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Topic: Building and maintaining relationships

THE ROLE OF STATISTICS IN EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING[1]

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I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   The international community agrees that statistics are/should be instrumental in informing policy making processes. The aim is to improve relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of policy reforms. Given this international community aim, why then is statistics not playing its role to its full potential? What are the factors, in addition to the evidence, influencing the policy making process and outcome? How can the uptake of evidence in policy making be increased? What are the mechanisms for engaging with stakeholders? Which communication strategies have worked well to get planners to use the data they receive? How are planners using the information that is being disseminated? This paper is a preliminary attempt to give some answers to the above questions.

II.   EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING

2.   Evidence-based policy has been defined as an approach which "helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation" (Davies, 1999a). This definition matches that of the UN in the MDG guide. Here it is stated that "Evidence-based policy-making refers to a policy process that helps planners make better-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the centre of the policy process".

3.   This approach stands in contrast to opinion-based policy, which relies heavily on either the selective use of evidence (e.g. on single survey irrespective of quality) or on the untested views of individuals or groups, often inspired by ideological standpoints, prejudices, or speculative conjecture.

4.   Many governments and organizations are moving from "opinion-based policy" towards "evidence-based policy", and are in the stage of "evidence-influenced policy". This is mainly due to the fact that the policy-making process is inherently political and, that the processes through which evidence translates into policy options often fails to meet required quality standards.

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[1] This article is an abstract of the publication « Bridging the gap. The role of Monitoring & Evaluation in Evidence-based policy making", available free of charge at
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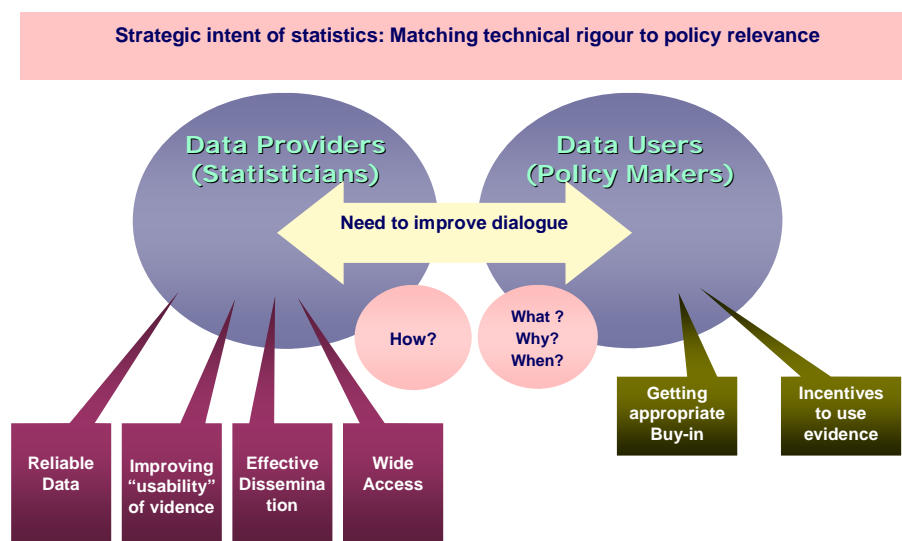
Figure 1. Dynamic of policy-making
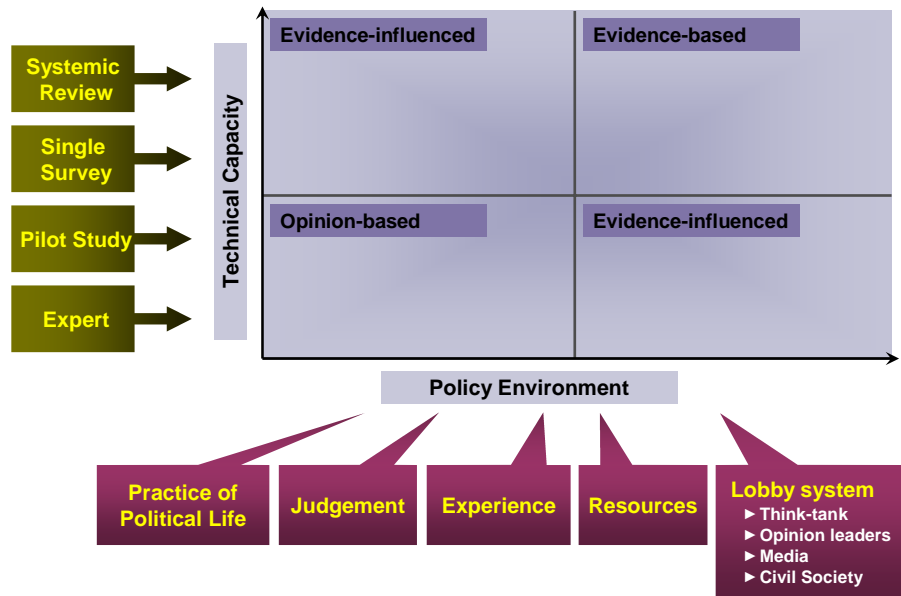
5.	Public policies are developed and delivered through the use of power. In many countries, this power is ultimately the coercive power of the state in the hands of democratically accountable politicians. For politicians, with their advisers and their agents, securing and retaining power is a necessary condition for the achievement of their policy objectives. There sometimes seems then to be a tension between power and knowledge in the shaping of policy. A similar tension appears to exist between authority and expertise in the world of practice. Emphasising the role of power and authority at the expense of knowledge and expertise in public affairs seems cynical; emphasising the latter at the expense of the former seems naïve.

6.	Power and authority, versus knowledge and evidence, maybe more complementary than conflicting. This interdependence of power and knowledge is perhaps more apparent if public policy and practice is conceived as a continuous discourse. As politicians know too well, but social scientists too often forget, public policy is made of language. Whether in written or oral form, argumentation is central in all stages of the policy process. In this context, evidence is an important toll for those engaged in the discourse, and must be both broad enough to develop a wide range of policy options, and detailed enough for those options to stand up to intense scrutiny.

III. EVIDENCE INTO PRACTICE. MATCHING TECHNICAL RIGOUR TO POLICY RELEVANCE

7.	A stronger commitment to make statistics not just useful but useable, and increasing the uptake of evidence in both policy and practice, has become a preoccupation for both policy people and service delivery organizations. The primary concern for those wishing to improve the utilisation of statistics is how to tackle the problem of under-use, where findings about effectiveness are either not applied, or are not applied successfully. However, concerns have also been raised about overuse, such as the rapid spread of tentative findings, and about misuse, especially where evidence of effectiveness is ambiguous (Walshe and Rundall, 2001).

Figure 2. Strategic intent of statistics: matching technical rigour to policy relevance

Strategic intent of statistics: Matching technical rigour to policy relevance	
Data Providers (Statisticians) — Need to improve dialogue — Data Users (Policy Makers)	
How?	What? Why? When?
Reliable Data / Improving "usability" of vidence / Effective Dissemination / Wide Access	Getting appropriate Buy-in / Incentives to use evidence

A. The need to improve the dialogue between policy-makers and the statistician community

8. Getting policy-makers and practitioners to own the evidence needed for effective support and implementation of policy is an important strategy. This is in contrast to the position where evidence is solely the property and domain of statisticians or, perhaps even worse, managers and bureaucrats who try to impose less than transparent evidence upon practitioners and front line staff. Ownership of the best available evidence can enhance its use to make well informed and substantiated decisions.

9. To improve ownership and uptake of evidence, in both policy and practice, developing better, ongoing interaction between evidence providers and evidence users is the way forward. Much of the more recent thinking in this area now emphasises the need for dialogue if common ground is to be found (Nutley et al, 2000).

B. Matching strong demand with a good supply of appropriate evidence

10. A distinction can be made between people who are users of statistics and those who are provider of statistics. Whilst it may be unrealistic for professional decision-makers and practitioners to be competent doers of statistics, it is both reasonable and necessary for such people to be able to understand and use statistics in their professional practice. Integrating statistics into practice is a central feature of professions. An increasingly necessary skill for professional policy-makers and practitioners is to know about the different kinds of statistics which are available; how to gain access to them; and, how to critically appraise them. Without such knowledge and understanding it is difficult to see how a strong *demand* for statistics can be established and, hence, how to enhance its practical application. Joint training and professional development opportunities for policy-makers and analysts may be one way of taking this forward and for matching strong demand with a good supply of appropriate evidence.

C. Making evidence "usable" for the policy-making community

11.   A further challenge for statisticians is making data "usable" for the policy-making community. Statisticians often need to 'translate' statistics into a language that is useful to the users of evidence, without distorting or misrepresenting data.

D. Effective dissemination and wide access

12.   A key issue is how to communicate findings to those who need to know. The strategies used to get statistics to their point of use involve both dissemination (pushing information from the centre outwards), and provision of access (web based and other repositories of information which data users can tap into). DevInfo, the UN common platform to monitor MDG, has proven to be an effective tool in this regard.

IV. GOOD PRACTICES IN USING DEVINFO TO DISSEMINATE STATISTICS AND INFORM STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

13.   DevInfo implementation shared experiences from countries around the world provide a wealth of information on experiences and insight on the role of DevInfo in harmonizing monitoring systems, determining development priorities, supporting programming activities and guiding strategic decision-making in general.
An important success factor learned from these experiences is that the development and implementation of any DevInfo database should be guided by the needs of intended users. These intended users should be identified from the beginning and include those persons with decision-making functions. The role of the UN should not be over-emphasized, but instead, national ownership should be encouraged, complemented with UN support in capacity-building and technical assistance.

14.   Other guiding principles for the successful implementation of DevInfo in support of decision making include:
   o   DevInfo has an important role to play in a harmonized monitoring framework by encouraging agreement among different stakeholders on indicator names and definitions, metadata and data sources.
   o   National ownership and strategic partnerships and linkages are important elements to further the use of DevInfo by decision makers at country level.
   o   Alignment with national priorities, relevance, reliability, and other qualities of the database technology are essential for maximizing the utility of DevInfo for decision-making purposes.
   o   Awareness-raising activities are effective in the dissemination of the database and in highlighting value of the database among decision makers.

A. DevInfo's role in supporting harmonized monitoring systems

15.   Several countries have shared their experience on DevInfo's role in a harmonized framework for monitoring a range of plans and national priorities. In **Armenia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, for example, stakeholders discussed and jointly detailed and agreed upon the list of indicators to be included in the database. Similarly, in **Nepal**, the process of developing *NepalInfo* has played a key role in the coordination and harmonization of statistics in the country by requiring key ministries and partners to agree on the data to be contained in the system. **Lesotho** had a similar experience with the harmonization of national statistics, and highlighted the important role of DevInfo in the standardization of metadata. In **Tanzania**, the development of the DevInfo database has promoted the standardization of indicator definitions, time periods, units and metadata, ultimately increasing the confidence in the quality of the database. Once a database is recognized as harmonized, users and decision makers give more recognition to its utility.

B. National ownership, partnerships and linkages of the system

16.   Government ownership of the system is vital to the effective use of DevInfo by decision makers. **Serbia** and **Costa Rica** selected a strategic implementing government partner who is responsible and who has assumed ownership over the system, and thus, is developing it further, promoting it, and most importantly, sharing the information contained therein. In **Egypt**, a Memorandum of Understanding transferring ownership of the database was signed with the government agencies in charge of data collection, processing, analysis and dissemination. Furthermore, a major issue is the DevInfo adaptation's linkages to existing decision-making mechanisms and processes in the country. **Cambodia** provides a clear illustration of strategic linkages. The Statistical Literacy Project has partnered with the *CAMInfo* initiative to conduct joint nation-wide trainings on *CAMInfo* and statistical literacy, targeting government officials and users of statistical data, including high-level decision makers. This partnership is expected to promote better coordination between the data manager, the National Institute of Statistics, and the planning and decision-making agency, the Ministry of Planning. As a result, better access to quality data and improved statistical literacy are hoped to contribute to the improvement of the government's capacity to integrate statistical information into policy making. In **St. Lucia**, *Helen Info* is designed to be used by the government for Evidence-Based Social Policy. The database has been established in partnership between Government, EU, UNDP and UNICEF, but most important has been government ownership and their commitment to maintain and use it. Following this successful example, DevInfo is now being rolled out throughout the Eastern Caribbean.

17.   DevInfo is recognized in many countries as a powerful advocacy tool for mobilizing society and government. It is very important for the DevInfo initiative to form partnerships with the stakeholders in the areas of advocacy and communications.

C. Data quality and national priorities

18.   The content and quality of the database can be a determining factor for whether DevInfo is used simply as a data repository or is used to its full potential for decision-making. An important basic consideration for ensuring that the database is relevant for decision-making is aligning it with national development priorities, plans and procedures. In **India,** the features of *DevInfo India* are being implemented to generate information on the overall situations with respect to sustainable development. The monitoring framework is inclusive of indicators to measure UNDAF outcomes/outputs, information on trends/mechanism for coordination, tracking of national development over time, progress of joint-sector programmes and responses to humanitarian emergencies."

19.   In **Lesotho**, *MalutiInfo* helps make information easily accessible to policy-makers, development practitioners and others, thus allowing them to monitor and evaluate the performance of identified indicators related to the UNDAF, PRS and MDGs. To increase the usefulness of the database, the country has created report templates to generate regular progress reports on thematic development agendas like those related to the UNDAF, OVC, CCA, NHDR, Situational Analysis of Women and Children (SAWC) and many others. In order to ensure the relevance of **Tanzania**'s *TSED*, the database includes data for the MDGs, the country's National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty and other relevant frameworks such as Ageing and Aged Population, Labor Market Indicators, Maternal and Child Monitoring Indicators and Education for All. In addition, the National Bureau of Statistics implements a process for ensuring the quality, accuracy and reliability of the data. These conditions encourage the use of the database to produce reports to monitor the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty, and it enables the government and its partners to gauge the progress being made by various interventions. Civil society organizations are using *TSED* in advocacy work related to policy/program formulation and budgetary processes. Others have also used the database for reporting, proposal writing and presentations. Similarly, **Malawi**'s *MASEDA* contains indicators for monitoring the country's development strategies, MDGs, and the UNDAF M&E matrix, supplemented by indicators from other relevant areas such as governance. In **Cambodia**, *CAMInfo* was adapted to include not only the indicators specific to monitoring the UNDAF, but additional indicators in the areas of governance and human rights, in order to capture more qualitative information and results at the output/outcome level.

20.   The interest of linking MDG data with project data appears in several countries. **Indonesia**'s *Aceh Nias Info* is a good example. Additional indicators that were suggested to make databases more relevant in certain contexts were governance, crisis and environmental indices and data on disaster vulnerability. The database must be updated regularly in order for the data to be useful for current analysis and planning. This implies a structured, well-defined and documented data collection policy that ensures the continuous availability of such data. Several countries highlight the need for the data to be reliable and accurate and for there to be a national consensus on the content of the database in order to ensure that it is trusted, relied upon and its use is generalized. In **Moldova**, *DevInfo Moldova* provides decision makers with reliable data that can help them adjust the design of social policies and promote the dialogue with other stakeholders engaged in the poverty reduction strategy.

21.   The inclusion of data at the sub-national level is often considered as a key factor to enabling decision makers to use the database for analyzing the situation, determining priorities, monitoring progress and guiding the decision-making process in general. The experience in **Serbia** and **Albania** , for example, shows how the availability of *DevInfo Serbia and AlbInfo*, which contains relevant data at the sub-national level has contributed to decentralization and allows the authorities in the various regions to monitor the implementation of the Regional and Local Plans of Action. In addition, in Serbia the database is informing the process of budget allocation by municipalities. Similarly, in **Thailand**, *TPD Info* contains sub-national data and is thus playing a crucial role in monitoring the MDGs and national development plans at the national and the provincial level, in addition to serving as a tool for the dissemination of the data used to guide the decision-making process at the sub-national level. In the case of **Moldova**, the inclusion of sub-national data in the database has yielded valuable inputs for policy analyses and reports showing disparities between districts.

D. Advocacy and awareness-raising

22.   Society in general, and decision makers in particular, can effectively be made aware of the availability of the system through launches at national and sub-national levels and dissemination activities. **Thailand** has been focusing on a dissemination strategy that includes the development of public information materials meant to reach public users, but in particular provincial governors and line ministry officials who benefit from using *TPDInfo* in their decision-making. In **Vietnam**, *CiaB Info* is being used towards an informed pro-poor planning and decision-making process in Cao Bang province. District and province authorities are in charge of the development and maintenance of the database. This has been developed in Vietnamese in coordination with the national DevInfo adaptation, *VietInfo.*

23.   Continuous advocacy and communication campaigns can help maintain awareness of the availability and usefulness of the system. As experienced by **Colombia** and the **Dominican Republic**, for example, bulletins, newsletters and other material can be prepared periodically using DevInfo in order to illustrate its potential. Continuous capacity-building activities for users and administrators will help keep in-country capacity up-to-date.

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