

CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

A research programme on evidence use in policymaking: Studies of evidence use in practice

1. Programme summary

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) [Research Commissioning Centre \(RCC\)](#) has been established to effectively commission and manage research to enhance FCDO's impact. The RCC is part of Global Research and Technology Development (GRTD), which represents the FCDO's portfolio of high-quality and impactful research and development

Led by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), the University of Birmingham, and a consortium of UK and global research partners, the RCC aims to commission different types of high-quality research in FCDO's key priority areas. All FCDO-funded research and development (R&D) investments commissioned by the RCC will be implemented using rigorous and robust research methodologies and quality standards. These R&D standards include meeting the Frascati definition requirements and FCDO's Ethical Guidance for Research Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (European Union 2014; FCDO 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2002). For this research, the RCC is working with the Economic Growth Research Team (EGRT) in the Research and Evidence Directorate (RED) of FCDO.

2. Description of research to be commissioned

Research title: Studies of evidence use in practice: learning from cases of evidence use in economic policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

This is a call for expressions of interest (EoI) to identify common conditions under which decision-making in government economic policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia is informed by research evidence (or not). It is intended to enhance understanding of how policymaking processes work and shed light on the underlying factors, including evidence, that influence changes in agenda setting, policy or spending decisions, or the implementation of programmes or policies. The research should be designed to draw actionable learning on the conditions or levers that enable the use of evidence in government decision-making and strategic entry points for enhancing evidence use.

3. Background

While the case for the use of evidence in policymaking is well established as a means to improve decision-making and, ultimately, development goals, barriers to evidence use by policymakers are well documented. These include lack of access to

timely and relevant evidence and limited capacity to understand or appraise the evidence available (Oliver et al. 2014; Damba, Mtshali, and Chimbari 2022).

Previous research on the use of evidence in policymaking, and initiatives designed to increase its use, have engaged in only a limited manner with the policymaking context (Oliver et al. 2022). The political, bureaucratic and institutional context of policymaking

exerts an important influence on the extent to which decision-makers appeal to evidence, as well as how they select and interpret it (Parkhurst 2017). A political economy approach to evidence use recognises the role of power relations between actors; individual and organisational incentives, norms, and biases around the use of evidence; and policymakers' political needs and realities (Shaxson et al. 2021).

Some recent research has used innovative approaches to explore important political and institutional determinants of evidence adoption. Bonargent (2024), using data from International Growth Centre research projects, found that co-creation with policy officials, project timing in the political term, and researcher affiliation all matter for achieving policy impact. Examining the relationship between evaluated conditional cash transfer 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, highlighting the importance of actionability for policymakers. In their analysis of 73 RCTs from 30 US cities, DellaVigna, Kim, and Linos (2024) identify such factors as organisational inertia and leadership prioritisation as key determinants of the take-up of evidence-informed policy.

4. Research need

Working with counterparts in EGRT at FCDO, the RCC has conducted an extensive period of scoping to shape the research priorities of this funding round. This involved consultations with researchers, practitioners and funders, as well as with senior economic policy officials in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, to assess the state of the field and identify key gaps for new research. In collaboration with the Pan-African Collective for Evidence (PACE), we also conducted a systematic review of what works to increase the use of evidence for policy decision-making (Nduku et al. 2025). Findings from the scoping phase are summarised in an accompanying [pathfinding paper](#), which suggests future research priorities.

A cross-cutting theme throughout the consultations was the lack of detailed attention in previous research to the political and bureaucratic influences on evidence use in government decision-making processes, grounded in a nuanced understanding of how these processes work in practice. In addition, the systematic review and wider scoping identified very few published policy case studies that focus on evidence use within an area of economic policy decision-making, as distinct from health or other sectors. The current research therefore aims to shed light on the underlying factors – be they individual, institutional or political – that influenced changes in a national economic policy agenda, decision or reform.

Building on previous research programmes including Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) and Strengthening the use of Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI), there remains much to understand about the political economy of policymaking and policymakers' use of evidence in practice (Shaxson et al. 2021; Vogel and Punton 2018).

5. Research questions and approach

Indicative research questions include:

- What are the individual, institutional, political, and systemic factors that influence national economic decision-making in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa? How does the same body of evidence lead to different policy outcomes across contexts?

- What value do decision-makers place on evidence and for what purpose? How do they define 'evidence'? What sources and types of evidence are used by whom and why?
- What is the political economy of policymaking in a given context? Who are the actors responsible for decision-making, and how much agency do they exert? Whose voices are more or less influential? What individual and institutional incentives do decision-makers face around evidence use?
- What are the formal and informal processes and networks through which policy decision-making occurs? Who has access to these?
- How does the nature of contention of a policy issue, the interests of dominant actors, and the logics by which those actors operate, lead to variation in the way issues are framed and different types of evidence are mobilised? Does this differ across policy areas/types?
- What windows of opportunity exist for leveraging evidence in policy processes, for example, in relation to electoral cycles, proximity to a decision-making moment, or policymaker tenure?
- How does uncertainty affect decision-makers' relationship with evidence?

Approach and methods

We anticipate that studies will be retrospectively conducted and designed to enhance understanding of how policy processes operate in practice and the role of evidence within them.

We invite studies with either of two entry points (see also Newson et al. 2018):

(i) Robust economic research evidence produced

Starting from the perspective of evidence generation, these studies would explore the extent to which a specific body of research evidence played a central role in a policy process in the direction suggested by the evidence. Alternatively, studies could learn from examples where there was no, insufficient or contradictory change in policy position or agenda despite the existence of robust evidence.

(ii) Economic policy changes, reforms or processes of the type that economic policy research is intended to inform

Starting from the identification of a major economic policy change, reform or process, the research would trace the contributing factors to the policy process and the extent to which research evidence played a role— and if yes, what and how. This could include both direct and indirect influence, for example, where research is directly cited as a rationale for policy decisions or where it shapes the policy discourse between government decision-makers and key partners (e.g., International Financial Institutions or development agencies).

In both cases, studies should be situated within the dynamic system in which government decision-making happens to identify the key underlying factors that influenced policy processes. In understanding the role of evidence, studies should also examine the nature of evidence use, recognising that evidence can serve a number of purposes for decision-makers (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007):

- **Instrumental use:** Research findings are directly applied to solve a specific problem.

- **Conceptual use:** Research influences thinking about issues without immediate, direct action.
- **Strategic use:** Research is used to justify pre-existing positions or decisions.
- **Process use:** The act of engaging in research itself leads to changes in thinking or behaviour.¹

We are interested in understanding the levers used in successful examples of research evidence translating into courses of action in line with the evidence, but also insights around misuse, selective use or lack of evidence use and the factors that contribute to it.

Key design considerations

What is the geographic focus?

Studies should be conducted in low and lower-middle income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. They can adopt a single country focus or a comparative approach across multiple contexts.

What is the sectoral focus?

Studies should focus on economic policy or reform areas that are of national importance for economic growth. Examples include, but are not limited to, energy systems, high-volume transport, industrial policy, labour markets, and trade policy.

What do we mean by evidence?

We distinguish evidence from other types of information in that evidence (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](#)).

To reflect FCDO and RCC's role in commissioning research, this call primarily focuses on the role of evidence generated from research, by which we mean 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. However, it is important to understand the contribution of research evidence in the context of other influences on policy decision-making, including other types of information on which policymakers may draw. This could extend to government statistical, survey and administrative data; perspectives of citizens and other interest holders; or tacit knowledge from experts. We welcome studies that explore how policymakers conceive of evidence and whether there is shared understanding of what it comprises.

What policy processes are we interested in?

The primary emphasis is on policymaking by national governments, including elected officials, senior civil service staff and those working for them in key ministries and supporting agencies. It may include policymaking at the sub-national government level where this has national implications for economic growth. Studies may also explore the role of external evidence intermediary organisations in supporting national decision-making. We conceive of

¹ See also Rickinson and colleagues (2017), who develop a typology of evidence use including constructing a policy narrative, testing the policy narrative, and communicating the policy narrative.

policy in a broad sense, encompassing government strategy, public sector investment decisions, programme implementation, legislation, economic reform, regulation, or similar.

While recognising that government policymaking processes are complex, iterative and non-linear, it can nevertheless be helpful to consider different stages or entry points during which evidence can play a role, for example:

1. **Agenda setting:** Identifying issues that require policy attention
 - **Policy formulation:** Developing potential solutions to address identified issues
 - **Decision-making:** Choosing a course of action from available options
 - **Implementation:** Putting the chosen policy into practice
2. **Evaluation:** Assessing the outcomes and impacts of the implemented policy (See, for example, Jann and Wagrich 2017).

Studies can explore the contribution of evidence (or lack thereof) in a single aspect of a policy process or across multiple domains as appropriate, provided they focus on meaningful policy outcomes for national economic growth.

What study designs or research methods should be used?

Study designs and research methods should be appropriate to the proposed research question(s). These may include individual or comparative case studies adopting a predominantly qualitative approach, or quantitative analyses to explore the relationship between political and bureaucratic influences and evidence use in government decision-making. Eols should provide a high-level research design including the data sources and analysis approach to be used. This can be developed further by successful teams at proposal stage. Note that we expect studies to be retrospectively conducted, so should rely on existing policy developments and bodies of evidence.

6. Deliverables and timeline

Studies should be designed to generate actionable recommendations that support researchers, intermediaries and policymakers in the high-quality use of evidence for policy decision-making.

The following outputs are expected for each research project:

- **Inception report and slide presentation** to RCC/FCDO, outlining the study's approach and work plan.
- **Final report**, including executive summary. Submission of at least one peer-reviewed journal article is strongly encouraged.
- **Workshop presentation** to share learning with RCC/FCDO.

Studies should take a retrospective design and be completed within one year of signing the funding agreement. Indicative milestones and target dates are suggested below for applicants' information. Teams invited to submit full proposals will be asked to provide a populated work plan with timelines and deliverables.

Phase	Milestone	Target date or timeline
Inception	Kick-off meeting	Within two weeks of agreement signing
	Study plan/inception report	Within one month of the kick-off meeting
Implementation	<i>Determined by study design</i>	
	Satisfactory delivery of quarterly progress reports	Within three, six, and nine months of the kick-off meeting
Reporting	Satisfactory submission of project report	Within three months of the end of data collection and one year of the agreement signing
Dissemination and learning sharing	<i>To be specified in the proposal.</i>	

We expect to hold one or more events for commissioned teams to share learning with FCDO and each other. More information will be provided to successful teams at the proposal stage.

7. Preferred expertise and skills of the team

We welcome bids from any organisation(s) able to deliver against the FCDO's scope of work and encourage applications from groups of individuals or partners bringing their skills together to meet the research needs.

The team conducting the evaluation should demonstrate the following experience and expertise:

- Partners or specialists who will operate flexibly to achieve maximum impact and learning.
- Deep understanding of the policymaking context in which the study takes place. We strongly encourage the leadership of in-country research partners where studies are undertaken.
- Methodological expertise appropriate to the study design, with a proven track record of conducting comparable research.
- Excellent written and spoken communication, with demonstrated ability to convey and disseminate findings to government policy officials.
- Working proficiency in English. Where research is conducted in non-English speaking contexts, the capacity to conduct research in relevant languages other than English should be demonstrated.
- Organisational capacity to implement and manage the project effectively.

8. Estimated budget

The project budget is intended to cover the researchers' time as well as any necessary support required to complete the work as planned. This includes, but is not limited to, data collection and analysis costs, travel, and dissemination costs. The total budget for this assignment should not exceed **£200,000**, including VAT and other charges.

Budgets are not required at the EoI stage, but teams invited to prepare full proposals will be asked to submit a fully costed budget that demonstrates value for money. We expect

research teams to propose a reasonable budget that reflects a comprehensive understanding of the assignment and an efficient utilisation of resources in delivering the scope of work.

9. Eligibility

Only legally registered organisations and/or their consortia of registered organisations, not individuals, may apply. There are no restrictions on the number of proposals an organisation can lead or be named on across the research programme,² provided they demonstrate the necessary expertise and capacity to carry out the project(s) successfully.

The RCC strongly encourages the leadership of in-country research organisations where primary research is undertaken.

10. Criteria for selection

The commissioning process involves two stages. In this first phase, teams should submit an EoI that follows the word limits specified in the application form. Accompanying CVs should not exceed three pages.

EoIs will be screened for completeness and eligibility and scored on the following criteria:

#	Criterion	Description	Score weighting
1	Understanding of the Expression of Interest	The extent to which the application reflects the call for EoIs and meets the objectives of the project and the needs of the intended audience.	25%
2	Methodological approach	The extent to which the methodological approach, at a high level, is appropriate for meeting the objectives of the project.	25%
3	Proposed team	The extent to which the proposed core team demonstrates the required contextual, methodological and project management expertise to carry out the project.	25%
4	Equity and inclusion	The extent to which the project involves a diverse research team with an equitable distribution of roles and responsibilities and substantively engages researchers and other key stakeholders from the country(ies) or region(s) in which it takes place.	25%

Please note that, in addition to the strength of individual submissions, some decisions may be made on a strategic basis across the programme, for example, based on geography or policy area, to maximise learning from the round. Please also note that, given the current

² Research teams are welcome to apply for the complementary workstream on 'Interventions to influence the use of evidence' should they be well-positioned to do so.

funding climate, the final budget envelope is subject to FCDO review, but we expect to commission 5-10 projects in this workstream.

Successful teams at the EoI stage will be invited to submit a full research proposal and budget, for which templates will be provided.

11. Deadline for submission of Expressions of Interest: 30 May 2025 (17:00 GMT)

12. Competition process and indicative timeline

Stage	Target date
Call for EoIs launched	10 April 2025
Deadline for queries	25 April 2025
Q&A webinar	1 May 2025
FAQs posted	8 May 2025
EoI submission deadline	30 May 2025 [17:00 GMT]
Invitations to full proposal issued	Week of 30 June or 7 July 2025
Deadline for queries	23 July 2025
FAQs posted	30 July 2025
Proposal submission deadline	26 August 2025 [17:00 GMT]
Outcome decided and bidders notified	29 September 2025
Due diligence completed	13 October 2025
Signing of accountable grant	(dependent on due diligence)

13. Q&A and contact

This project is managed by the FCDO Research Commissioning Centre. If you have any questions related to this opportunity, please submit them by 25 April 2025 to the rcc@3ieimpact.org mailbox, including “RCC evidence use in practice - Request for clarification” in the subject line.

We will also be holding a Q&A webinar on 1 May 2025 to provide an opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification. In the interest of fairness and transparency, all questions and answers will be published on the [call page](#) on the GRTD website.

References

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