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Behavioral Insights on the Use of Evidence
for Local Policy-Making in South Africa

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About ideas42

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For more than a decade, we have been at the forefront of applying behavioral science in the real world. And as we've developed our expertise, we've helped to define an entire field. Our efforts have so far extended to 40 countries as we've partnered with governments, foundations, NGOs, private enterprises, and a wide array of public institutions—in short, anyone who wants to make a positive difference in people's lives.

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⟫ *Summary*

Designing impactful policies that respond to constituents' needs is the goal of all good policy-makers. Employing appropriate evidence—from qualitative inputs about the community's needs and preferences to quantitative and technical data—can support policy-makers in this goal and improve the quality of their policies. However, it is generally accepted that, across the world, the current level of evidence use in policy-making is insufficient. We conducted research aimed at understanding behavioral barriers that might inhibit local policy-makers in the Western Cape Province of South Africa from gathering and employing evidence for the development of the municipal Integrated Development Plan (IDP).

While we found that structural challenges such as limited data availability were undeniably present, we also identified six behavioral barriers that might affect the collection as well as the use of evidence for policy-making. For example, our research suggests that policy-makers may see the use of evidence as a box-checking exercise, or may feel overconfident in their knowledge of what the community needs. We also found that policy-makers often regard budget spenddown as the only indicator of the IDP success rather than looking for evidence of impact. While more research is needed for a more nuanced understanding of these barriers and to design effective context-specific solutions, these emerging findings may provide helpful direction for local governments and other stakeholders interested in improving the use of evidence in policy-making.

The use of evidence in policy-making

Policy-making is the process by which governments create rules, decide how to allocate resources, and take actions to translate political visions into desirable outcomes for constituents. However, deciding what outcomes to prioritize, how to best achieve them, or determining if they have been achieved are not straightforward tasks. The use of evidence can support and improve policy-making by providing the rationale for initial policy directions, pinpointing the nature and extent of problems, suggesting possible solutions, and identifying their potential impact. Furthermore, evidence can be used to justify the need to adjust a policy or its implementation.[1]

Evidence is a broad term that encompasses various types and sources of information. In policy-making, it typically refers to economic evidence, surveys, qualitative evidence, scientific evidence, international evidence, controlled trials, and consultations, among others.[2] The evidence-based policy movement started in the 1970's and has gained momentum as a means to "promote rigorous analysis of policy and program options, with the intention of providing useful inputs for policy-makers in their ongoing consideration of policy development and program improvement."[3] In more recent years, the policy field has begun to increasingly recognize that "… evidence is only one part of public policy. Other factors, including the expression of public preferences (through voting and ongoing civic participation), political dynamics, public-sector implementation capacity, and budget constraints do—and should—play a role."[4] Nonetheless, policy makers and academics alike generally recognize the need and the benefits of incorporating evidence at different stages of policy-making, and it is generally accepted that currently, policy-making around the world is not utilizing evidence as much as it should be.[5]

To date, research on why evidence is not being more widely employed in policy-making has mainly focused on structural challenges (e.g. inadequate funding, understaffing, lack of adequate software and systems, limited access, etc.). However, while the use of evidence is touted as a way to reduce biases in policy-making, public officials' decisions and actions related to whether or how to use or interpret evidence can themselves be affected by psychological biases. Nevertheless, research on the role of behavioral factors in the use of evidence in policy-making is still in its infancy and has only begun to receive attention in recent years.[6,7,8,9]

It is undeniable that certain fundamental structural challenges, such as basic access to evidence, need to be addressed in order to achieve progress on evidence-use in policy-making. However, such challenges are not always at the root of the problem, nor is addressing them guaranteed to solve the issue. Behavioral science can provide a new and complementary angle for examining how policy-makers make decisions and take actions related to the use of evidence, and a deeper understanding of human behavior and decision-making can point to relatively simple and inexpensive changes to the institutional context or the presentation and framing of evidence to promote a fuller use of evidence in policy-making.

A behavioral approach to understanding the use of evidence for policy-making in the Western Cape

Project background

ideas42 conducted research to uncover potential behavioral barriers that inhibit more complete, meaningful and unbiased evidence-use in local policy-making. We started by attempting to understand how local officials in South Africa currently perceive and use evidence. Our investigation focused on one of the municipal-level policy-making processes: Integrated Development Planning (IDP). The IDP is the principal strategic planning, budgeting, management, and decision-making tool for municipalities in South Africa, covering topics such as municipal budgets, land management, and promotion of local economic development. This mandatory process[10] is centered on offering constituents and community members opportunities to provide input on local programs, budgets, and policies. Relevant for our study, the IDP includes requirements to incorporate evidence from both the community and from quantitative sources.

Although there are multiple actors involved in drafting the IDP, we focused our attention on IDP Managers. These key decision-makers are non-elected officials responsible for managing the IDP process and for sourcing and employing evidence, through activities such as organizing public meetings, collecting relevant census data, consulting various stakeholders and technical experts, and revisiting and assessing progress on the IDP goals.

As part of our research, we conducted in-depth interviews with twelve municipal officials and NGO stakeholders from five municipalities across the Western Cape province and ran collaborative workshops. These were organized with the assistance of OpenUp—a civic technology organization based in Cape Town.

The use of evidence in the IDP

> **It's important for municipal officials to keep on doing the professional thing that is your mandate. Our mandate is not to follow politics. We can gather information and try to get the best information possible and come up with solutions from a technical point of view."**
>
> –IDP Manager

The IDP has an explicit goal of employing evidence from a variety of sources, ranging from national census and socioeconomic survey data, and research from partner universities and consultants, to guidance and evidence from technical staff and feedback from residents. For example, the initial

phase in the IDP methodology, analysis, states its goal as ensuring that "all actors involved in the planning process are aware of and have access to basic facts and figures related to the present situation, trends and dynamics."[11] The IDP process also requires consulting local stakeholders through activities such as public meetings, as well as the establishment of an IDP Representative Forum that includes the mayor, senior officials, ward committees, community organizers/advocates, traditional leaders, and others.[12]

However, to turn these high-level goals into a reality through collecting and using evidence, IDP Managers must make a large number of decisions and take many actions (see Figure 2) for which no formal guidance exists. For example, to collect and employ as much evidence as necessary, the IDP Manager must *perceive* the use of evidence as valuable. The IDP Manager also needs to decide what types of evidence to use, and to initiate and conduct evidence collection activities. Once evidence has been collected, they need to analyze and interpret it, and harmonize the findings with political mandates, budget constraints, and other practical and political considerations. Thus, there are many moments when policy-makers may take sub-optimal decisions, or fail to follow-through on actions in the process of using evidence.

Figure 1: A stylized process map for evidence-use in the IDP process.
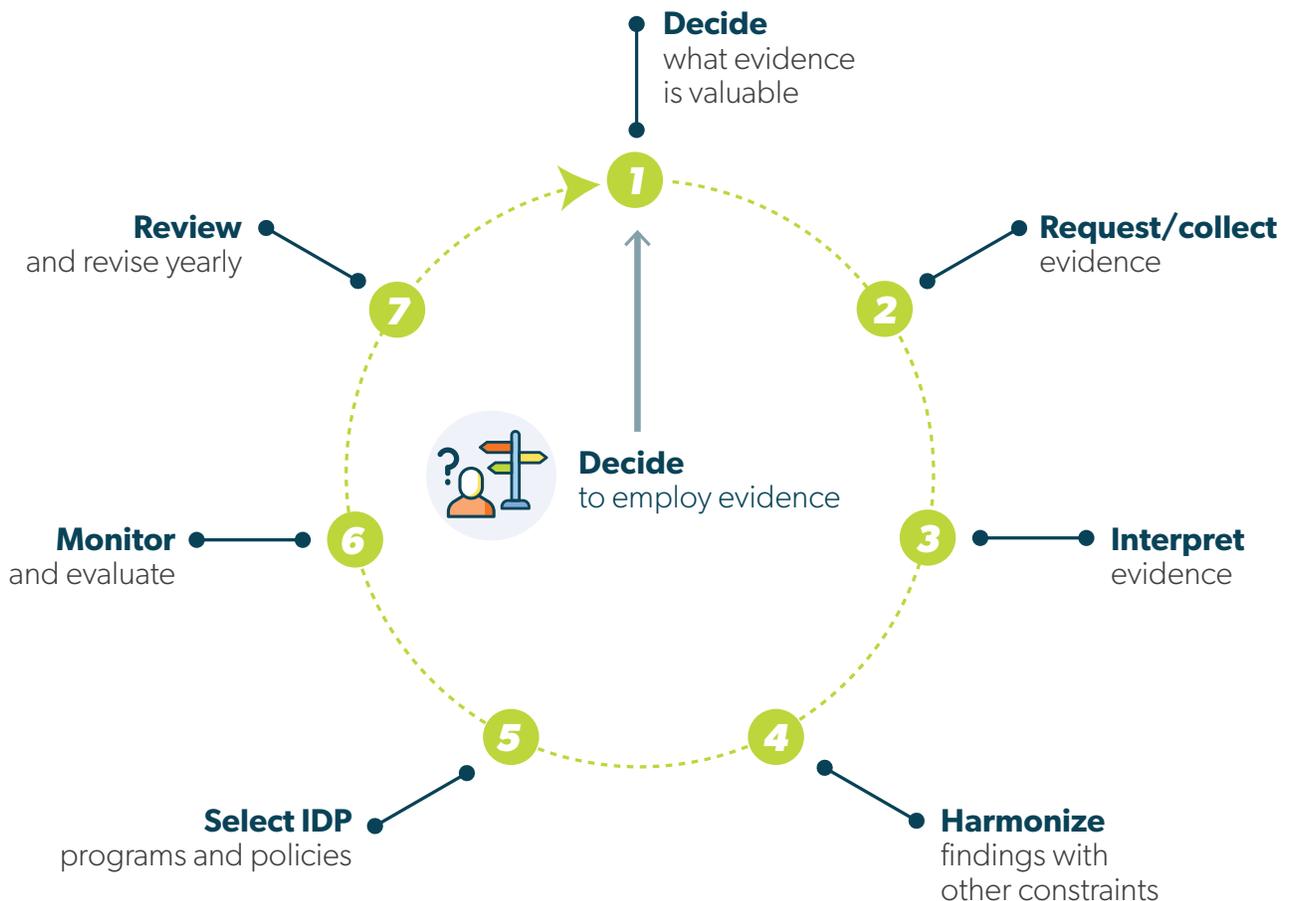
Behavioral barriers to evidence use

Our research confirmed that a number of typically identified challenges to evidence use, such as poor access or lack of adequate training, affect Western Cape policy-makers as well. However, we also identified several behavioral barriers that likely contribute to the issue.

① Policy-makers see the use of evidence in the IDP mainly as a box-checking exercise, and only collect and use evidence to the extent it satisfies mandatory requirements.

> *"Officials don't have power, they feel that whatever they are presenting is not of value … so they just do what they think is necessary to get the job done to get paid."*
>
> –NGO Leader

> *"[…] in my experience, by the time you receive it [data] … you're normally quite crushed for time and dealing with other legislative duties. Nobody has the luxury of time to scrutinize details …"*
>
> –Municipal Official

Beyond broad-level legislated mandates and methodological directives, local governments in South Africa do not have clear guidance and requirements around evidence use for policy-making[13]. IDP Managers have limited human and financial resources available to dedicate to the IDP, and their jobs require constantly juggling many tasks and responsibilities. This context of **scarcity** can cause policy-makers to **tunnel**—or exclusively focus—on certain aspects of the IDP process, leaving little mental bandwidth to consider collecting and using additional evidence beyond what they are given.

Collecting and using more or better evidence to inform policy not only requires awareness and know-how of what could be done differently, but it also entails a significant level of effort, likely with no personal benefit. Officials with demanding jobs and multiple responsibilities may instead **satisfice**, a strategy where individuals seek to meet a minimum acceptable threshold, rather than exhaustively evaluating alternatives or necessarily identifying the *best* option. For example, although IDP Managers reliably hold public input meetings as dictated by municipal mandates, they are less likely to seek alternative ways of listening to constituents, or to specifically look for further input from under-represented groups.

Furthermore, municipal budgets and strategic directions are often set at a higher (i.e., national and provincial) level. This power dynamic limits IDP Managers' decision-making authority in terms of what evidence they can access or collect, and it limits the potential impact of using evidence for policy decisions. Moreover, technical experts, consultants, and researchers are often charged with analyzing and interpreting quantitative data, which can lead IDP managers to experience low **self-efficacy**. IDP Managers may perceive as beyond their abilities to even attempt to collect, use, or interpret evidence in a way that diverges from the basic requirements.

2 Policy-makers believe they already know what issues and development priorities the community will voice.

"They (community members) need to understand that management already knows what the needs are."

—Municipal Official

"We know better than the citizens … The citizens have nothing new to tell us."

—Municipal Official

Community members often raise similar issues across meetings, and over the years. Over time, IDP Managers, who often have long tenures, gain valuable insights about the typical needs and desires of their communities. However, at the same time, that accumulated experience can lead them to exhibit **overconfidence bias—**feeling more confident in their ability to correctly predict what the community wants than is warranted or true.

IDP Managers are also usually members of the communities they serve and have personal perspectives on which community needs should be prioritized. IDP Managers may exhibit the **false consensus effect**, overestimating the extent to which other community members share their experiences and opinions on what the community needs. This can cause policy-makers to underestimate the need for and the value of continued and diligent consultation with community members or to feel justified in dismissing community input that contradicts their existing beliefs.

3 Policy-makers face challenges determining the relative importance and validity of the various requests received from the community.

"A lot of public meetings are dominated by who shouts the loudest."

—Municipal Official

"… People have different opinions on what should be done and the needs of people … it's difficult between action groups to move along on a purely technical/official manner and try to service the people best from a municipal point of view."

—Municipal Official

Public meetings are intended as a channel for all community members to make their voices heard. In reality, low public engagement and lack of participation from certain groups (e.g. youth[14]) can result in meetings dominated by participants who do not represent the broader community or who have political or personal agendas. When hearing requests or feedback—especially negative or otherwise antagonistic—from such constituents, IDP Managers may demonstrate **reactive devaluation.** They may dismiss even valuable input due to a negative perception of the messenger, rather than judging the substance of the issue itself.

During community meetings, constituents typically raise a large number of requests, some of which can be outside the municipality's scope of responsibility. IDP managers need to decide (and, in fact, have significant latitude to decide) which community inputs are meaningful or appropriate. Without objective guidelines, IDP Managers may interpret community input in ways that reinforce their existing beliefs or is in line with their desired outcomes, a tendency known as **confirmation bias**. For example, an IDP Manager who believes they need a new park in their municipality may be more likely to interpret a community's requests about childcare, safety, and community in a way that supports this view.

4 Policy-makers broadly distrust the available quantitative data or think it's irrelevant to their specific context.

> *"Can be hard to integrate all the data especially when there is so much data and it is not very credible."*
>
> –Municipal Official

> *"... there are other good sources from provincial counterparts who have better data but it is sort of general and not exactly what you need for your own community. Also, you need very fine-grained data by ward ideally and that is not available generally."*
>
> –Municipal Official

The official data that IDP Managers typically have easy access to is often outdated and provides highly aggregated, national or provincial-level statistics. For example, municipalities employ Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) national census data as their main source of evidence for assessing the existing level of development (e.g. gaps in public service provision), but this data is only collected every ten years. Based on this experience, IDP managers may **overgeneralize** that most quantitative data is similarly irrelevant and dismiss even valuable sources of quantitative evidence.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, IDP Managers often live in the communities they serve, and they observe and experience certain issues from a personal perspective. Because certain issues are more **salient** to them, policy-makers may perceive them as pervasive and crucial for the entire community, and thus for policy. For example, a policy-maker who witnesses a dramatic robbery experiences **vividness effect**, and may therefore be led to believe that local crime is much more widespread and common than the data indicates. **Availability bias**, or our human inclination to judge probability based on how easy it is to recall examples of an instance, may further erode policy-makers' trust in the quality and plausibility of available evidence when quantitative data does not corroborate their own perceptions.

5 Policy-makers perceive that the additional collection or analysis of data would be unfeasible for them.

> *"Data or surveys is quite an expensive exercise. And you don't have a lot of staff that know how to properly record that data, how to articulate it, how to use it. You know, it's very difficult."*
>
> –Municipal Official

> *"I'm sure we could get the raw data if we wanted it, but another challenge is that we don't have a dedicated GIS team. Within our town planning, we only have two planners."*
>
> –Municipal Official

IDP Managers most often encounter a limited set of traditional data, and may develop a **mental model**—an internal belief or concept about the world— that data collection and analysis is slow, costly, and overall inaccessible. For example, policy-makers may associate new data collection with conducting door-to-door surveys—often indeed prohibitively expensive, and not consider alternative channels such as identifying existing administrative-level data, or data from other similar municipalities that could prove relevant and useful.

Moreover, IDP managers are not typically trained in quantitative data collection or analysis, and do not have roles that emphasize data-related skills. Beyond the lack of technical skills, IDP Managers' **identity** as non-technical individuals may further lead them to perceive that everything related to quantitative evidence is out of their realm of responsibility or ability. Thus, they may consider that it is exclusively up to others (e.g. technical experts) to make decisions or attempt to change how evidence is collected or used (e.g. requesting funds for new data collection or identifying innovative data sources).

6 Policy-makers' mental model of a successful IDP does not include evidence of policy impact.

> *"One way to measure success in terms of the budget is to see if they spend the budget that they have … Spending 100% of budget is part of the success. But you can't measure success."*
>
> –Municipal Official

> *"In March when we do an assessment, the first thing we look at is the budget, how we look at how much of the budget has been spent until March. The budget is an indicator of success."*
>
> –Municipal Official

Currently, there are no requirements to rigorously evaluate the impact of the IDP's policies or programs on the community. On the other hand, there are requirements to report on the percentage of budget spent down, and on certain IDP activities and outcomes (e.g. number of meetings held or number of houses built). This can lead IDP Mangers to have an inaccurate **mental model** of the IDP success. Because the required indicators are concrete, easily measurable, and **salient,** IDP Managers perceive the IDP's success as strongly and perhaps exclusively correlated

with outcomes such as budget spending and IDP execution. Thus, they may not consider or be motivated to collect further evidence to demonstrate impact, or to improve future policy decisions.

Emerging directions to improve the use of evidence in policy-making

Designing and implementing concrete solutions to increase the use of evidence in the IDP were outside the scope of this current work. However, the behavioral barriers we uncovered point to several directions that policy-makers across the Western Cape and beyond could consider in order to improve local policy-making practices and outcomes.

1 **Showcase examples of evidence-use in local policy-making and celebrate champions**

▶ Spotlight successful policies that resulted from meaningful collection and consideration of evidence. For example, municipalities could host a TV or radio spot to describe important policies and how they were developed based on consideration of evidence.

▶ Send a signal to IDP Managers that the government values evidence use by publicly recognizing individuals who demonstrate that they are committed to the meaningful use of evidence in policy-making processes. For example, provincial level governments could designate one individual municipal official as the "IDP Manager of the year" and hold an award ceremony for this person, recognizing their use of evidence as both innovative and achievable for others.

2 **Make it easier for policy-makers to request and collect evidence throughout the policy-making process**

▶ Provide resources to policy-makers at opportune moments (e.g. times when they are experiencing less scarcity of time and resources) to help them request and gather evidence from various sources. For example, during the IDP preparation period, IDP Managers could be sent reminders through official channels to gather evidence alongside lists of evidence sources or innovative approaches (e.g. how to engage and solicit input from underrepresented groups).

▶ Make relevance, trustworthiness, and applicability of evidence for policy-making decisions clear and prominent. For example, researchers and technical experts from local universities could partner with municipalities to verify available evidence and label its topic area, key takeaways, quality/trustworthiness, and how it could be used by local policy-makers for the municipality.

3 Create accountability mechanisms that ensure policy-makers consult evidence

▶ Include impact outcomes in policy assessments. For example, before choosing IDP priorities, policy-makers could be given a template that requires them to specify a policy's intended impact on the community, and name indicators for measuring said impact. At the end of each year, they could be asked to report back on the progress of the previous year's impact indicators.

▶ Publicly announce IDP impact goals to the local community. For example, municipalities could place a billboard in a high-visibility location within the community to list key measurable impact goals for policies each IDP cycle.

➤➤ *Conclusion*

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The use of evidence to inform local policy-making is instrumental to improving policy outcomes. Our research on the barriers to evidence-use by local governments in the Western Cape province of South Africa suggests that although institutional challenges, such as poor evidence quality or insufficient access to data, are undoubtedly important, IDP Managers may also face behavioral barriers that hinder the effective use of evidence in the IDP process. While this work is most relevant to the specific context of the Western Cape province, the insights may be relevant to other contexts.

Truly understanding behavioral barriers to evidence use is in its nascent stages following this work. However, we believe that even the most valiant attempts to address systemic policy issues will remain unsuccessful if they fail to acknowledge the human psychology of policy-makers as individual decision-makers. As with many policy problems designed by humans for humans, effective solutions to increase evidence use should seek to address not only systemic issues but also behavioral barriers, with careful consideration given to their interdependencies and contexts.

We hope that in their efforts to devise solutions to increase and improve evidence use in policy-making, local and national-level policy-makers will look beyond what may appear as intractable systemic barriers, and will consider employing a behavioral lens. While behavioral science is not a panacea for problems related to evidence use, it may be more than an inexpensive, feasible alternative, but rather an indispensable approach.

If you are interested in learning more about our work, please reach out to lcojocaru@ideas42.org

Endnotes

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