractical, methodologically complex and too dependent on theory. These realities do in fact inhibit the use of research because the relevance of such research is not obvious.

Lack of government capacity to do in-house research

Fourth, the lack of in-house research capacity in government, and government's inability even to develop research agendas or to outsource research have fairly frequently been mentioned. The following comment by an interviewee is probably true in many government departments: "In government we lack research and sector specialists with technical knowledge to conduct required research which would assist in the development of policies and strategies." Such lack of capacity contributes significantly to the poor quality of research.

Inability to deal with the inherent contradictions in research conclusions

Fifth, research by academics and alternative data are sometimes seen to lead to conflicting conclusions. This certainly does not help in clearing the road ahead. Although some contradictory conclusions are related to the poor quality of research, it is also equally true that contradictory research conclusions are related to different methodological approaches and research paradigms. This barrier will only be addressed if there is a systematic process of understanding the research and its assumptions.

The perceived danger that research is neither authentic nor legitimate

Some comments in this respect have already been made with regard to StatsSA data. The problem of research authenticity and legitimacy crosses the boundaries of data. The same applies to concerns about the so-called outdatedness of research. One respondent summarised this barrier to the acceptance of research: "If data is not credible and research done was conducted in a biased and partial manner, the danger with this barrier is that it could, depending on the research results, be an easy mechanism to challenge research results which do not concur with the conventional wisdom of existing policies or strategies. Although there should be obvious concerns in respect [of] the quality, it is possibly more important to build a knowledge base acknowledging the methods and research assumptions rather than fundamentally question all types of research."

Concerns around government research units

Interviewees were somewhat divided regarding the value of such in-house research units. On the positive side, some value was mentioned, while, and on the negative side, the quality of their in-house research was questioned. However, there are a few other more serious limitations regarding policy making. The first and main concern is that such units are not independent.

They might, because of various power relationships, only confirm the already existing conventional wisdoms. Secondly, it would seem that, in practice, researchers in these units are often used to provide information rather than question existing practice. The obvious danger is that such research is not critical enough and that it would therefore not influence decision-making processes. Thirdly, there is a danger that such units are being seen as separate from the policy-making or strategic decision-making processes and could therefore potentially lose their inherent value.

The absence of research agendas and research plans

Although there were some slight indications of the availability of research agendas and research inventories, the general lack of these suggested a lack of strategic thinking about research at the provincial level. The idea of research inventories should be considered in more detail and maybe in an expanded mode. The question is whether provinces have a research clearing house where all possible research is evaluated and condensed into the main policy lessons. In addition to research agendas and plans, research should also further be scheduled to support policy-making processes. A respondent rightfully noted the importance of research scheduling: “In order for policy-related research to be relevant, it must be applied at the right time, in the right place, and in the right format.”

Limited funding for research

The lack of funding for research at the provincial level was commonly mentioned as one of the main obstacles. This was probably best reflected in the following words: “However, I personally feel that the low budget for research limits departments in conducting much-needed research that could inform the PGDS.” It is fairly strange that partnership programmes with universities were not seen as a means of collaboratively accessing more funding for strategic research projects.

The political environment

The flux in the policy environment and the flux in strategies and systems were also commonly mentioned as being problematic in respect of a systematic approach related to evidence-based policy making. This was probably best summarised in the following words: “Much has already been done to engender a research led culture in the province, but this seems to be irrelevant when systems are in disarray.”

4.2.2.3 Barriers at research institutions

In addition to the barriers at the policy-making level, a number of barriers exist in relation to research and researchers at the institutional level.

The way researchers communicate their research

The first important aspect in this respect is how academic research is presented and published. This is usually done in books, lengthy academic reports or papers in academic journals. The following neatly encapsulates the problem: “Research findings which are presented in a complex format are unlikely to be adopted by politicians. Research should appeal to policy makers and not be a document containing technical terms which does not make sense.” The policy environment does not require academic articles but a different format. The overall implication is that researchers and research institutions should do much more to make their research more user-friendly. Such research findings could be presented in the form of, for example, policy briefs, one-pager research summaries, ten-page summaries of lengthy documents, etc.

Inability to understand policy processes

Just as officials do not always understand that research could not/should not automatically be directly related to policy, researchers should understand more about policy making and programme design in the public sector. One of the respondents articulated this barrier in the following words: “In some cases, researchers enter into agreements with an inadequate understanding of the decision-making structures or fundamental interests of the other partner, resulting in slow decisions and the rejection of research findings.” Other respondents mentioned the tedious process related to policy making and the inability of researchers to understand this.

Not all provinces have universities

The fact that some provinces do not have a university was also seen as an obstacle to improving the levels of evidence-based policy making. One interviewee reflected upon this reality: “We don’t have a university in province B and we are forced to utilise researchers from other provinces. What I have realised is that some of these consultants fail to make an impact or produce the expected quality of work because they do not consider the dynamics within the province.” Although these provinces were able to use researchers from universities in other provinces, remarks were commonly made about the ability of such researchers to understand the dynamics of provinces with which they were not that familiar. Although such an attitude has

both merits and demerits, there is probably no guarantee that a university would necessarily address these concerns.

The inability to link innovative research with economic development

Despite the existence of a range of arrangements between universities and government, it seems as if the majority of such research has been purely on the economic side. Very little evidence was found of research on innovation and how that could assist towards promoting economic growth. This probably serves only to confirm the divide between social sciences, information technology sciences and natural sciences research.

Universities are accountable to the national sphere of government

Recent research on the relationship between regions and the universities in the Free State indicated that, because universities are accountable to a national department, this fact limits their potential regional links. Furthermore, because the largest government research funding organisations are nationally based, this inhibits a more direct influence from provincial government. The point here is not to argue for a system of provincial funding to universities but rather to acknowledge the shortcoming and maybe find ways of exerting some regional influence on university research agendas.

Other issues related to the research

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, a range of other issues was also mentioned as barriers:

- Limited links between policy makers and researchers in contextualising research questions and research agendas
- Poor quality of research
- University staff also being careful not to be compromised by research findings and wanting to have the assurance that their independence would be guaranteed

4.2.3 Factors assisting in the use of evidence

Despite the barriers identified in the above section, mention was further made of a number of aspects found to be assisting the process of evidence-based policy making. The interviews revealed a number of aspects in this regard:

An available research culture

It would firstly seem that a culture of research – or, at least, a culture of valuing the potential contribution of research to decision making - is one of the key aspects assisting in the use of research results. This culture of openness towards accepting, evaluating and synthesising all available research should be entrenched throughout departments. This applies not only to in-house research or research conducted on a tender basis but includes research related to postgraduate studies and general research. This point was adequately summarised by an interviewee: “A key element in ensuring that researchers conduct policy-related research is an environment that is conducive to the dynamic link between research and policy.”

The value of institutionalisation at the government level

Secondly, it also seems that provinces that acknowledge the importance of research have a “unit” to coordinate much of the research within the provincial government structures. Although such a unit is probably not a prerequisite, it probably helps to create a research culture - one in which research evidence plays a crucial part in policy making and programme design. The importance of such a structure was emphasised in the following comment from one of the respondents: “The fact that our unit – the Chief Directorate: Policy Analysis and Research – is tasked to facilitate the province’s macro policy analysis and strategic planning process, and co-ordinate research and impact analysis on the provincial government, has played a significant role in promoting a culture of research within the xxxxx provincial government.” An added advantage of a structure of this nature would lie in its potential to get the research units of other provincial departments together. This could, in turn, lead to cost saving, better coordination and the development of appropriate research plans (preferably in association with research institutions). However, researchers have pointed out that a unit in itself would not necessarily be enough to ensure adequate research. A respondent from one of the provinces moreover noted that the availability of significant research capacity in the form of quality researchers had been a key success factor.

International linkage

Over and above the local use of research, there also seems to be some value in involving international and national institutions in research at the provincial level. The names of the CSIR and the World Bank were mentioned in this connection. Though universities are usually well-positioned to create international knowledge linkages, this point was not mentioned in the interviews.

Researchers to understand policy processes

A fourth key success factor is the ability of academics/researchers to understand the policy process and their willingness to do such research. Although this seems to be the obvious course, very few researchers understand the policy process or the relationship with research. Note however that we do not argue that all social science research should be policy orientated but rather that a better understanding from academics would be crucial towards improving the relevance of policy research.

Quality of research

Aspects relating to the quality of research are prerequisites for considering the implications of research on policy issues.

Availability of research plans

One or two researchers made mention of the existence of a research agenda and plan for a province as a whole. In most cases this referred to an internal research plan or a plan specifically to procure research services. In very few cases was this however seen also to include the normal research processes of researchers at research institutions or those of postgraduate students. A research inventory was established in some provinces but this could probably be taken further also to include processes and mechanisms for disseminating research results. Although not much information is available on the North West Research Coordinating Committee, theirs seems to be the best example of a holistic approach. In most other cases, either government units or partnership programmes have planned and procured research.

The availability of research champions in government

The successful linking of research and the policy-making process was attributable to research champions in at least two of the provinces.

Aspects generally found to assist research

A number of other issues were also mentioned in this regard:

- Support of research by senior officials and the Premier

- Support from knowledgeable government officials
- The availability of sufficient finance
- Increased collaboration between researchers and the provincial administration
- A greater understanding of the potential contribution of research to policy, which was partly propagated by lead sector departments

5. Evidence-based policy making: a possible way forward

Having started off with an overview of the international experience concerning evidence-based policy making, we next turned to reflections on the nature of evidence-based policy approaches pertaining to PGDSs. In this section we make proposals in this regard.

A possible starting point: a mature response

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of effective evidence-based policy processes is the danger that research will either be accepted or rejected on the basis of method, metatheory, paradigm, the results or even simply because decision makers dislike the original researcher. International experience suggests that an ideologically free zone is required. In our opinion, the request for an ideologically free zone is probably somewhat naive. More appropriate, however, would be the need for creating a research space that evaluates research in terms of its policy implications - irrespective of ideology yet with due cognisance of the underlying ideological assumptions. A further assumption here is that a fair amount of social science research does have policy implications but that these implications are seldom effectively communicated by the researcher. This also negates the false assumption that there is a direct relationship between research and policy making and it emphasises the building of both a knowledge base and knowledge memory for a province. What cannot be denied is that evidence-based policy making requires a mature relationship between policy makers and researcher(s) – one in which the parties are willing to listen to one another. Such an approach requires political will.

A second starting point: agree on the evidence to be used

Evidence does not equate to data; nor is it only related to quantitative techniques. Evidence could thus come from more distinctly qualitative research designs. In order to mainstream research, some kind of agreement is required on what is regarded as research and the specific evidence that will be used.

Building partnerships

The third step would be to build appropriate partnerships between governments and research institutions. Universities located in a specific province come to mind as obvious partners; yet narrowing it down to only those universities could be restrictive. Neither should other national research organisations and international organisations be overlooked. The value of such partnerships is that:

- Universities have access to research funds other than those available to governments.
- Regional research agendas can be developed and managed.
- Co-designed research questions, research agendas and research proposals could have significant value.
- They prioritise research.
- Government could potentially access much more research than that it pays for (the hundreds of postgraduate studies come to mind).
- They ensure that such research results are adequately contextualised for the policy environment.
- They make sure that there is a demand for specific research.

Yet such partnerships obviously are not without their problems, one being the fear that researchers might be compromised or lose their independence – an aspect that will have to be managed.

How such a structure should look and how it should be managed is open to debate.

What can governments do?

In addition to building partnerships governments could:

- Make sure that policy makers and researchers are in constant dialogue.
- Create a demand for research.
- Coordinate research within government circles.
- View researchers as partners rather than clients/service providers.
- Second university staff to government research units.

- Be careful to exclude research results that do not use official statistics.
- Make sure that research results are fed into other spheres of government.
- Create governance mechanisms that enable provincial governments to influence research agendas.
- Find mechanisms to make universities more regionally responsive

What can universities and researchers do?

Universities can play a crucial role in evidence-based policy making by:

- Acting as link between national/international organisations and the region.
- Publishing research results in formats other than lengthy research reports or academic journals.
- Capacitating staff in policy-making processes and systematic reviews.
- Having annual policy-research days.
- Helping to train government researchers.
- Finding national and international donors for research.

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Annexure A:

The following sources were commonly used:

- StatsSA (x11)
- NSDP(x6)
- CSIR (x4)
- Data from government M&E systems (x2)
- SARB quarterly bulletin (x1)
- Evidence in existing planning documents(x1)
- Provincial departments (x2)
- Global Insight(x2)
- Skills Development Plan of the Province(x1)
- University of Stellenbosch(x3)
- University of KZN(x1)
- ASGISA (x2)
- Anti-Poverty Strategy(x2)
- National Industrial Policy Framework(x1)
- Provincial studies(x1)
- Guidelines for PGDS(x3)
- Policy on Local Economic Development (2001)(x2)
- National Industrial Policy Framework(x1)
- Mpumalanga Province Environmental Implementation Plan (EIP) (x1)
- Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA)(x1)
- Medium Term Strategic Framework (2004-2009)(x1)
- ILO(x1)
- Research by University of Western Cape(x2)
- January 8 statement by the President(x1)
- MTEF(x4)
- World Bank studies(x2)
- Spatial framework(x1)
- HSRC – provided both economic and social information(x1)
- SAIRR – useful for crime statistics(x1)

- University of Cape Town (African Centre for Cities) – provided useful information on urbanization, food supply, affordable shelter, employment opportunities, water and waste management, public transportation, crime and disease, and environmental degradation and climate change. (x3)
- Quantec – provided regional market indicators
- SALDRU – conducted research in microeconomics with an emphasis on labour markets, human capital, poverty, inequality and social policy.(x1)

- Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) – provided useful information on socio-economic issues such as poverty and inequality, and social security.(x1)

- University of the Free State
- MDG(x1)
- UN studies(x1)
- Vision 2025(x1)
- Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE)(x1)
- University of Limpopo(x1)
- University of Pretoria(x1)
- World Bank studies – socioeconomic studies(x1)
- SMME guidelines(x1)
- DBSA(x1)
- Health Systems Trust – provided health systems research(x1)
- IDP(x1)

Also quite an intensive kind of analysis, backed up by research by four different studies:

- i. Labour and employment study(x1)
- ii. Economic study done by TIPS (Trade and Industrial Policy Services) (x1)
- iii. Environmental study conducted by a local company called Green Puq (x1)