Understanding the use of evidence in policymaking: Informing a new research agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Research Commissioning Centre pathfinding paper

The Research Commissioning Centre is part of Global Research and Technology Development (GRTD), which represents the FCDO's portfolio of high-quality and impactful research and development.

List of acronyms and initialisms

3ie	International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
ACED	African Center for Equitable Development
ACRES	Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis
AFIDEP	African Institute for Development Policy
BCURE	Building Capacity for the Use of Research Evidence
CERP	Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan
DFID	Department for International Development
EIPM	Evidence-informed policymaking
EVIPNet	Evidence Informed Policy Network
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Action
LMIC	Low- and middle-income country
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PACE	Pan-African Collective for Evidence
RCC	Research Commissioning Centre
SEDI	Strengthening the use of Evidence for Development Impact
SUMMA	Laboratory for Research and Innovation in Education for Latin America and the Caribbean
ToC	Theory of change
WHO	World Health Organization

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Executive summary

This pathfinding paper, commissioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Research Commissioning Centre (RCC), summarises the current landscape of evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with a particular focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Building on previous research programmes including Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) and Strengthening the use of Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI), it seeks to support a new research agenda exploring the political, institutional, and systemic factors that shape the use of research evidence in economic policymaking and proposes avenues for future theoretical and empirical investigation.

While the integration of high-quality research evidence into policymaking is widely recognised as a condition for more effective, efficient, and accountable governance, evidence use remains inconsistent and often marginal in national policy processes. This is not merely a problem of evidence availability or technical capacity, but a function of political economy dynamics, institutional path dependencies, and cultural norms surrounding knowledge and decision-making.

The paper examines the interplay between the supply and demand for evidence, and how political, institutional, and systemic forces shape the broader evidence ecosystem. It draws on a range of sources, including a systematic review of evidence-use interventions conducted with the Pan-African Collective for Evidence (PACE) (Nduku et al. 2025), broader scoping of academic and grey literature, and targeted consultations with senior policymakers and practitioners. We aim to summarise existing knowledge and identify future priorities to generate actionable insights to understand and enhance EIPM.

What we know about EIPM

On the **supply side**, key challenges include insufficient funding for research generation, poorly functioning research infrastructure, limited technical capacity to conduct research, and the misalignment between academic incentives, funding interests, and policymaker needs. Research is often not designed with policy relevance in mind, and dissemination strategies can be inadequate to reach or persuade time-poor decision-makers.

On the **demand side**, policymakers can face significant constraints in terms of time and resources, as well as lack of expertise to interpret or apply research evidence and absence of institutional incentives or accountability mechanisms to prioritise evidence use. Organisational cultures within government may reward procedural compliance and political loyalty over analytical rigour, while high turnover within ministries undermines continuity and institutional memory. Furthermore, decision-making structures are frequently fragmented, opaque, or overly hierarchical, undermining transparent deliberation and evidence-informed dialogue.

Evidence use is inextricably linked to the **political, institutional and systemic context** in which it occurs. Political incentives, electoral cycles, ideological frameworks, and patronage systems profoundly shape whether and how evidence is used. Institutional factors, including bureaucratic processes, organisational mandates, and interdepartmental relationships further influence the uptake and application of evidence. At a broader systemic level, factors including

media narratives, public opinion, legal frameworks, and international funding priorities exert significant influence over the evidence-policy interface.

Economic development policymaking is characterised by particular features that are important to consider for EIPM. Policymakers may be motivated by narrower objectives than national economic development, particularly given the long time horizons of many economic initiatives. Policymakers also face situations of deep uncertainty regarding the future political, economic and natural environment, which makes anticipating the most effective economic investments difficult to predict. Moreover, generating causal evidence to inform policy decision-making is challenging, particularly for meso- and macroeconomic policy areas. Economic policymaking additionally involves numerous potentially competing actors, both within and outside government, who exercise varying levels of power and influence.

Despite persistent challenges, there is growing momentum in the field of EIPM, particularly in LMICs. The number of organisations conducting systematic reviews and impact evaluations, which support a robust evidence ecosystem, have increased rapidly. The emergence of evidence intermediaries, including policy labs, knowledge brokering initiatives, and collaborative platforms, provide new pathways for enhancing the accessibility and salience of evidence.

However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of evidence-use interventions remains scant and fragmented. Most impact evaluations originate from high-income countries, with evidence from the economic policy sector considerably underrepresented compared to health and applied social sciences. Existing studies also tend to rely on policymakers' self-reported attitudes or behaviours around evidence use, rather than observed EIPM outcomes.

Future research agenda

Overall, there is need to move beyond identifying barriers and facilitators of EIPM to an understanding of how, when and why these factors come into play. Research should actively engage policymakers in study design and implementation, adopt interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary perspectives, and generate locally grounded evidence from LMICs. A systems approach, attentive to the complex interplay between different actors, relationships, structures, processes, incentives and interests, is crucial for understanding evidence use in policymaking.

We propose a two-strand research agenda aimed at advancing understanding of how policymaking works in practice and the impact of interventions to strengthen EIPM.

- **Understanding policymaking in practice**

Literature scoping and consultations with policymakers stressed the critical importance of understanding the nature of the policy process: where decision-making occurs, which actors are most influential, how different evidence sources are consulted and interpreted. This can then provide the basis for bolstering evidence-use processes, identifying where change is needed, and ensuring changes are feasible and sustainable. Priorities for future research include political economy analysis in different policy settings, comparative analyses of policy processes and evidence use within and across contexts, peer learning about the institutional

factors shaping evidence use within government departments, and interrogation of what evidence use means for policy outcomes and downstream implementation.

- **Evaluating evidence-use interventions**

There is a parallel need for rigorous evaluation of initiatives aimed at enhancing EIPM. These evaluations should be underpinned by clearly articulated, context-specific theories of change, and employ appropriate mixed-method study designs. Evaluations should clearly define what 'impact' looks like, with the opportunity to move beyond policymakers' individual knowledge or behaviour change to assess broader institutional and systemic outcomes, including procedural reforms, organisational culture shifts, and policy content changes. The proliferation of policy labs and other approaches to evidence intermediation provides an opportunity to understand how, for whom, and under what circumstances they are most impactful.

There can be no 'magic bullet' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach to increasing the use of evidence in policy decision-making, but efforts to deepen understanding of the political economy of policymaking, develop theories of change that explore the mechanisms and contextual influences underpinning EIPM outcomes, and confronting issues that fall outside traditional EIPM scholarship, can generate actionable learning for researchers, practitioners and policymakers in support of sustainable economic development.

1. Rationale for evidence-informed policymaking

The evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) movement is founded on the premise that when policymaking is informed by the best available evidence—as distinct from intuition, political expediency or short-term interests—decisions are more likely to lead to better outcomes for citizens. By this logic, governments implement policies or programmes that have demonstrated evidence of effectiveness and adjust or discontinue those that do not yield intended effects. This allows governments to optimise resource allocation, improving the cost-effectiveness of public spending by supporting initiatives most likely to achieve impact. In an era where public sector accountability is increasingly scrutinised, EIPM strengthens legitimacy and public trust, as policy decisions can be justified based on evidence rather than subjective preferences (Head 2016).

Beyond effectiveness of policy outcomes, EIPM offers potential for more streamlined decision-making processes—for example, less time spent pursuing policies that are not supported by evidence (Zida et al. 2017)—which generate further efficiencies. By embedding EIPM within government structures, policymakers can enhance policy coherence, limiting fragmented or contradictory policy interventions that arise from ad hoc decision-making. Importantly, in other cases, evidence use may serve to lengthen time horizons for decisions, for example by expanding the range of available policy options or surfacing previously unknown problems, but with the ultimate aim of improving policy outcomes.

Evidence can also be a powerful tool to push back against vested interests or elite capture of the policymaking process (OECD 2017). In the intensely political and values-driven process of democratic policymaking, evidence is one of many factors that influences policy decisions (Cairney and Oliver 2017), but when leveraged effectively it can help counter other motives and lend credibility to policy decisions. Multilateral organisations including the OECD and WHO have embraced EIPM discourse and promote it as best practice (OECD 2020; WHO 2021).

Despite the compelling case for EIPM, challenges to achieving it are deeply entrenched. It is clear that simply producing credible, robust, and relevant evidence and making it available to policymakers is insufficient for achieving policy impact. A growing research field is concerned with understanding the channels through which research evidence effectively informs policy decision-making and under what circumstances—that is, to generate evidence on evidence use.[1]

Previous initiatives by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) have sought to understand and strengthen institutional mechanisms for research evidence use in policymaking, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Programmes such as Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact (SEDI) worked to integrate research evidence into government structures in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda, focusing on training policymakers, improving research accessibility, fostering demand for evidence, and identifying strategic entry points for evidence-use initiatives. Similarly, DFID's Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme sought to embed evidence literacy within public administration by supporting civil service training and policy advisory networks. However, these initiatives have also faced challenges in ensuring sustainability, institutional buy-in, and alignment with

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[1] Alternatively, 'research on research use' or 'meta-research'

national governance systems, underscoring the renewed need for long-term approaches to embedding evidence use in policymaking.

The SEDI and BCURE programmes emphasised the importance of 'thinking and working politically' in understanding EIPM (Vogel and Punton 2018; Shaxson et al. 2021). Building on this work, and in line with one of FCDO's central priorities to accelerate sustainable economic development and growth (FCDO 2023), the FCDO Research Commissioning Centre (RCC) is launching a new programme of research on evidence use in economic policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. It has a particular focus on the political, institutional and systemic influences of policymaking, which have received limited attention in evidence-use efforts (Cairney and Oliver 2017).

To support the generation of actionable learning for researchers, practitioners and policymakers engaged in efforts to enhance EIPM, this pathfinding paper seeks to:

1) Explore the state of knowledge on EIPM, with a particular focus on the political, institutional and contextual influences of evidence use, and insights from recent studies and policy programmes in LMICs.
2) Present a research agenda to inform commissioning for the upcoming programme of work by identifying outstanding gaps and opportunities.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Sections 2 and 3 present an overview of the methods and research questions that shape the discussion and define the key concepts and assumptions that guide our approach. Section 4 then briefly summarises the global literature on barriers and facilitators of evidence use in policymaking, with a deeper focus on the political, institutional and systemic influences. While drawing on insights from a broad literature, it also considers specific challenges for economic policymaking. This is followed in Section 5 by an overview of recent developments in the EIPM landscape in LMICs, with a particular focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The second part of the paper, from Section 6, builds on what we know about EIPM to propose a research agenda for future work in the field. Section 7 concludes.

2. Methods and scope

To inform the RCC's commissioning priorities, 3ie and RCC consortium partners undertook a series of scoping activities, including:

- Group consultations (n=3) with researchers, practitioners and funders in the evidence use space (n=32 experts), conducted in February 2024.
- Individual consultations (n=6) with current or former senior economic policy officials in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, identified through International Growth Centre and World Bank Chief Economists of Government networks, conducted August-October 2024. We are grateful for contributions from:
  - o Ali Sarfraz Hussain, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the World Trade Organization; former Chairman Planning and Development Board, Punjab.
  - o Christopher Mvunga, Former Governor of the Central Bank of Zambia; Previously Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet-Finance and Economic

Development and Former Deputy Minister of Finance & National Planning, Government of Zambia.

- o Enilde Sarmento, National Director of Economic Policy and Development in the Mozambican Ministry of Finance.
- o Menacé Minko Mi Mbelé Tomo, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Gabon.
- o Muhammad Omar Masud, Chief Executive Officer of The Urban Unit and member of the Pakistan Administrative Service; previously the Government of Punjab's Additional Secretary of Finance.
- o Trudi Makhaya, Senior Advisor, Boston Consulting Group; Former full-time economic advisor to President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa (2018-2023).
- A systematic review of what works to increase the use of evidence for policy decision-making, conducted by the Pan-African Collective for Evidence (PACE) and 3ie (Nduku et al. 2025).
- Additional scoping of the theoretical and empirical literature to build on learning from previous programmes including BCURE and SEDI.

This pathfinding paper draws together insights from the scoping phase to summarise the current state of the field and identify future research priorities. The paper is not intended to be a systematic or exhaustive review of available research on the use of evidence in policymaking, but a narrative overview of key issues to inform the RCC research agenda.

The paper is guided by the following questions:

1. **What do we know about evidence-informed policymaking?**
   - What is the landscape of research on effectiveness, mechanisms of change, and contextual factors that influence evidence use in policymaking?
   - What are the political, institutional, and systemic structures, processes, or motivations that facilitate or constrain evidence use?
   - What are the emerging research gaps from the evidence base?
2. **Based on what we know, what do we need to do?**
   - What are the key priorities for research to better understand the use of evidence in policy decision-making in LMICs?
   - What interventions suggest the most promise for increasing the use of evidence in policymaking?
   - What study designs and research methods could be used to explore key evidence gaps?

3. Key concepts

The scope of the paper is shaped by the following key concepts and parameters:

3.1 Policymaking

The emphasis of the RCC commissioning, and therefore this paper, is on policymaking by national governments, including key supporting agencies. We conceive of 'policymaking' in a broad sense[2] to include national strategy or planning, public sector investment, programme

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[2] We note the broad definition of public policy used by Cairney (2012): 'the sum total of government action, from signals of intent to the final outcomes.'

implementation, legislation, reform, regulation, or similar. We similarly use the term 'policymaker' to include any actor engaged in the national policy process, including both elected officials and technocratic staff, recognising that patterns of evidence use differ across policy domains, job roles, and organisational functions (Head 2016).

The paper does not explore the extensive adjacent literature on evidence use by frontline practitioners such as doctors and teachers or other decision-makers outside national government.

3.2   Evidence

To reflect FCDO and RCC's role in commissioning research, our specific focus is on the use of evidence generated from research—*research evidence*—which derives from a systematic investigative process employed to increase or revise current knowledge. This could range from conceptual and theoretical research to policy evaluations and systematic reviews. Evidence is distinguished from other types of information or data in that it (i) substantiates or disproves a specific proposition and (ii) is appropriate in terms of quantity and quality for addressing the question or need at hand (Glandon, Kelly, and Gaarder 2024).[3]

It is well recognised, however, that policy actors draw on other types of evidence – and do not necessarily distinguish these conceptually from research evidence (Day and Bogenschneider 2024). Other evidence types include *practice evidence* gained from participating in policy processes, or more generally through other hands-on experience; and *citizen knowledge* held by the public, both individually and collectively, through direct experience of their daily lives (Jones et al. 2013). We therefore aim to understand the role of research evidence in policy decision-making in the context of other types of information on which policymakers may draw.

3.3   Evidence-informed policymaking

Although often the ultimate goal for research producers, the instrumental use of evidence by policymakers, whereby research findings directly inform a policy decision or outcome, is rare (Weiss 1979). Conceptions of EIPM must therefore recognise the other ways that policymakers use evidence, including:

- Conceptual use: when evidence changes how policymakers think about a problem or the questions they ask
- Relational use: using evidence to earn the trust of colleagues, educate others, or influence colleagues' perceptions about policymakers' own expertise
- Process use: when evidence changes how policymakers think about the structures and processes within which policymaking occurs
- Strategic use: using evidence to justify a pre-existing policy position or explain a particular action (Supplee 2023).

Rickinson and colleagues (2017) map different types of evidence use against the policy process, starting from constructing a policy narrative (using evidence to define a problem, set an agenda, or make a case for change), testing the policy narrative (identifying, selecting or designing interventions; clarifying best practice; or identifying key drivers/levers of change), and communicating the policy narrative (securing buy-in from key stakeholders). As these typologies imply, EIPM involves the integration of evidence through both formal and informal

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[3] In line with Parkhurst and Abeysinghe (2016), we do not privilege certain types of research evidence over others but emphasise the appropriateness of the evidence to the question at hand.

channels in various aspects of the policy process, from agenda setting and policy formulation to policy decision-making, implementation and evaluation. Importantly, not all evidence use by policymakers demonstrates meaningful engagement with a body of knowledge and its implications. In understanding EIPM, we are therefore interested not just in the *extent* of evidence use but the *quality* of it.

3.4 Economic development policymaking

The focus of RCC commissioning is on economic policy or reform areas that are of high importance for national economic growth and development. Examples include, but are not limited to, energy systems, high-volume transport, industrial policy, labour markets, and trade policy. This pathfinding paper draws on examples of EIPM research in the economic development sphere where available, as well as the experiences of six senior economic officials in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. However, it also seeks to distil lessons and opportunities from a broader literature covering different policy areas and methodological disciplines.

4. What do we know about evidence-informed policymaking?

4.1 Barriers and facilitators of evidence use

Effective use of evidence in policymaking requires the coordination of an 'evidence system,' which generates high-quality research evidence, and a 'policy system,' which generates public policy (Stewart et al. 2022). An extensive literature has explored the barriers and facilitators of evidence use by policymakers, from the perspective of both evidence supply and evidence demand. These factors are many and multifaceted, ranging from individual actors' characteristics and relationships to institutional and systemic processes, structures and incentives. Collectively, they shape the capability, motivation and opportunity to use evidence in policymaking (Nduku et al. 2025).

We present below a summary of these factors from the global literature (Table 1), before focusing more detailed attention on the political, institutional, and systemic influences on EIPM, with reference to emerging research.

Table 1: Supply and demand side factors influencing evidence use in policymaking

Factors that influence evidence supply	Factors that influence evidence demand
Staffing, funding and resourcing for research production	Availability of high-quality evidence
Local capacity to conduct research	Capacity of policymakers to access, interpret, and use evidence
Researchers' soft skills in communication, relationship-building	Time to engage with evidence
Institutional and systemic incentives to generate research for policy	Strong managerial and leadership support for evidence use
Academic and funding interests	Staffing, funding and resourcing for knowledge translation
Researchers' understanding of policy processes; collaboration between researchers and policymakers	Institutional and systemic incentives to use evidence; institutional evidence culture
Timely communication of research evidence	Relationships between evidence users and producers; research co-production
Local and global research infrastructure: research ethics committees, evidence repositories, open access publications, technological capacity	Research characteristics: origin, researcher affiliation, timeliness, credibility
	Policy characteristics: novelty, contentiousness, public profile
	Political interests; media, lobbying, public opinion
	Bureaucratic processes

4.1.1 Factors that influence evidence supply

Availability of, and access to, high-quality evidence is a cornerstone of EIPM. Where research evidence is not produced to answer policy questions, where outputs are not accessible to policymakers, or where available evidence has a low foundation of rigour, this limits the ability to make informed decisions (Oliver et al. 2014). Evidence supply may be dictated by available **funding** for evidence generation, **local technical capacity** to undertake rigorous research, or the **functioning of supportive structures** such as research ethics committees (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022; Murunga et al. 2020). Access is influenced by **local and global research infrastructure**, such as accessibility of research repositories, open-access publications, internet connectivity, and technological capacity (Murunga et al. 2020; Head 2016).

Once research evidence is generated, it must be **effectively communicated** for use in policymaking. Even when high-quality research is available, poor dissemination strategies can prevent policymakers from accessing or understanding the evidence (Oliver et al. 2014; Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022). Where researchers lack the necessary communication skills to translate complex findings into actionable insights for policymakers, this communication gap can result in research being overlooked or misunderstood (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022).

Moreover, evidence produced to meet **academic and funding interests** may not align with the needs of policymakers (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022). The evidence system can also impose **structures and incentives** that reinforce this misalignment between research and policy goals. For example, the prioritisation of academic publications in high-impact journals reduces opportunities for deliberative engagement with policymakers (Stewart et al. 2022), while academic rewards that privilege publishing in international journals can make findings less accessible to local audiences (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022). As Omar Masud, a policymaker we spoke to in Pakistan, reflected:

> [A]cademics, they are academics. They work under their tight regime, you know, in the sense their evaluation is done on totally different metrics. We do not have similar expectations from them. I don't want them to be published in the American Economic Review before I accept their policy advice based on evidence. […] That may be their university requirement if they want to get tenure, but that's not the case over here [in policy].

> (Omar Masud, policymaker consultation, Pakistan)

On the other hand, **understanding of policy processes by researchers** and greater **collaboration between researchers and policymakers** can facilitate generation of policy-relevant research (Oliver et al. 2014; van de Goor et al. 2017). Such collaboration, which can be facilitated by organisations acting as evidence intermediaries (see Section 5), can also support researchers to reach the relevant stakeholders in complex policy processes.

4.1.2 Factors that influence evidence demand

While EIPM depends on a strong supply of policy-relevant evidence, it is equally dependent on demand from and **capacity of policymakers to access, interpret, and use evidence**. At the individual level, policymakers' skills, experience, values and knowledge act as significant determinants of evidence use (Oliver et al. 2014; 2022; Vogel and Punton 2018; Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022). Capacity limitations can be exacerbated by **time constraints** that prevent policymakers from engaging with complex research evidence (van de Goor et al. 2017; Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022).

At the institutional level, strong **managerial and leadership support** that encourages integration of evidence use into policy processes can foster a culture where evidence use is prioritised. In particular, the support of policy champions—individuals who advocate for the use of evidence in policymaking—increases motivation and strengthens structures for implementing evidence-based policies (Oliver et al. 2014; Redman et al. 2015). On the other hand, lack of leadership can result in fragmented efforts to institutionalise research utilisation, leaving policymakers without a clear directive to incorporate research findings into policy (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022).

More broadly, **staffing and resourcing** influence institutional capacity around EIPM (Oliver et al. 2014). Frequent movement of personnel disrupts institutional memory and weakens the continuity of EIPM initiatives. Lack of sustained personnel dedicated to research and policy synthesis, or insufficient funding for knowledge translation (Murunga et al. 2020), also weakens the ability to utilise evidence effectively in policy processes.

Institutional governance structures provide a framework within which evidence use can be sustained and integrated into decision-making processes (Kuchenmüller et al. 2022). This includes coordination between institutions or departments in government to avoid siloed or fragmented decision-making and promote information sharing. The presence of **incentives to use evidence**, such as performance evaluation criteria, career progression and promotion, or other forms of recognition, can further enhance policymakers' engagement with research findings (Gaarder, Handel, and Kelly 2024), including by shaping their perceptions of the value of research evidence (Redman et al. 2015). Institutional arrangements that actively support evidence use, including mentorship programs, research fellowships, and structured knowledge-sharing platforms, can create conducive environments for integrating research evidence into policymaking (Murunga et al. 2020), while written policies that mandate the use of evidence can also promote accountability for EIPM (Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022).

Weak institutional linkages between research producers and users limit knowledge translation efforts. A key facilitator of evidence use is the development of **trust and strong relationships** between researchers and policymakers (Oliver et al. 2014; van de Goor et al. 2017). Structural collaboration between researchers and policymakers and clearly defined institutional responsibilities can facilitate stronger evidence uptake (van de Goor et al. 2017), by ensuring that research is relevant to policymakers' needs, contextually grounded and meaningful. Evidence intermediary organisations can also play an important brokerage role between evidence users and producers.

Relatedly, **characteristics of the research** itself can influence how it is received by policymakers, including its clarity, relevance, reliability and perceived importance (Oliver et al. 2014). In US state governments, Xu and colleagues (2024) find that civil servants show a clear preference for evidence generated in their own jurisdictions over research conducted in other states or countries. This preference is rooted in concerns about external validity: policymakers tend to trust findings that reflect their own economic, cultural, and institutional realities more than those derived from different contexts. Similarly, Parkhurst (2017) highlights examples of resistance to international evidence in LMICs, particularly when policies appear to be externally imposed. However, Hjort et al. (2021), in an experiment in Brazilian municipalities, find limited evidence that local research mattered for policy decision-making.

4.2 The importance of political, institutional and systemic context

Our consultations with EIPM experts consistently highlighted that the field has engaged in only a limited way with the political, institutional and systemic context of policymaking. Even when policymakers have access to timely and relevant evidence, technical capacity to interpret and apply it, and strong relationships with evidence providers, contextual pressures may inhibit evidence use. Donadelli (2020) describes how environmental research evidence, despite being largely uncontested in the scientific community, highly relevant to policy decisions, and clearly communicated during policy debates, was ignored when it contradicted dominant interests in Brazil.

We discuss the influence of political, institutional and systemic factors on policymaking below.

4.2.1 Political context

Policymaking inherently involves making choices between different priorities in allocating scarce resources, and as such, rarely involves a simple technical assessment of available evidence (Parkhurst 2017). This decision-making does not occur in a vacuum. Policymakers operate within politically charged environments where evidence competes for policy influence with political pressures, financial constraints, power dynamics, ideological beliefs, and social values (Oliver et al. 2014; Goldman and Pabari 2021).

Moreover, research evidence 'rarely points to an obviously optimal solution' (Vogel and Punton 2018, p.25). Tax policy, for example, may be driven by income redistribution goals, revenue-raising targets, showing support for particular sectors or groups (e.g., small businesses, entrepreneurs), or promoting national economic growth (Pope, Tetlow, and Advani 2023). Budget choices, therefore, involve weighing up potentially competing priorities, which are heavily shaped by political narratives and available resources.

Evidence is frequently used as a tool of political argumentation rather than as a neutral input into policy. Parkhurst (2017) highlights that the use of evidence in policymaking is subject to two types of bias: *technical bias*, where evidence is manipulated or misused, and *issue bias*, where certain types of evidence are privileged while others are marginalised. This means that even in cases where robust evidence exists, its influence on policy is mediated by the political motivations of decision-makers. Policymakers often strategically frame evidence to align with dominant political discourses rather than allowing it to dictate policy direction (Belfiore 2022; Weiss 1979), and research has shown that decision-makers' ideology can influence how they interpret evidence, such that they draw different conclusions from the same set of findings based on their underlying beliefs (Baekgaard et al. 2019).

Policymakers' responsiveness to evidence can depend on whether a policy area is settled and dominated by entrenched beliefs or is a new, evolving issue without an established status quo (Ouimet et al. 2024). For well-established policy domains, evidence is often used symbolically to reinforce pre-existing positions rather than to challenge them. By contrast, in their study of US legislators, Xu and colleagues (2024) find that evidence is more readily accepted when there is no prior policy precedent, as policymakers are more open to different sources of information when crafting entirely new frameworks.

Power dynamics, patronage, and complex decision-making structures add extra layers of complexity to EIPM efforts (Shaxson et al. 2021; Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022). Thoto (2023), reflecting on his experience leading a think-and-do tank in Benin, highlights the importance of understanding the 'game of power' and the challenges evidence producers and intermediaries face in navigating it. He identifies three types of decision-maker:

- *Apparent decision-makers*, who act as if they have decision power—and are perceived by others to have it—while it is truly held by 'hidden authorities' such as technical advisors.
- *Constrained decision-makers,* who hold decision power but cannot use it, for example due to institutional or bureaucratic barriers.
- *Unwilling decision-makers,* who hold decision power but are guided by interests other than evidence due to lack of accountability, corruption, or political motives.

This reflects Trudi Makhaya's experience when serving as economic advisor to President Ramaphosa in South Africa: 'People would go, have the proper meetings, present evidence, and then there would be a backroom conversation where the actual decisions were made' (Makhaya 2025).

The economic policy officials we consulted consistently emphasised the importance of navigating the political environment in achieving desired policy outcomes:

> *Now, again, to achieve all these things at the end of the day, we can't ignore the fact that you need political will. […] Unless you get buy-in from the top, everything you try and do will get neutralised along the line.*
> (Christopher Mvunga, policymaker consultation, Zambia)

At the same time, Mr Mvunga felt that evidence was particularly valuable for overcoming political polarisation. In a context where 'the view taken is, "Are you with us or are you against us?"' evidence from an independent source can help inform a credible route forward.

In political systems characterised by regular turnover and winner-takes-all electoral cycles, 'windows of opportunity' for evidence use are important to identify. A burgeoning literature provides an indication of the factors associated with evidence-informed policy impact. Using secondary data from 511 International Growth Centre research programmes, Bonargent (2024) finds that projects developed in partnership with policymakers are 17 to 20 percentage points more likely to result in observed policy change and that, relative to the electoral cycle, these collaborations most often occur earlier in the term when political conditions are conducive to experimentation and reform. By contrast, projects initiated in the two years leading up to an election are about 15 percentage points less likely to result in evidence uptake. This is likely explained by policymakers' shift in focus from policy effectiveness to electoral gains, leading to prioritisation of high-profile projects that can boost re-election prospects over those that may have long-term benefits but lack immediate political visibility.

This was echoed by the policy officials we spoke to, including Ali Sarfraz Hussain:

> *[W]hat really puts a barrier in case of politicians, when they are making decision and try to be intuitive at times, you know, even when you present them evidence, they'll go with more populist decision because of the political pressure.*
>
> (Ali Sarfraz Hussain, policymaker consultation, Pakistan)

Examining the relationship between evaluated conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes in Latin America and subsequent spending on those programmes, Rao (2024) finds that the timeliness of evidence—but not its credibility, generalisability or magnitude of impact—is a predictor of spending. Her study thus emphasises actionability as critical for informing policy decision-making, best facilitated when evaluation findings are published relatively quickly (within 1-4 years of when impact was measured) and when the political party in power is unchanged between these time points.

The economic policy officials we consulted similarly reflected on this political calculus, emphasising that evidence-informed initiatives needed to align with an administration's time horizons and withstand personnel turnover:

[P]olicymaking is a selfish endeavour […] because I'm not going to be here five years from now on. I'm going to be here for the next two years, so if I want to see good results, I want to see them during my tenure.

(Omar Masud, policymaker consultation, Pakistan)

What normally happens is a research programme happens in year X and then nobody hears about it. The original civil servant, who sort of okayed or approved or was on board of the programme, moves ahead and in year Y when the programme results or outcomes come in, there is a new chap altogether and there's a big time gap and nobody understands from where did these people come into my office… I don't have any idea about it.

(Omar Masud, policymaker consultation, Pakistan)

4.2.2 Institutional context

In addition to being an inherently political exercise, policy decision-making occurs within a specific institutional context that dictates, shapes or constrains policy choices and outcomes (Parkhurst 2017). In exploring the organisational context of evidence-informed policymaking in the UK and South Africa, Shaxson and colleagues (2016, p.23) observe:

Policymakers are strongly influenced in what they can do by their need to comply with the routine departmental processes of business planning, budgeting and reporting; the need to liaise with other departments; the mandatory aspects of public consultation; responses to parliamentary questions, and many other processes that comprise the day to day business of government.

Government departments are simultaneously sites of constant change—as they respond to new political leaders, economic prerogatives, and unpredictable external events—and great inertia, with deeply ingrained processes and ways of working (Shaxson et al. 2016). While the bureaucratic and institutional conditions of policymaking have in some contexts been shown to stimulate local policy experimentation and innovation (Wang and Yang 2021), they are often seen as resistant to change and therefore not conducive to EIPM where it is not already entrenched. As Omar Masud reflected:

So what really happens is, evidence is being presented – either it is a report or something to that effect – and now you want to use it in policy. The organisation is not structured in such a way that this thing distils itself into policy. No fault of the organisation, but you know we are talking about rule-based organisations. They are not, you know, driven by appreciating evidence. They are driven by the appreciation of rules. So how do you, sort of, fix that?

(Omar Masud, policymaker consultation, Pakistan)

Even where governments maintain dedicated policy research units, their influence is often mediated by organisational cultures that prioritise administrative feasibility and political acceptability over scientific rigour (Head 2016).

In an analysis of 73 randomised controlled trials in 30 US cities evaluating the impact of introducing or revising light-touch government communications, DellaVigna, Kim, and Linos

(2024) find that cities adopted the recommendations in follow-on communication in just 27 percent of cases, despite minimal costs of doing so. Adoption was more likely in places where changes could be folded into pre-existing communications rather than introduced as new processes, so the findings suggest that organisational inertia is a key barrier to evidence-informed policy change.

Other studies have highlighted the role of institutional evidence culture in determining how evidence is sought, interpreted and used. Although not consistently defined or conceptualised, evidence culture concerns the values, norms and rationales about knowledge production and use and the structural processes and infrastructures that sustain them (Bandola-Gill et al. 2024). It has been shown to dictate the type(s) or source(s) of evidence that are valued by particular actors, which can differ across policy sectors (Saguin et al. 2024), and to be an important moderator of the impact of evidence-use interventions (Dobbins et al. 2009).

Intra-institutional dynamics similarly shape receptiveness to evidence use. In South Africa, Trudi Makhaya noted the likelihood of resistance to evidence-use initiatives that were perceived to undermine the expertise or autonomy of certain departments, as well as the relative power between actors which shaped who was listened to:

> *I think that's the greatest pushback between line ministries who think of themselves as experts and having to then contend with a structure that tries to tell them that they're not quite doing what they're supposed to be doing or offering them another perspective from a different angle.*

(Trudi Makhaya, policymaker consultation, South Africa)

> *[T]here's the budgeting process which tries to impose discipline. And then there's the strength of the department. Certain departments will be very strong in pushing for their initiatives.*

(Trudi Makhaya, policymaker consultation, South Africa)

4.2.3   System context

In addition to navigating the immediate political and institutional structures of policymaking, decisions are also heavily influenced by the wider system in which policymaking occurs. As Head (2016) has summarised, 'political dynamics are expressed through the preferences and agenda setting of political leaders, legislators, lobbyists, and stakeholders, mediated through media communication and public opinion.'

These system-level forces, including the media, pressure groups, and vested interests, often have a strong bearing on policy decision-making (Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman 2016). In a context where democratic political leaders are focused on maintaining stakeholder support, engaging with media-framed debates, and managing risks, evidence can inform and enrich political debates but does not drive decision-making (Head 2016). A systematic review of research evidence use by legislators suggested that high-profile issues that garner constituent, media, or lobbying attention are less likely to be driven by evidence (Ouimet et al. 2024). Conversely, issues with strong empirical support but low public or political visibility may struggle to gain traction in policy agendas.

Overarching governance frameworks, legal mandates, and regulations around EIPM also dictate how evidence is produced and used, in both facilitating and inhibiting ways. An example from Indonesia cited in Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman (2016) highlights how stringent regulations on government research procurement hindered timely access to relevant data, thereby stifling the responsiveness of research units. Other legal mandates attempt to enforce evidence use in policymaking, and thereby value for public money, by requiring decisions to be justified with evidence. Research from the United States suggests a mixed response to these approaches, which in some cases have encouraged better embedding of evidence in policy processes (Pew Charitable Trusts 2017), but have also led to evidence use being treated as a bureaucratic exercise to conform with requirements and not as a tool for informing policy decisions or direction (Yoshizawa 2022).[4]

Trudi Makhaya also reflected on the limits of mandates for evidence use: '[T]here's a stated commitment, but, I mean, people can be very opportunistic about how they use evidence' (Policymaker consultation, South Africa). Parkhurst (2017) advocates for the establishment of evidence-advisory systems that embed evidence use within regulatory frameworks to ensure policy legitimacy and accountability. Without such systems, policymakers may selectively use evidence to support pre-existing policy positions, leading to biased or politically motivated decision-making.

4.3 Economic development policymaking

Although the factors presented in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 can apply across all policy sectors, it is worth noting that the majority of published EIPM research comes from the health field and applied social sciences such as education or social work (Oliver, Adie, and Boaz 2024). Emerging research has explored sectoral differences in how policymakers access, interpret, or apply evidence in different spheres and found marked contrasts in how policymakers conceptualise evidence, the types of evidence they value, and what sources they draw on (Bandola-Gill et al. 2024; Saguin et al. 2024).

Economic development policymaking is characterised by a number of features which, while not necessarily unique, are important to recognise:

- ***Economic growth and development may not be the primary interest of a serving government***. Decision-makers may instead be motivated by narrower objectives, including staying in power, rewarding political supporters, or favouring specific regions or ethnic or religious groups, even when it is not economically efficient to do so (Dercon 2024). In this context, evidence-informed economic advice that runs counter to these objectives is likely to be only partially implemented or ignored.
- ***Time horizons are long***. Effects of structural reforms or long-term measures designed to enhance sustainable development can take years to manifest, beyond the typical duration of policymakers' term in office. Politicians driven by electoral pressure to deliver immediate impacts on citizens' lives may therefore take a short-term view and neglect opportunities to implement policy solutions that serve future goals (Martinuzzi and Scholl 2016), as we also saw reflected in policymakers' experiences above.
- ***Policymaking takes place under deep uncertainty***. Exacerbating the long time horizons of economic decision-making is uncertainty about the future political,

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[4] Weiss and colleagues (2005) have termed this 'imposed' evidence use.

economic, and natural environment. LMICs in particular have experienced dramatic changes in demographics, land use, climate volatility, global economic forces (e.g., commodity prices, currency swings), and political economy. This makes anticipating the most effective economic investments difficult to predict, particularly when combined with policymakers' competing beliefs, values, and preferences (Kalra et al. 2014). More broadly, policymakers may expect a level of certainty from evidence than is possible to provide, which hampers their confidence in it (Makhaya 2025).

- ***Generating causal evidence is challenging, particularly for meso- and macroeconomic policy areas***. Macroeconomics as a field has lagged behind the econometric revolution in applied microeconomics (Angrist and Pischke 2010). While labour market interventions, provision of subsidies and other microeconomic policy measures can feasibly be informed by well-specified causal studies, understanding the impact of sector- or system-wide initiatives is more difficult. With no ready counterfactual against which to compare, attribution of economic impact becomes more challenging, particularly in the context of broader time trends, market-wide shocks, and institutional changes that similarly affect development outcomes (Leuz 2018). Moreover, as these measures are often introduced in response to prevailing economic conditions, and economic actors may pre-emptively adjust their behaviour in anticipation of policy change, it is difficult to isolate policy impact to support evidence-informed decision-making.[5]

- ***Numerous influential actors are involved***. Stakeholder mapping of the Ghanaian economic development policy system, for example, conducted for SEDI, demonstrates a complex network of domestic and international institutions with varying levels of influence and decision-making power (Gatune et al. 2021). These include numerous sites in government—the Presidency, Cabinet, Economic Management Team, Ministry of Finance, National Development Planning Commission—as well as business associations, universities, think tanks, traditional authorities, civil society organisations, bi- and multilateral development partners and international financial institutions. These actors may have competing interests that serve different underlying goals.

5. Developments in EIPM activity in low- and middle-income countries

Persistent barriers to EIPM have been identified in LMICs, in line with the factors outlined in Section 4. These include inadequate data systems and other research infrastructure to support robust evidence generation; limited technical capacity to conduct, appraise and use research; insufficient funding, staff and resources; complex or opaque bureaucracies and decision-making structures; and political incentives that undermine evidence use (Dalberg Advisors 2023; Murunga et al. 2020; Nduku et al. 2025). As Siregar and colleagues emphasise, there is no 'clear boundary' between factors that impede EIPM in the Global North relative to the Global South, but 'more nuanced shades in the relative development and strength of informal

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[5] Innovative methods such as difference-in-difference, amplifier-attenuator mediation analysis and structural VAR models are being explored in the causal literature (Dufour and Wang 2024), but there has been limited work on the application of these methodological advancements to estimate causal effects on macroeconomic variables.

and formal institutions and organisational settings that affect [knowledge translation] practice and their outcomes' (Siregar et al. 2023, p.21).

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of activity supporting EIPM in LMICs. The number of organisations conducting evidence synthesis (Pan et al. 2021) and impact evaluations (Kaufman et al. 2023), which support a robust evidence infrastructure, has increased rapidly. A recent overview similarly highlights growth in initiatives promoting increased evidence use, strengthened relationships and partnerships across traditional evidence generation and use boundaries, and increasing capacity for evidence use in LMICs (Stewart 2023). Growing numbers of organisations have promoting or facilitating EIPM as their vision or mandate. The Africa Evidence Network, for example, has more than 5000 members and aims to foster collaboration among researchers, policymakers, knowledge brokers, and funders to promote evidence-informed decision-making (Africa Evidence Network 2024). Other global or regional initiatives to drive EIPM include Transforming Evidence, the Transforming Evidence Network, the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges, Evidence Hub of Latin America and the Caribbean (HubLAC), and WHO Evidence Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) (Hayter and Morales H. 2023).

There is increasing recognition of the role that evidence intermediaries[6] play in the evidence ecosystem, as entities that work between evidence producers and decision-makers to translate and mobilise knowledge (MacKillop, Quarmby, and Downe 2020; Georgalakis and Siregar 2023; Murunga et al. 2020). Some intermediaries may also fund or generate new research, alongside brokering, communication and capacity-building initiatives. They may be embedded within governments, hosted by universities, NGOs or foundations, or operate as independent organisations (Breckon and Boaz 2023).

A recent collection of lessons in using evidence in policy and practice in Africa (Goldman and Pabari 2021) highlights examples of evidence intermediaries acting as *knowledge managers* (developing, transferring, and translating knowledge), *linkage agents* (developing knowledge-based networks), and *capacity builders* (strengthening capacity to produce and use policy-relevant knowledge). Examples draw primarily on units within government, such as the Parliamentary Research Unit in Kenya, or national evaluation systems in Benin, Uganda and South Africa. Other models of institutional intermediaries include:

- Independent research policy institutes (e.g., African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP)), NGOs (e.g., Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES)), or think tanks (e.g., African Center for Equitable Development (ACED))
- Structured partnerships between researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders, such as knowledge translation platforms (e.g., WHO-sponsored Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet))
- University departments

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[6] Following Breckon and Boaz (2023), evidence intermediaries are individuals or organisations for whom evidence is central to their everyday mission, operate with a closeness to government but with a degree of independence from it, and facilitate the transfer, exchange, and translation of knowledge between researchers and policymakers.

- Research funders

The emergence and significance of policy labs has become particularly pronounced in the recent years, in what has been called the 'labification' of the policy field (Kembou and Dimovska 2024). Policy labs—also called 'delivery units,' 'evidence centres' or 'hubs,' among other terms—'reflect the current consensus that "supply"- and "demand"-side approaches for evidence should be addressed together' (Kembou and Dimovska 2024, p.78). They have as their central aim to inform public policy and enhance decision-making through the production and use of evidence, with activities ranging from defining and analysing a policy problem to creating and testing solutions (Olejniczak et al. 2020). Notable examples across LMICs include United Nations Global Pulse Asia Pacific, Egypt Impact Lab, Laboratory for Research and Innovation in Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (SUMMA), and the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) Embedded Evidence Lab Program (Hayter and Morales H. 2023; Olejniczak et al. 2020). However, the proliferation of lab models stands in stark contrast to the dearth of evaluations of their effectiveness (Richards et al. 2024). More broadly reflecting on the contribution of evidence intermediaries as a whole to EIPM, Ward and colleagues (2009, p.274) argue that 'probably the biggest challenge to knowledge brokering is the lack of knowledge about how it works, what contextual factors influence it and its effectiveness.'

Despite the spread of initiatives to increase evidence use in policy decision-making, the PACE-3ie systematic review commissioned to inform the RCC's programme of work found very limited impact evaluation evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of such initiatives (Nduku et al. 2025). Of only 18 counterfactual impact evaluations identified, seven included LMICs. These evaluations involved interventions primarily to increase policymakers' access to evidence or their capacity to interpret and apply it.

A nascent body of case studies has examined the role of evidence in policy decision-making in LMICs, starting either from the perspective of a body of evidence and tracing forward to understand its contribution (or lack thereof) to policy processes, or from a recent policy development and looking backward to understand the factors, including evidence, that informed it. The majority of these come from the health sector, for example in Burkina Faso (Ridde and Yaméogo 2018), Nigeria (Onwujekwe et al. 2015), Tanzania (Hunsmann 2012; Mori et al. 2014) and Uganda (Nabyonga-Orem, Nanyunja, et al. 2014; Nabyonga-Orem, Ssengooba, Macq, et al. 2014; Nabyonga-Orem, Ssengooba, Mijumbi, et al. 2014). Collectively, they include examples where policy decisions were effectively informed by evidence, as well as cases where evidence was not solicited or ignored in favour of other considerations. Studies of this type are valuable for understanding how policymaking occurs in practice and can be used to draw learning for future evidence-use initiatives.

6. Based on what we know, what do we need to do?

Our scan of the current evidence landscape has shown promising avenues for future research and highlighted opportunities to fill outstanding evidence gaps. Overall, there is need to **move beyond identifying barriers and facilitators** of EIPM, to an understanding of how, when and why these factors come into play (Oliver et al. 2014). This research should **actively engage policymakers in research design and implementation**. The majority of academic studies in the EIPM field are written by and for researchers, with limited involvement of policymakers

as co-authors (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014).[7] This restricts the potential of new research to meet policymakers' needs and priorities and the prospects of findings being taken up in policy processes (Bonargent 2024). Cairney and Oliver (2020, p.236) argue that a more effective approach starts by understanding how the policy process works and considering how research can feed into it:

> *Much advice rests on the assumption that academics are engaging primarily to persuade policymakers to privilege and act on their research. A better choice is to engage primarily to listen and learn, then reflect on their research practices, outputs, and most useful contribution.*

This bidirectional exchange of learning and expertise can enhance the strength and relevance of research findings and policymakers' investment in their outcomes.

There is also need to move beyond disciplinary and sectoral siloes and **embrace interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research**: 'Societal challenges are not solved by individuals within single, specialist fields, dissecting the problem and attempting to find solutions within separate domains' (Stewart et al. 2022, p.3). While there is much to learn from the preponderance of research into evidence production and use from the health sector (Oliver & Boaz 2019), patterns of evidence use are demonstrably different across policy areas (Head 2016; Saguin et al. 2024), so should be further explored. Sector expertise can benefit from additional insights from policy studies, political science and implementation science to understand the policymaking context and how to navigate it.

This implies a move away from simple, linear models of how evidence feeds into policy decision-making (Oliver 2022). Rather, a more nuanced appreciation of the complex interplay between different actors, relationships, structures, processes, incentives and interests using a **systems perspective** is essential for understanding evidence use in policymaking (Oliver 2023; Siregar et al. 2023). Mendizabal and Weyrauch (2024) identify a set of particularly 'thorny issues,' which impede effective production, communication and use of evidence for policy decision-making. These issues—for example, corruption, political patronage and vested interests, ideological polarisation, misinformation and disinformation—are characterised by their complexity, their outsized influence on policy outcomes, their distance from traditional EIPM scholarship, and the difficulty with which they can be openly discussed and resolved. The authors contend that without interrogating these wider contextual and structural issues, transformative and sustainable change cannot occur.

Georgalakis and Siregar (2023, p.55) similarly underscore the importance of a systems perspective for recognising the political and cultural influences on policymaking, which often outweigh the technical ones:

> *[E]mphasis on getting evidence into use does not always deal with broader systemic issues that relate to institutional cultures, cognitive justice and epistemic inequalities, and ultimately to social justice. Concepts of knowledge ecosystems that sometimes accompany donor-driven approaches frequently underestimate political and cultural*

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[7] Notable exceptions include the body of collaborative work between the Africa Centre for Evidence/ PACE and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in South Africa – e.g., (Stewart, Dayal, and Langer 2017; Stewart et al. 2019; 2022)

factors, as opposed to technical infrastructure and relationships, which are shaping dominant research and policy dialogues in particular contexts.

To achieve this, it important to **continue building the evidence base from LMICs**, ensuring future research harnesses local experience and expertise.

Against this backdrop, we propose a research agenda comprising two related strands:
1. Understand how policymaking works in practice, and the role of evidence within it
2. Evaluations of interventions to increase evidence use in policymaking

6.1   Understand how policymaking works in practice

Literature scoping and consultations with policymakers have stressed the critical importance of understanding the nature of the policy process: where decision-making occurs, which actors are most influential, how different evidence sources are consulted and interpreted (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014; Shaxson et al. 2021; Vogel and Punton 2018). Learning from policy studies and political science highlights the complexity of policy decision-making, by emphasising:

- The sheer number of actors both within and outside government making and influencing policy choices, and the different venues in which decisions take place
- A proliferation of rules and norms that shape decision-making in each venue, which can be formal and transparent or informal and opaque
- The pervasiveness of selective policy networks or relationships in which policy discussions occur
- A tendency for well-established ideas, core beliefs or dominant paradigms to influence receptivity to new policy solutions
- The role of outside social or economic events that can shift attention to different policy issues (Cairney and Oliver 2020).

Political economy analysis of economic development policymaking, conducted under the auspices of SEDI, reinforces this complexity. For example, the study in Ghana found that, despite having designated institutions with defined spheres of responsibility for economic development, which might on the surface drive a 'technocratic exercise involving the central coordination of inputs from across sectors and up through the layers of government administration,' in practice, 'economic development in Ghana is a far more politically driven process, shaped by actors, interests, and incentives well beyond the stated economic development goals' (Gatune et al. 2021, p.40). Stakeholder mapping of the economic development policy system described in Section 3.4 revealed the myriad relationships between actors and an understanding of where decision-making power was situated, suggesting potential entry points for EIPM programming.

Analysing the role of evidence in policy decision-making therefore requires an understanding of existing practices and processes in relation to evidence and how they came about, including the internal and external pressures and incentives that shape them (Shaxson et al. 2016). This can then provide the basis for bolstering evidence-use processes, identifying where change is needed, and ensuring changes are feasible and sustainable.
Priorities for future research include:

- Political economy analyses akin to those conducted for SEDI (Ahaibwe et al. 2021; Ahmed et al. 2021; Gatune et al. 2021) to understand the policymaking process in specific contexts and the role of evidence within it. Emphasis is on 'ground-level data on how things "work"' (Broadbent 2012), including the actors involved and the resource costs of implementing an EIPM system.
- Comparative analyses of cases where the same body of evidence led to different policy outcomes in different contexts, to understand the influence of political and systemic factors and how they are navigated. One such example is Cairney and Yamazaki's (2018) examination of approaches to tobacco control in the UK and Japan.
- Comparative analyses of policy issues within the same context, to understand variation in how the issues were framed and different types of evidence were conceptualised, based on the nature of contention of the policy issue, the interests of dominant actors, and the logics by which those actors operate (e.g., Walls et al. 2017 in Cambodia).
- In view of the challenges inherent to evidence use in economic development policymaking outlined in Section 4.3, cross-sector learning about how these challenges have been approached in other policy areas.
- Peer learning about the institutional factors shaping evidence use within government departments (e.g., akin to the Twende Mbele community, which fosters evaluation use among policymakers across countries).
- Interrogation of what evidence use means for policy outcomes and downstream implementation.

Such studies may draw on predominantly qualitative or mixed-method approaches, including interviews and focus groups, document analysis, participant observation or ethnography. Alternatively, quantitative analysis akin to Bonargent (2024), Rao (2024), or DellaVigna, Kim, and Linos (2024) could be used to explore the relationship between political, institutional and bureaucratic influences and evidence use in policy decision-making.

6.2 Understand interventions to influence evidence use

The systematic review by Nduku and colleagues (2025) underscored the dearth of evidence about the impact of initiatives designed to facilitate EIPM, particularly in LMICs and in the economic development space. Other research has highlighted the very limited actionable knowledge about how to make evidence-use initiatives work in practice (e.g., Oliver et al. 2014; Oliver 2023). There is need to advance empirical knowledge on how to improve the use of research evidence in policymaking through rigorous evaluation, according to the following principles:

- **Interventions should have a clear theory of change (ToC)**

    An intervention's theory of change maps the intended outcomes of the intervention, and the mechanisms through which these outcomes occur, in the context within which it is conducted. It should clearly articulate what the intervention is trying to achieve and present a credible model for explaining how the intervention design would be expected to translate into the desired EIPM outcomes, starting from a theory of the status quo.

    Many theories of change position 'context' as a set of underlying assumptions or a general barrier or facilitator of evidence-informed policymaking (Langer and Weyrauch 2021), but we saw above the active role contextual, systemic factors play in shaping

evidence generation, interpretation and use. Mendizabal and Weyrauch (2024), with reference to 'thorny issues' in EIPM, emphasise that 'they can no longer be relegated to assumptions or external context boxes.' Theories of change should therefore seek to understand the influence of systemic and contextual factors on the relationship between evidence and policy outcomes and how they might be mitigated.

- **Focus on interventions with highest potential for impact**

Although formal impact evidence is limited, particularly from LMICs (Nduku et al. 2025), existing research provides suggestive evidence of the types of intervention that are more likely to yield positive effects on EIPM. In contexts where the evidence ecosystem is in its infancy—as highlighted by a policymaker we consulted in Gabon—targeted interventions focused on increasing awareness of, and value for, evidence may be an important entry point. However, to achieve sustained behaviour change, multi-component interventions that address multiple mechanisms of the evidence-to-policy journey (for example, that combine better access to evidence with capacity building to interpret and apply it) may be required (Nduku et al. 2025; Vogel and Punton 2018). The intervention's ToC will be integral for understanding the proposed route to impact, appropriate to the context.

Moreover, if evidence use is to be institutionalised in policy decision-making, interventions must go beyond individual-level initiatives to address institutional capacities and cultures and strengthen relationships between evidence producers, intermediaries and users (Kembou and Dimovska 2024). The BCURE evaluation reflected that without addressing organisational structures and incentives that inhibit evidence access, appraisal and use, and achieving a 'critical mass' by 'catalys[ing] pockets of good practice' or engaging senior managers to 'stimulate support and demand' for increased evidence use, capacity building interventions were unlikely to lead to widespread shifts in practice on their own (Vogel and Punton 2018, p.72).

Consideration of the resource costs of implementing an EIPM system is also pivotal. The BCURE evaluation raised uncertainty about the future viability of capacity-building initiatives in partner countries due to lack of secure funding, reduced staff numbers, and limited duration and reach of the initial interventions such that they were not sufficiently embedded (Vogel and Punton 2018). A landscape scan of EIPM infrastructure in East and West Africa suggests that, while long-term intermediation efforts between evidence producers and evidence users have in some cases yielded positive norms and regulations to embed evidence more sustainably, these approaches are difficult to scale because they are so resource-intensive and heavily reliant on personal relationships (Dalberg Advisors 2023). Intervention designs should thus consider sustainability and scalability from the outset to achieve long-term change.

Effective interventions will require buy-in from policymakers and leveraging of research-policy networks. Valuable learning can therefore be drawn from evaluating evidence-use initiatives that are already active, particularly where existing evidence is limited. We have seen that the proliferation of policy labs and other structural approaches to evidence intermediation such as long-term research-policy learning partnerships, provides an opportunity to understand how, for whom, and under what circumstances they are most impactful. This could support investment in replicating

or scaling up successful models, while also exploring new and innovative approaches (Dalberg Advisors 2023).

- **Use an appropriate study design and research methods**

Counterfactual impact evaluation designs—randomised controlled trials or robust quasi-experiments—generate causal evidence about the effect of a given intervention. By minimising bias and maximising internal validity, these designs are the most robust way of attributing intervention impact. However, on their own, impact evaluations say nothing about *how* or *why* a particular effect was observed. They are therefore strengthened by mixed-method process evaluations that use interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations and other approaches to shed light on the implementation of the intervention in context. This can enhance understanding of the mechanisms through which the interventions led (or did not lead) to impact, and the influence of mediating and moderating factors, with a view to refining the theory of change and intervention effectiveness (Dixon and Bamberger 2022).

Counterfactual impact evaluations require the construction of a control group against which to compare outcomes of interest in the absence of the intervention. Importantly, not all interventions lend themselves to this type of design. Complex interventions delivered at the institution- or system- level are less amenable to counterfactual designs but may be most likely to achieve impact on EIPM. Indeed, Oliver (2022, p.91) has argued that a preoccupation with experimental designs 'sidestep[s] important questions about systemic problems' (emphasis removed). In these cases, small *n* approaches to causal attribution can be used to understand intervention effects and the mechanisms through which they operate (White and Phillips 2012).

- **Clearly define what 'impact' looks like.**

With the ToC articulating the goals of a given intervention, the evaluation should carefully consider how to measure impact on EIPM. A global review of methods for assessing research impacts on policy and the policy utilisation of research found that many studies did not define what they meant by 'research use' or 'policy impact' (Newson et al. 2018). Among those that did, a variety of approaches were taken to conceptualising outcomes, with some drawing 'direct and linear links' between research and policy decisions, and others favouring a focus on 'the processes (e.g. interactions, dissemination activities) and stages of research adoption amongst end-users/stakeholders resulting from these processes (e.g. changes in awareness, understanding, attitude/perceptions)' (Newson et al. 2018, p.16).

The high-level [conceptual framework](#) developed by the FCDO RCC recognises that evidence can influence policy processes in multiple, non-linear ways, not limited to instrumental changes in policy decisions. The ToC includes four domains of EIPM outcomes:

- o **Conceptual**: changes in the intellectual frameworks policymakers and other policy stakeholders use to understand policy issues
- o **Behavioural**: changes in policymakers' attitudes and behaviours around evidence use

- o **Procedural**: changes in the processes and structures that underpin policy development, debate, decision-making and implementation
- o **Content**: creation of new policies or revision of existing ones, including plans and strategies.[8]

Beyond the challenge of conceptualising EIPM outcomes is that of operationalising them. Our consultations with researchers and practitioners consistently highlighted the lack of agreed indicators and outcome measures by which to assess evidence use in policymaking. As part of the Knowledge Translation in the Global South project, Siregar and colleagues (2023, p.20) similarly note that:

> [I]t is difficult to measure [knowledge translation] outcomes, stemming from a lack of standard indicators and differences between concepts and labels. Context also matters, with indicators ideally locally-driven, flexible and focused on usefulness.

Most studies in the EIPM sphere measure impact by asking researchers or policy officials about their perceptions of evidence use through interviews or surveys (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014). Self-reported data suffers from a variety of potential biases, including social desirability, where respondents over-report evidence use because they perceive it is something they 'should' be doing. Research has demonstrated misalignment between attitudes and perceptions about evidence use and actual behaviour (Gitomer and Crouse 2019). Comparatively few studies use methods such as participant observation, document analysis or other methods to monitor how evidence is used in practice (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014). Indeed, of the 18 impact evaluations included in Nduku et al. (2025), only seven sought to observe actual evidence use by policymakers; most looked at an indirect outcome such as policymakers' beliefs or intentions.

The RCC has produced a [database](#) of 124 measures that have been used to track the use of evidence by policymakers and the factors that facilitate or hinder it. The majority of included measures come from the health sector (n=90) and comprise interview schedules (n=59) or survey instruments (n=57), but other innovative approaches to measuring evidence use in policymaking, such as qualitative coding of research language in legislative texts or EIPM observation tools, have been identified. The database signals opportunities to validate existing measures or develop new ones where existing coverage is limited. Mphande (2020) emphasises the need for measures that are 'flexible enough to accommodate different types of interventions, outcomes and changing contexts of the policymaking sphere.'

Beyond the scope of the RCC measures database, but important to consider in evaluations of evidence-use interventions, is the impact on downstream outcomes that EIPM is intended to improve. The underlying premise of initiatives to drive evidence uptake and use—that EIPM will lead to 'better' policy decisions, most likely to enhance intended health, social or economic outcomes—is in fact rarely tested (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014). Even in the health sector, where EIPM research is most prevalent, a scoping review of the uses and institutionalisation of knowledge for health policy in LMICs concluded that 'the literature connecting knowledge use to health system outcomes and health impacts remains vague' (Koon et al. 2020, p.9). None of the

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[8] Note that EIPM need not necessitate a change in policy content if evidence reinforces the status quo.

studies in Nduku and colleagues' systematic review (2025) explored impacts beyond immediate policy intentions or decisions.

7. Conclusion

There can be no 'magic bullet' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach to increasing the use of evidence in policy decision-making. Due to the inescapable influence of the political, institutional, and systemic policymaking context and the nature of decisions themselves, whereby different forms of evidence will be required at different times, 'nothing can be said to simply "work" to inform policy when policy involves more than a simple technical exercise' (Parkhurst 2017). Moreover, the formulation of 'good' policy does not guarantee its successful implementation.

Nevertheless, efforts to deepen understanding of the political economy of policymaking, develop theories of change that explore the mechanisms and contextual influences underpinning EIPM outcomes, and confronting 'thorny issues' that fall outside traditional EIPM scholarship, can generate actionable learning for researchers, practitioners and policymakers in support of sustainable economic development.

8. References

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