

How can capacity development promote evidence-informed policy making?

BCURE Evaluation Briefing No. 1, April 2016

'The effective use of research and evidence can play a crucial role in making policy more successful.'

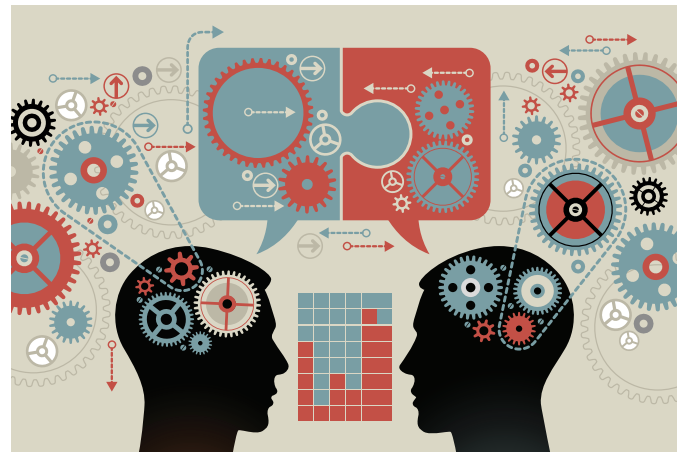
This is the starting assumption behind the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence Programme ([BCURE](#)), a £13 million initiative by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) that runs from 2013-2017. The BCURE programme aims to increase the capacity of policy makers to use research more effectively, through building the skills, incentives and systems required to access, appraise and apply evidence in decision making. [Itad](#) is leading a three year impact evaluation of BCURE (2014-2017), examining how and why different approaches to capacity building for evidence-informed policy making work, for whom, and in which contexts. The evaluation aims to strengthen the evidence base on how capacity building can promote evidence-informed policy, to inform decisions within and beyond DFID about whether to fund and how to design this type of programme in future.

This briefing note presents three of the main lessons emerging from a [literature review](#) produced by the evaluation team, which asks 'how can capacity development promote evidence-informed policy making?' First, interventions that aim to increase capacity for evidence use can catalyse change in a variety of ways, and the literature provides some practical insights into some of the factors that might help or hinder various types of interventions in different contexts. Second, we need to think beyond a capacity 'gap' that can be 'filled' through training and other skills-building interventions. Finally, uncovering the assumptions behind the idea of 'evidence-informed policy-making' is crucial to understanding the links between capacity building, evidence use, and better policies.

Insights from the evidence: what works to build capacity for evidence-informed policy making, for whom, and why?

The literature review examines how and why different approaches to capacity building for evidence-informed policy making work, for whom, and in which contexts – aiming to provide a practical resource summarising existing knowledge about evidence use in decision making and how to promote it.

The review also plays a crucial role in our realist evaluation design, through identifying theories from the literature about 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why' to build capacity for evidence-informed policy making. These theories are now being refined and tested through primary data collection, with the aim of providing robust evidence on how and why various interventions, designed and combined in different ways, result in change.



The literature on evidence-informed policy making is large, growing and disparate, spanning a wide range of disciplines. Three of the main lessons emerging from this literature are as follows:

Lesson 1: Interventions that aim to increase capacity for evidence use can catalyse change in a variety of ways

There is little primary empirical evidence on how capacity development can improve evidence-informed policy making. The studies that do exist mainly relate to training courses that are narrowly focused on improving individual skills and capacity, mainly within the health field. However, despite these limitations some useful insights can be distilled, on how and why interventions lead to particular outcomes in different contexts. These provide some practical insights that may help practitioners think through how their capacity building intervention might lead to change, and some of the factors that might help or hinder it. Some of these are summarised in Box 1 (overleaf).

Box 1. What is the evidence on how to build capacity for evidence-informed policy?

- A number of capacity development interventions (including training, knowledge brokers and organisational tools to promote evidence use) may work through promoting self-efficacy: improving participants' beliefs and confidence in their capability to perform a certain task or handle a particular situation. However, the concept of self-efficacy is just one way of understanding how learning happens, suggesting the potential merit of bringing learning theory more explicitly into capacity development interventions. Combining classroom training with on-site projects, and actively engaging participants' organisations, were frequently linked to training success; especially as supportive organisations seemed to be an important contextual factor influencing the effectiveness of training.
- Different types of 'change agents' can support evidence use within organisations or institutions. Knowledge brokers may influence change through acting as 'cheerleaders' – stimulating and maintaining enthusiasm and momentum for evidence-informed policy making. Informal evidence 'champions' can stimulate change through providing 'transformational leadership' – influencing, persuading and building support for evidence use within an organisations, including through securing resources. Champions' seniority and vision, commitment, and dedication seem to be important here, along with their stability and continuity within an organisation.
- Organisational tools (such as checklists, guidance notes and templates) and systems (policies, plans and procedures) may increase evidence use through facilitating behaviour change – making a person's job easier – or reinforcing it, through for example rewards, audit or feedback. Tools may also lead to evidence-informed policy making by increasing the value staff place on evidence, through convincing them of the benefits that data can bring to decision making. A virtuous circle may emerge, in which increased use of evidence leads people to appreciate the value it brings, which in turn leads to greater demand for evidence.

Lesson 2: We need to think beyond a capacity 'gap' that can be 'filled' through training and other skills-building interventions

The BCURE programme is built around the assumption that policy makers do not use evidence in part because they lack the capacity to do so. The literature review examined this assumption, looking at the factors that promote and constrain evidence use in policy making.

A lot has been written on the barriers to and facilitators of evidence-informed policy making, and this evidence is synthesised in a number of secondary reviews. However, the

literature has been criticised for focusing on single elements of the policy-making process, failing to engage with political theories or concepts, and relying on the perceptions of research producers and users – rather than examining how evidence is actually used within policy processes as a whole. The literature review therefore attempted to contribute to this already well-trodden ground through summarising some of the primary evidence on psychological, political, cultural and institutional factors affecting the use of evidence. Overall, this evidence suggests the importance of thinking beyond a 'capacity gap' that can be 'filled' through training and other skills-building interventions. Some of the main insights are summarised in Box 2.

Box 2. What factors promote and constrain evidence-informed policy making?

- Individual beliefs, attitudes and motivations to use evidence are connected to pre-existing beliefs, and to the norms and values that prevail within organisations or societies. For example, evidence may be ignored or sidelined if it counters past experience – particularly if an issue is hotly debated. Deeply held values and beliefs may prevent evidence from being considered in a rational, deliberative way. Beliefs about what counts as 'good' evidence can also mean that useful knowledge that does not fit these ideals is ignored or discounted.
- The status of evidence itself also appears important: where evidence is valued, this can encourage its use as a weapon to confer legitimacy on a decision; where evidence is less valued this can lead to deliberate attacks of the very concept of 'evidence-informed policy making' for political gain.
- 'Lack of time' is one of the main obstacles to evidence use mentioned in the literature. This is not just about individuals being too busy or failing to prioritise evidence. Rather, lack of time partly reflects an organisation's 'culture' of evidence use, for example whether individuals are given permission and space to spend time finding and reading research papers.
- External actors and features of the wider institutional environment can play an important role in both enabling and constraining evidence use. However, there do not appear to be any simple correlations between the presence of certain actors (e.g. international donors) or factors (e.g. democracy) and increased evidence use. For example, donor commitments to evidence-informed policy making may result in policies that are more 'evidence-based' being adopted; but this may also result in neglect of local context and needs; or donors might impose funding pressures that create an incentive to ignore certain types of evidence. Civil society may play a number of different roles in relation to evidence-use in policy processes including putting pressure on

government to use evidence, building momentum behind ideas, and bringing together different forms of knowledge.

Lesson 3: Uncovering the assumptions behind the idea of ‘evidence-informed policy making’ is crucial to understanding the links between capacity building, evidence use, and better policies

There are a huge number of assumptions underpinning the concept of ‘evidence-informed policy making’. When starting the literature review, we immediately needed to ask: what is ‘evidence’? What is ‘policy’? What role does evidence play in policy processes, and how can it make policy ‘better quality’? What does ‘capacity’ to use evidence look like, and how can this be ‘developed’?

Similar questions underpin all programmes attempting to promote evidence-informed policy making – whether explicitly acknowledged or not. This field is sometimes criticised for failing to make use of the rich theoretical literature on political process, and for failing to make assumptions explicit. The literature review therefore provides a brief overview and introduction to some of the theoretical literature from diverse disciplines that provide insights into these questions – including theories from political science on how policy making happens, theories from psychology on cognitive processes and biases, and theories from adult learning literature about how people acquire knowledge. We hope that this will provide an entry point to help others working in the field think through the questions above, and the assumptions underpinning their own programmes and practices. Some of the insights from the theoretical literature are summarised in Box 3.

Box 3. What is ‘building capacity for evidence-informed policy making’?

What is ‘research evidence’, and what makes it ‘good quality’?

- Research evidence is just one type of evidence required and used by policy makers – and cannot easily be isolated from other forms of knowledge (including process and practice knowledge, knowledge about public opinion, and ‘common sense’) in policy debates.
- When thinking about evidence ‘quality’, the appropriateness of evidence may be more important than its position on a generic evidence quality hierarchy.
- Research evidence is never ‘neutral’ – it always reflects to some extent the pre-existing views and values of researchers and commissioners, and findings rarely point to obvious solutions. Therefore

contestation over what research means is inevitable.

What is ‘policy’, and how can evidence benefit policy making?

- Rational and linear models of policy processes such as the ‘policy cycle’ have been widely criticised for ignoring the messy realities of policy making. More recent models emphasise the non-linear nature of policy change, the importance of interactions between various networks of actors, and the role of power and politics in shaping how evidence is used (and even how it is understood).
- Theories from psychology also offer important insights, stressing the cognitive limits of human rationality, and the importance of mental models in shaping how we interpret evidence in light of our existing beliefs and biases.

What is ‘capacity to access, appraise and apply evidence’, and how do we ‘build’ it?

- ‘Building capacity’ is about more than just imparting new knowledge and skills. Recent theories suggest it is multi-dimensional, requiring interventions at different ‘levels’ (e.g. individual, interpersonal, organisational and institutional). Recent insights from complexity theory suggest the importance of considering whole systems and expecting non-linear change and feedback loops within capacity development interventions.
- Theories of adult learning provide insights into how individuals acquire knowledge, which is important given the strong emphasis on training within the BCURE programme. For example, theories of andragogy and self-directed learning suggest several ‘key principles’ that may help inform training courses, and different schools of learning provide a diverse set of models for understanding the mechanisms that link training to individual behaviour change.



BCURE African Cabinet Network, John Mitala, Uganda Secretary to Cabinet, makes a point. Photo credit: BCURE Global Wordpress (bcureglobal.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/4-john-mitala-uganda-cabsec-makes-a-point.jpg)

The full literature review is now available online from itad.com/knowledge-and-resources/bcure, together with the literature database created to screen and select literature for inclusion in the report. We hope this will help others attempting to navigate the diverse literature in this field.

We recognise the literature review is not exhaustive, and there are plans to update it in 2017. We are particularly interested in primary empirical evidence we missed this time, and strongly encourage readers to forward us any relevant papers for inclusion.

Future evaluation briefings

This BCURE Evaluation Briefing is the first in a series published during the life of the BCURE programme. It aims to share lessons on building government capacities for evidence use, for the benefit of funders, designers and implementers of initiatives to promote evidence-informed policy making. Future briefings will share further lessons learned from the evaluation, including insights into what works to build capacity among decision makers for evidence use, for whom, in what circumstances, and why.

More on BCURE

The BCURE evaluation is a three-year impact evaluation of BCURE, examining how and why different approaches to capacity building for evidence-informed policymaking work, for whom, and in which contexts. It is an independent evaluation led by Itad, in partnership with the University of Stellenbosch, and is funded by the UK Department for International Development.

BCURE consists of six linked projects spanning 11 countries in Africa and Asia, working within government settings (and beyond) to develop skills and organisational systems for evidence-informed policy making (EIPM). The interventions range from training and mentoring, to supporting evidence champions and building networks, to facilitating decision-making processes and establishing systems within ministries and cabinets to improve evidence use.

The six projects are as follows:

- [Africa Cabinet Decision-Making Programme](#) in South Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, led by Adam Smith International
- Building Capacity for the Use of Research Evidence in Bangladesh, led by [ECORYS](#)
- [Data and Evidence for Smart Policy Design](#) in India and Pakistan, led by Harvard University
- [SECURE-Health](#) in Kenya and Malawi, led by the African Institute for Development Policy
- [UJ-BCURE](#) in South Africa and Malawi, led by the University of Johannesburg
- [VakaYiko](#) in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana, led by the VakaYiko Consortium



Find out more about Itad's evaluation of BCURE at itad.com/projects/evaluation-of-approaches-to-build-capacity-for-use-of-research-evidence-bcure/

We want the resources invested in international development to deliver the best possible results for the poor. Through our innovative consultancy services in monitoring and evaluation we provide the insight and ideas to ensure that they do.

The opinions expressed here are based on the findings of the BCURE evaluation and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the UK Department for International Development.

Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material from this summary in their own publication. In return, BCURE requests due acknowledgement and quotes to be referenced to the authors. [Mel Puntton, Rob Lloyd, and Isabel Vogel]

Find out more about Itad's evaluation of BCURE www.itad.com/knowledge-and-resources/bcure

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