

Why don't decision makers use evidence, and what can be done about it?

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Can we promote evidence use through developing government capacity?

The Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). It aims to build knowledge, skills, commitment, relationships and organisational systems to support government officials and parliamentarians in developing countries to use evidence more effectively when developing policy.

So how exactly can capacity building promote evidence-informed decision making, and help counterbalance decisions made for political and ideological reasons? This is not yet fully understood, especially in developing countries. We also don't yet fully understand the related challenges of how to create stronger links between research users and research producers, and how to engage citizens and civil society in pushing for more evidence-informed policy.

The realist evaluation of BCURE is seeking to plug these gaps by looking at how and why capacity building approaches support evidence-informed policy making, through case studies of BCURE projects in Sierra Leone, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Pakistan and South Africa.

Rethinking 'capacity building'

The Stage 1 synthesis report explores the first findings from the BCURE evaluation about how and why capacity building for evidence use works and does not work, for whom, to what extent, in what respects, and in what circumstances.

This briefing note summarises the synthesis and reflects on some of the broader lessons emerging from the evaluation up to this stage. The paper outlines six insights for those designing and implementing capacity building strategies.

At the heart of our BCURE programme theory is the idea that capacity development is about more than 'skills.' Instead, we draw on recent literature, discussed in a

[literature review](#) conducted by the evaluation team, that conceptualises capacity as emerging from different factors, processes and changes working together and reinforcing each other at different levels. At individual level, capacity change involves individuals' knowledge, skills, attitudes and commitment to use evidence. At interpersonal level, capacity change is about the relationships and networks between people and groups that affect evidence interpretation and use. At organisational level, capacity change is about the systems, processes and guidelines within or across government departments that affect evidence use. Finally, institutional change is about the wider enabling environment for evidence use *outside* of government, including the role of external actors such as civil society and donors, and the influence of external factors such as crises and global events. The two-sentence version of the BCURE theory of change is presented below.

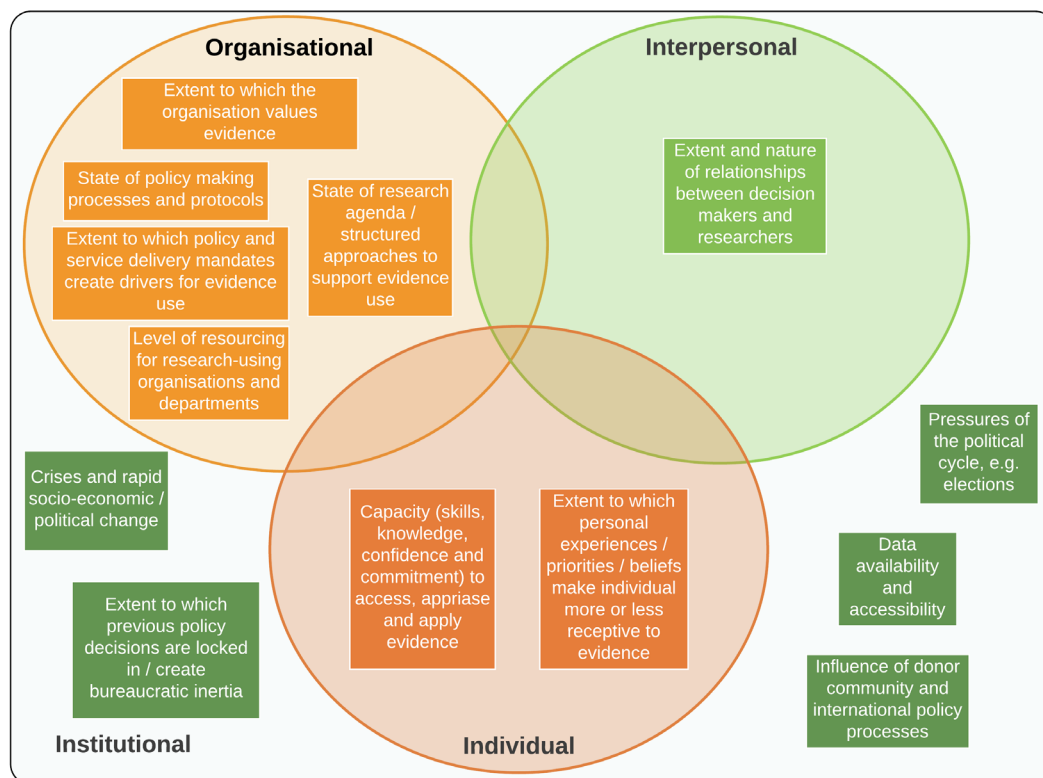
The BCURE theory of change

Developing the capacity of decision makers to use research evidence (by building knowledge, skills, commitment, relationships and systems at four levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational and institutional) will allow them to access, appraise and apply good quality evidence more effectively when forming policy. This will improve the quality of policies, ultimately benefitting more poor people.

Insight 1: Why decision makers don't use evidence – barriers to and enablers of evidence use

The synthesis explores the deep-seated dynamics of evidence use in order to explain why decision makers in the BCURE countries may not access or use evidence. Understanding these dynamics is necessary because these factors have strong potential to block longer-term change as a result of capacity building.

Figure 1. Overview of enablers and barriers that affect evidence use at institutional, organisational, interpersonal and individual levels



The evaluation found evidence of a range of factors that can either create opportunities for evidence use or act as barriers, depending on the circumstances. These are summarised in Figure 1. Two critical factors emerged from the analysis of barriers and enablers, which may block the use of evidence even if individuals’ technical skills are enhanced:

The extent to which the organisation values evidence: If it is not valued, spending time accessing and appraising evidence is seen as ‘non-work’ and not prioritised. Without organisational support, individual ability and commitment to use evidence cannot counteract pressures (for example time or political pressure) to ignore or sideline evidence, or bridge structural gaps such as research availability.

Missing foundations and underlying structural issues such as a lack of planning systems: Absence of planning systems or policy development guidelines, alongside the under-resourcing of key organisations and departments who might promote evidence use, act as barriers even if individual capacity is built. The issue of missing foundations seems particularly acute in fragile contexts.

Insight 2: Capacity development requires multi-level strategies

Unsurprisingly given the many reasons why decision makers don’t use evidence, the synthesis finds that effective capacity development for evidence use needs to go beyond building technical skills at an individual level.

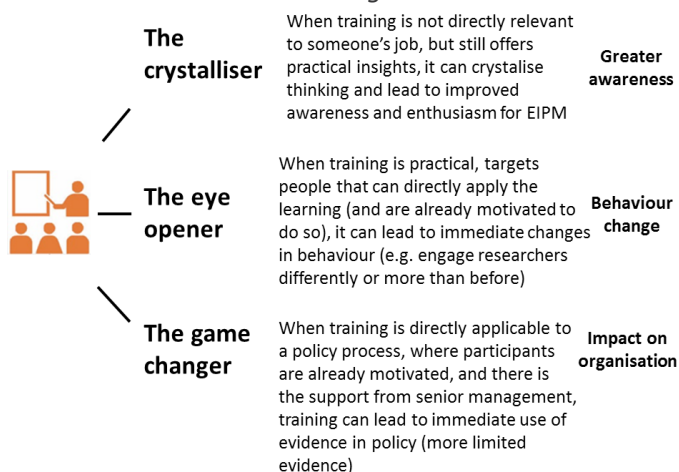
Emerging evidence at Stage 1 suggests that outcomes at one level can create conditions for change at another level. For example, if training captures the imagination of an enthusiastic and well connected civil servant and convinces them of the importance of evidence (individual change), they might become a ‘champion’ in their department, providing peer support to help others use evidence (interpersonal change), and helping BCURE partners to establish new systems within the ministry (organisational change).

Insight 3: How training can make a difference

At the individual level, the evidence suggests BCURE training may lead to ‘aha moments’ in which individuals recognise the relevance of evidence to their work. Different kinds of ‘aha moments’ led to different sorts of outcomes. For example, exposure to new knowledge about the value that evidence can bring, and opportunities to practically apply it, sometimes resulted in a ‘game changer’. This meant that learning was seen as immediately applicable to an ongoing policy process and evidence was used by programme participants to inform, even to ‘unblock’, a process.

There is some evidence to suggest that this will only happen in contexts where there are external drivers to improve use of evidence, and supportive managers who provide opportunities to do so, as well as where participants already have some motivation to apply evidence in decision making.

Figure 2. Our working theories about how training can contribute to behaviour change



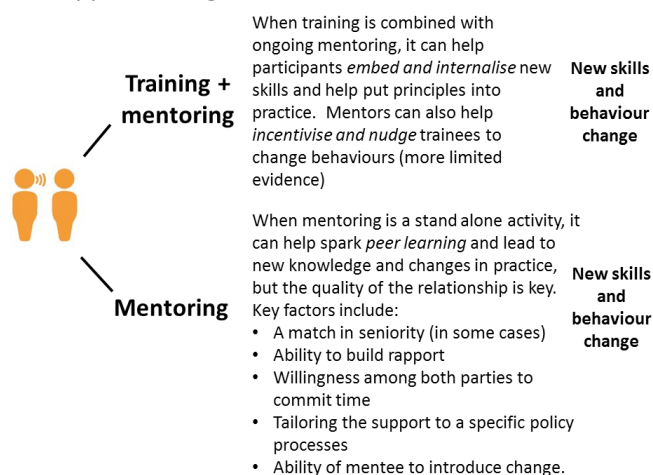
Insight 4: How mentoring can support change

The synthesis suggests (although the evidence is limited at Stage 1) that when training is combined with ongoing mentoring, it can help participants embed and internalise new skills and help put principles into practice. Mentors can also help incentivise and nudge trainees to change behaviours.

When mentoring is a stand-alone activity it can help spark peer learning and lead to new knowledge and changes in practice, but the quality of the relationship is key. Important factors include:

- A match in seniority between mentor and mentee (although in some cases it is sufficient for the mentee to feel the mentor has relevant expertise)
- Ability of the mentor to build rapport
- Willingness among both parties to commit time
- Tailoring the support to a specific policy process
- Ability of mentee to introduce change

Figure 3: Our working theories about how mentoring can support change



Insight 5: Change can occur through collaborative learning

Many BCURE programmes provide opportunities for collaborative learning that seem to catalyse changes in relationships and networks. There is only limited data,

but the Stage 1 findings suggest two distinct patterns:

Promoting awareness of evidence through networking and collaborative learning: Networking opportunities facilitate people to learn from and be influenced by others, which can result in stronger relationships and spark further collaboration that has an effect at the organisational level. For example, evidence from some BCURE programmes shows that when researchers and decision makers were brought together in an informal setting and encouraged to pool their skills to tackle a topical policy problem, this led to improved awareness of the importance of evidence use as well as strengthened relationships.

Learning-by-doing: In other examples, when government staff were provided with close technical support on a live policy issue, in a context where there was government ownership of the process, this enabled 'learning by doing' and helped build skills as well as improving the use of evidence within the process.

Insight 6: Leadership plays an important role in supporting organisational change

'Champions' are defined as people embedded within an organisation or institutional context who, formally or informally, promote evidence use. Although only one BCURE programme is working formally to support champions for organisational change, there is evidence to suggest that they are important in all the BCURE country contexts. Champions can promote change from both above and below. Two distinct patterns of 'championing' have emerged from the synthesis:

Transformational leaders: When senior staff with connections and credibility are identified and supported informally, they exercise influence and stimulate reforms which can lead to high level commitment to evidence in government and new systems being put in place. For example, in Sierra Leone a senior champion helped establish formal procedures to promote better evidence use in policy making, and in Kenya a champion helped establish a new parliamentary forum. There is some evidence to suggest that champions are not 'created' by a programme, but rather identified and provided with the knowledge and resources they need to promote evidence use. There are some potential risks associated with this – if the evidence agenda is associated too strongly with a single individual it may be more vulnerable to political and personal changes in circumstances.

Junior champions: More junior staff may not have decision making power, but capacity support may galvanise them to promote evidence use among peers and through their day to day work (for example through seminars or policy proposals). This appears more likely to happen among junior staff with an existing commitment to using evidence in decision making, and who have good interpersonal skills. Over time, these junior staff may be promoted and become transformational leaders.

Demonstrating success at all levels

Demonstrations of success that showcase the positive benefits of evidence can be catalytic within an organisational setting. Our Stage 1 findings suggest that supporting staff to use evidence in ways that attract the attention of their colleagues and managers, building organisational ownership by involving high-level stakeholders, developing policy pilots that model effective evidence use, and ensuring that evidence support tools are relevant and improve people's work, may all help catalyse further change to embed evidence use.

Conclusion

As the evaluation still has two stages to go, confident operational recommendations cannot yet be made. However, the Stage 1 synthesis identifies two clear recommendations for designers and implementers of strategies to build capacity for evidence-informed policy making:

1. *Develop an understanding of evidence use in decision making as a dynamic system* – ensuring that contextual factors, such as power, politics and institutional history, and the barriers and enablers they create, have been fully identified. This analysis could identify that efforts are needed to tackle underlying structural issues, such as lack of policy planning systems, which constrain evidence use.
2. *Design multi-level strategies to influence change at individual, interpersonal, organisational, and institutional levels* – ensuring that they build on each other and respond to the context. For example, at the individual level, consider including training on 'soft skills' alongside technical evidence appraisal skills to support individuals to feel confident to advocate for, debate and defend evidence with senior managers. At an organisational level, consider opportunities to engage senior leaders by demonstrating the ways that evidence can enhance the work of government. And keep an eye out for well-connected, passionate people who can be supported to champion evidence use within their organisation.

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About BCURE

The BCURE programme aims to increase the capacity of decision 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, through case studies in Sierra Leone, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh. 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 is based on the BCURE Evaluation Stage 1 Synthesis Report written by Isabel Vogel and Melanie Punton, with Rob Lloyd. (itad.com/reports/building-capacity-use-research-evidence-bcure-evaluation-stage-1-synthesis-report)

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

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

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