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Walking the last mile on the long road to evidence-informed development: building capacity to use research evidence

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The systematic application of rigorous evidence to inform the design and implementation of development policies and programmes has the potential to positively influence development outcomes. To achieve such evidence-informed development, a process of generating, transmitting, and using high-quality, policy-relevant evidence of development effectiveness is required. This article focuses on the final step in this casual chain – the use of evidence by national development policymakers. It proposes a people- and demand-focused approach to capacity building for the use of research evidence by policymakers. This support in building personal as well as team capacity and demand is assumed to encourage a growing institutionalisation of evidence use. The article integrates these capacity-building efforts into the wider theory of change for evidence-informed development, highlighting the importance of effective mechanisms to encourage research use in order to achieve the objective of improving lives through research evidence.

Keywords: evidence-informed development; capacity building; evidence use; theory of change; development effectiveness

1. International development as more than good intentions

Development policy and practice has not been systematically informed by, least been based on, scientific knowledge (White 2005, 2009; Banerjee and Duflo 2011). The art of development (Eyben and Rosche 2013) relied on a mix of good intentions, top-down economic models, and assumed rationality when designing development interventions. Approaches to international development, and likewise particular development interventions, have fallen in and out of fashion with little to none empirical evidence of their effectiveness. This reoccurring susceptibility of development policy to heavily invest in and follow magic bullet interventions and one-stop blue prints has been described as a type of ‘faddism in development policy’ (White 2014b). Alas, the application of apparently convincing and well-intended magic bullet interventions has often failed to have a positive impact on the realities of people living in poverty. The cases of community development and microfinance programmes are among the most popular examples of this discrepancy between assumed and empirical development impact (Vajja and White 2008; Stewart et al. 2010; Mansuri and Rao 2013).

Currently, the volume of foreign aid alone stands at \$138.5 billion (Glennie and Sumner 2014). However, only a marginal amount of these public funds are evaluated

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for their effectiveness. Heartfelt narratives, anecdotes, and case studies are rather used to underline the assumed implicit effectiveness of development programmes to foster objectives such as improved health, social welfare, and education (Langer and Stewart 2014). The shortage of empirical and scientific evidence – both quantitative and qualitative – of the effects of these attempts to improve people’s lives has led to a situation in which ‘it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is no evidence to show that most development interventions actually have a significant effect on their intended outcomes [...]’ (White 2009, 8). This statement holds true even in the context of large-scale development successes, such as the *East Asian Miracle*; as there is little agreement to which policies or programmes this success should be attributed (World Bank 1993; Krugman 1994).

The limitations to expert opinions, big ideas, and passionate advocacy – perhaps most precisely expressed in Karlan and Appel’s (2012) notion of development as ‘more than good intentions’ – have translated into a strong rationale to generate and use evidence of what works (and what does not work) in international development. This article aims to provide a theory of change for evidence-informed development – that is, the systematic and transparent use of scientific knowledge in the formulation, design, and implementation of development policies and programmes. In particular, it will present an innovative model to increase the uptake of evidence, showcasing a people- and demand-focused approach to build capacity to use evidence currently piloted with national policymakers in South Africa and Malawi (Stewart 2014). The remainder of the article is structured as follows: after a brief introduction to the state of the art in evidence-informed development, the theory of change of how evidence can improve development performance is presented visually and explained narratively. Thereafter, the article reports on the conception and application of the capacity-building approach to use evidence in South Africa and Malawi. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of evidence use and institutionalisation as the last mile effort towards evidence-informed development.

2. The advent of evidence-informed development

The call for more reliable knowledge of what works (and does not work) in international development was most prominently expressed in the Center for Global Development’s (CDG) 2006 ‘When will we ever learn?’ report, which, bemoaning an evaluation gap, called for the increased application of rigorous impact evaluation of development interventions. The foundation of the *Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab* (J-PAL) and the *International Initiative for Impact Evaluation* (3ie) can be seen as direct responses to the need to generate evidence of development effectiveness. Not least through the work of these initiatives, considerable progress has been made in mainstreaming the importance of rigorous research evidence to inform development policies and practice. For example, Cameron and colleagues (2015) identify 2259¹ impact evaluations of development interventions published between 1981 and 2012 of which all but 132 have been published since 2000 with the strongest growth of evidence production taking place after 2008. While closely related with the results agenda in public governance, this drive towards the increased production of impact evaluation evidence to inform development policy and practice, though, needs to be distinguished from the mere monitoring of outcomes as often practiced in results-based management (White 2011; Barder 2014).

Evidence-informed development is more encompassing than measuring the results of development interventions without ensuring adequate programme attribution; it also extends beyond the isolated conduction of rigorous impact evaluations of development policies and programmes. Evidence-informed development refers to the practice of making decisions in development policy and practice informed by the best available evidence.

This practice requires the availability of high-quality and policy-relevant evidence as well as a systematic and transparent process of feeding this evidence into decision-making procedures of policymakers and practitioners. Evidence-informed decision-making in development mirrors the institutionalisation of evidence-based health care. The adoption of the term evidence-informed rather than evidence-based development acknowledges that research evidence remains but one factor influencing decision-making in policy and practice (Stewart 2014).

3. Towards a programme theory of evidence-informed development

Efforts in international development to institutionalise the use of evidence cannot rigidly be modelled on best practices in health care and natural sciences. Evidence-informed development is facing a number of domain-specific challenges to the systematic uptake of research evidence. A range of key factors explain why the use of evidence in development policy is different from, for example, health care. First, neither policymakers nor practitioners in development are commonly trained or incentivised to use research evidence. Unlike in the medical profession, most decision-makers in international development are national politicians, NGO staff, and bureaucrats in international organisations – few of which are exposed to research evidence in their professional environment (White 2014a, 2014b).

Second, there are no institutionalised mechanisms or incentives to improve the uptake of research evidence in development policy. Whereas the introduction of new technologies or drugs undergo a stringent process of quality approval, overseen by institutions such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), development programmes are commonly implemented without an ex ante requirement to indicate their likely impact and cost-effectiveness. Similarly, formal policy guidelines that shape the institutional environment in which social programmes are conducted seldom face obligation to be informed by a systematic review of the existing evidence (White 2014a, 2014b).

Third, there are no institutionalised mechanisms to ensure the usage of evidence in development practice. Implementing development programmes that have been proven to be effective is neither a practical nor a normative responsibility of development practitioners. Systematic evidence of development effectiveness is rarely accessible to development practitioners and, in addition, there is no social norm within the development community that enforces the use of evidence in programme design and implementation (Barder 2014). Lindkvist and Dixon (2014) refer to this lack of social incentives as the choice between ‘feel good’ and ‘do good’ development interventions.

Lastly, development policies – as most social policies – achieve social impact through a large number of incremental changes. Research evidence of the impact of these policies is necessarily confined to deliver at best small positive results. The celebration of small and context-dependent solutions to challenges of international development, however, is out of step with the domain’s preference for magic bullets and one-stop blue prints to eradicate global poverty (White 2014a; Barder 2014).

Because of these constraints, using evidence to systematically improve development performance and the realities of people living in poverty requires a careful examination of the mechanisms and contexts that support the practice of evidence-informed development.² In this remit, a theory of change for evidence-informed development is presented below in Figure 1, which outlines in detail how international development could institutionalise the use of research evidence to enhance development outcomes.

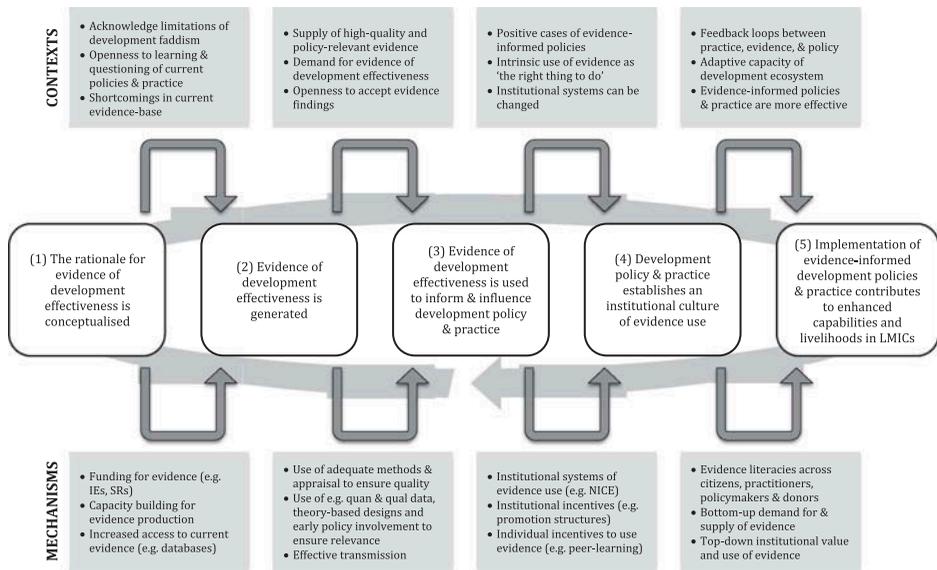


Figure 1. A theory of change for evidence-informed development.

As outlined in the brief history of evidence-informed development presented above, the origins of this development approach are vested in the realisation of the need for and virtue of evidence of development effectiveness. Much progress has been made towards the conceptualisation of the rationale for development effectiveness resulting in an increased supply of evidence such as impact evaluations and systematic reviews (Cameron, Mishra, and Brown 2015). The current state of the art in evidence-informed development then seems to meet Step 1 and Step 2 in the theory of change presented in Figure 1.

However, the increased production of evidence of development effectiveness alone is not sufficient to translate into meaningful changes of development policy and practice. The evidence further needs to be taken up by policymakers and practitioners in order to be used to inform development policies and programmes. This third step in the theory of change depends, among other, on the nature of the evidence and much effort has been invested to broaden the methodological scope as well as context- and policy-relevance of evidence products (Bamberger, Rao, and Woollock 2010; Leach 2014; White 2014b; Stewart 2014). The creation of effective communication and transmission channels between evidence suppliers and users is further a key aspect to support the uptake of evidence at a policy and programme level.

Step 4 on the theory of change refers to the establishment of an institutionalised culture of evidence use in international development. The emphasis of a culture of evidence use distinguishes between the isolated uptake of evidence (for example, in individual programmes such as deworming campaigns) and the systematic incorporation of research evidence across decision-making and implementation processes. This incorporation requires a systemic change targeting institutional structures and personal habits with the aim to establish an intrinsic motivation to use evidence as the use of evidence is thought as 'the right thing to do'. Altering promotion structures to incentivise evidence use as well as mechanisms to encourage peer-learning are examples that have been applied to support an institutional culture of evidence use.

As the final step on the theory of change for evidence-informed development, an institutionalised culture of evidence use in development policy and practice is assumed to translate into meaningful changes in the realities of people living in poverty. For evidence use to exercise such a direct impact, a bottom-up demand for and supply of evidence needs to be met by a top-down institutional culture of the uptake and use of evidence. Such an evidence-policy ecosystem, potentially, could allow for a fluid exchange between policy-relevant knowledge from research, practice, and experience informing in return locally relevant and effective policy decisions and programme implementation.

4. Building capacity to use research evidence for evidence-informed development

From the theory of change above, it becomes apparent that producing high-quality and policy-relevant evidence of development effectiveness does, on its own, not suffice to establish an evidence-informed approach to international development. The generation of research evidence needs to be followed up by the equally important use of evidence by decision-makers, ideally within an institutional framework of ongoing research use (Step 3 and Step 4 in [Figure 1](#)). To inform and ultimately influence and change policy and programme implementation – the last mile on the long walk towards evidence-informed development – development policymakers need to have the ability and willingness to access, appraise, and act on research evidence. This capacity to use research evidence is crucial to establish the virtuous circle between policy-informed research and evidence-informed policymaking ([Leach 2014](#)).

Over the last decade a number of initiatives were attempted to improve the evidence-to-policy interface in LMICs³. However, most of these programmes have focused on increasing the capacity to supply research evidence (‘push activities’) as opposed to enhancing the capacity to use scientific knowledge by decision-makers in development (‘pull-activities’) ([Newman, Fisher, and Shaxson 2012](#); [Stewart 2014](#)). One-sided push activities, yet, rarely translate into meaningful evidence use as they neglect the crucial capacities and incentives of decision-makers to engage with research evidence – for example, the ownership of research findings ([White 2014b](#); [Goldman 2014](#)). As a result, recent efforts in evidence-informed development were focused on how to build policymakers’ demand for and capacity to use research evidence ([Newman, Fisher, and Shaxson 2012](#); [Stewart 2014](#)). This article introduces one such effort to capacity building currently piloted with the national governments of South Africa and Malawi.

5. A people and demand-focused approach to evidence use

There is an absence of clear evidence on how to best encourage the use of research evidence among decision-makers in international development ([Stewart 2014](#)). Using the best available evidence on how to build capacity for evidence use by policymakers, a team⁴ at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) had identified people-focused approaches as a promising instrument. By December 2014, the team had developed and piloted two related capacity-building programmes to improve the use of research evidence in South Africa and Malawi emphasising personal relationships and policy-driven ownership – namely the UJ Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (UJ-BCURE) programme. The programme design and focus on people-centred activities followed a year-long inception and consultation period with government partners.

Promoting the evidence use of policymakers, in most instances, is essentially an effort to modify the behaviour of policymakers. Acknowledging the complexity of actively

facilitating behaviour change and the resulting need for multiple processes of change, experimentation, and close relationships, the importance of mutual trust and confidence between the team members and the partners in policy institutions was regarded as a key element of the programme (Stewart 2014). Consequently, the programme follows a people-focused approach to capacity building.

UJ-BCURE's capacity-building efforts commence with a focus on decision-makers' demand to use research evidence. Government partners need to have expressed an active interest in the programme indicating an openness and willingness to use research evidence. Requested activities then initially lay out the rationale for evidence-informed decision-making before addressing the technical skills required to use research evidence. The delivery of these core technical skills – accessing, appraising, synthesising, and integrating evidence for policy – then employs five people-focused approaches to facilitate an effective change in decision-makers' treatment of research evidence. These five approaches refer to: (1) building sustainable relationships; (2) building relationships specifically with national governments; (3) using relationships to build organisational and systems change, as well as individual capacity; (4) ensuring the right people are targeted; and (5) ensuring partner commitment and post-programme sustainability. The interaction and implementation of each of these five people-centred approaches is explained in detail in (Stewart 2014).

A number of key assumptions inform this people-centred approach to capacity building for the use of evidence. First, UJ-BCURE assumed that it is feasible to build capacity in research use among decision-makers actively generating demand for research evidence. During the inception of the programme, government partners expressed an active interest to receive support in research 'pull' activities and related skills. In South Africa, this interest translated into an ongoing demand for capacity building, which goes hand in hand with the government's efforts to implement a national monitoring and evaluation system. External efforts to create demand met with an institutional ambition to make better use of evidence. In Malawi, the programme encountered a situation in which the distinction between an active demand and the mere need to use research evidence was blurred at times. For example, in some partner departments the need for capacity-building support exists and is acknowledged, but for various reasons (relating, *inter alia*, to internal capacity, hierarchies, and logistics) support that is offered is not taken up (Erasmus et al. 2015).

UJ-BCURE's second assumption held that an improved capacity to use research evidence (that is, skills to access, appraise, synthesise, and integrate evidence) would lead to a sustainable and increased use of evidence during decision-making processes. Halfway through the programme, in both South Africa and Malawi there are documented events of evidence use during decision-making at policy level. These events have been occurring in particular where the capacity-building activities were formulated around a specific policy issue such as the design of policy-implementation plans (South Africa) and district-level development plans (Malawi). The third assumption UJ-BCURE formulated at the onset of the programme referred to the feasibility to build meaningful, productive, and sustainable relationships between research-users, producers, and intermediaries, which will be discussed in more detail below.

6. Relationships, networks and institutionalisation of evidence use

UJ-BCURE assumed that strong relationships to build personal as well as team capacity to demand and use evidence in policymaking are central to the nascent institutionalisation of evidence use. Personally convinced of the value and experienced in the practice of

evidence-informed decision-making, individual policymakers are best posed to challenge and improve institutional cultures and organisational mechanisms. A focus on key people with sufficient institutional powers also enlarges the probability that institutional mechanisms such as incentives to use evidence through performance appraisal structures can in fact be changed.

The programme uses mentorship placements to link policymakers and evidence specialists in order to establish a growing community of practice for evidence-informed decision-making. The placements and thereby-created networks build trust and confidence between researchers and policymakers facilitating closer linkages and exchanges for an effective evidence-to-policy interface. Drawing from experiences of institutionalising evidence use in Latin America, Gaarder and Briceño (2010) highlight the effectiveness of this approach, explaining that the likelihood that evidence will be used depends on policymakers' trust in the source of evidence and their identification with the process of evidence generation. Strong relationships and networks thus seem to be at the heart of evidence-informed development (Stewart 2014). In South Africa – so far – UJ-BCURE has created 16 mentorship relationships of which one relationship has evolved beyond that of mentee and mentor to an institutional-level relationship.

In addition, in order to provide government partners with an independent stake in the programme, the UJ-BCURE programme is deliberately participatory in its design and approach. This open and flexible approach has facilitated relationship building and supported programme relevance, uptake, and increased impact. However, these close relationships can also pose a challenge when the partner expectations on the programme design and contribution exceed the available resources.

All in all, these experiences justify UJ-BCURE's people-focused approach to building capacity to use research evidence. No single individual will possess all the skills and capabilities required for each step on the theory of change for evidence-informed development. An effective collaboration between policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and citizens, each contributing their unique form of knowledge and expertise, is required to arrive at a culture of evidence-informed decision-making in international development. In this context it is important to refute the often-stated false dichotomy between the worlds of academia and policymakers. It is a myth that policymakers are not concerned with the use of evidence, as it is a myth that researchers have no interest in policy influence. The experiences of UJ-BCURE, as that of other related initiatives, clearly show that policymakers and researchers often experience common challenges that lead to a desire for collaboration and that pave the way for a shared vision of evidence-informed development.

7. How much have we (ever) learned?

The mantra of improving lives through research evidence gives rise to the idea of evidence-informed development. By means of formulating a theory of change for evidence-informed development, this article has deconstructed the black box of how the systematic application of scientific knowledge can support international development. It outlined five causal steps required for evidence-informed development policies to lead to better outcomes for people living in poverty; and further provided an introduction to the mechanisms and contexts associated with the effective progression from each step. Progress towards evidence-informed development has been strongest across the first two steps of the theory of change, resulting in an increased focus on the use of evidence in policy and practice, as well as the subsequent institutionalisation of this usage. The final outcome of evidence-informed development, that is, more effective social and

economic changes for people living in poverty, will require rigorous evaluation once sufficient amount of evidence-informed development policies have been implemented.

Thus, much has been learned, and much has changed, since the CDG's (2006) challenge of when we will ever learn. The article outlined that the knowledge frontier in ensuring development effectiveness has moved from the generation and transmission of evidence towards the use and institutionalisation of evidence – the last mile on the long walk towards evidence-informed development. It has proposed a demand-side approach to evidence use with the objective to support decision-makers' capacity and willingness to use research evidence. These capacity-building efforts to demand and use evidence have been identified as most promising when following a people-centred approach emphasising the importance of relationships and networks.

A culture of learning is essential to constantly accumulate new knowledge of what works, how, and why in international development. Evidence of development effectiveness can only effectively be incorporated into policy and practice if decision-makers are open to accept the findings of evaluation and research studies. The domain requires a transparent communication and acquaintance of learning from successes as well as failures. The latter has for long remained a taboo. Irreversible policy changes (White 2014a), however, are the result of scaling-up effective programmes as well as closing down ineffective ones. A growing evidence-base of what works, why, and how in development will eventually expose an increasing number of underperforming development interventions. Whether the domain has learned enough to neglect these interventions in future depends to a large extent on the establishment of a deeply rooted culture of evidence-informed decision-making at all levels of development.

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Notes

1. Cameron and colleagues' (2015) search was limited to impact evaluations published until 2012. As of June 2015, the updated number of evaluations in 3ie's online impact evaluation repository stands at 2640 studies.
2. The contexts and mechanisms introduced in Figure 1 are not aiming to be exhaustive.
3. For example, the evidence-informed policy network (EVIPNet) and the Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA).
4. For more information, see <http://www.africaevidencenetwork.org/supported-by-uj-bcure/>

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