AOSIS

How relationship and dialogue facilitate evidence use: Lessons from African countries

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Matodzi M. Amisi[1]
Mohammed S. Awal[2]
Mine Pabari[3,4]
Dede Bedu-Addo[5]

Affiliations:
[1]Center for Learning on Evaluation and Results, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

[2]Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, Accra, Ghana

[3]Athari Advisory, Nairobi, Kenya

[4]Center for Learning on Evaluation and Results, Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

[5]Ghana Monitoring and Evaluation Forum, Accra, Ghana

Corresponding author:
Matodzi Amisi,
michellematodzi@gmail.com

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: This article shares lessons from four case studies, documenting experiences of evidence use in different public policies in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Objectives: Most literature on evidence use in Africa focuses either on one form of evidence, that is, evaluations, systematic reviews or on the systems governments develop to support evidence use. However, the use of evidence in policy is complex and requires systems, processes, tools and information to flow between different stakeholders. In this article, we demonstrate how relationships between knowledge generators and users were built and maintained in the case studies, and how these relationships were critical for evidence use.

Method: The case studies were amongst eight case studies carried out for the book entitled 'Using Evidence in Policy and Practice: Lessons from Africa'. Ethnographic case studies drawn from both secondary and primary research, including interviews with key informants and extensive document reviews, were carried out. The research and writing process involved policymakers enabling the research to access participants' rich observations.

Results: The case studies demonstrate that initiatives to build relationships between different state agencies, between state and non-state actors and between non-state actors are critical to enable organisations to use evidence. This can be enabled by the creation of spaces for dialogue that are sensitively facilitated and ongoing for actors to be aware of evidence, understand the evidence and be motivated to use the evidence.

Conclusion: Mutually beneficial and trustful relationships between individuals and institutions in different sectors are conduits through which information flows between sectors, new insights are generated and evidence used.

Keywords: evidence; evidence use; evaluation use; evidence use systems; relationships.

Introduction

A growing recognition within the field of evidence-informed policy and practice or evidence-informed decision-making is that policy and decision-making are political processes informed by the values, culture and experiences of policymakers and practitioners as well as technical considerations such as the fit with existing systems, human resources and budgets (Du Toit 2012; Oliver & Faul 2018; Parkhurst 2017). In addition, knowledge generation is not the sole domain of researchers (Weber et al. 2014). Policymakers and implementers also hold knowledge and expertise that researchers may not possess, and this knowledge and experience is important not only in the uptake of research but also in how research evidence is generated (Amisi 2015; Stewart, Dyal & Langer 2017). Evidence use is increasingly viewed as a social process, aided by processes that promote information flows between individuals and organisations, and by the collective interpretation of existing knowledge (Amisi, Buthelezi & Magangoe 2020; Rickinson & Edwards 2021). In this understanding of evidence use, the relationships between different stakeholders in the policy ecosystem are critical enablers for the use of evidence in policy and practice. Understanding who is taking part in different policy processes, research and evaluation and to whom they are connected (their networks) and how they access information is an important building block for promoting the use of evidence in policy (Oliver & Faul 2018). Yet, relational aspects of evidence use do not receive adequate attention in the evidence-based policymaking literature (Oliver & Faul 2018), with researchers and development practitioners tending to focus more on the development of evidence tools to support integration of evidence in policy (Stewart & Smith 2015).

Relationships between stakeholders in policy ecosystems are shaped by what happens in both formal and informal networks. Weyrauch, Echt and Suliman (2016) argue that networks of relationships can be broadly classified into two categories. Firstly, there are the relationships between state agencies for policy design and implementation. These are formal networks dictated by statutory requirements either in the country's constitution or in sectoral legislation that spells out roles and responsibilities and how different institutions of government should cooperate. These relationships are further shaped by the politics of the country as well as the nature and quality of democracy. For example, the South African constitution defines how national, provincial and municipal governments should cooperate in the delivery of services. However, within these formal networks, individual policy actors have agency to establish interpersonal relationships that can promote or hinder cooperation between institutions (Oliver & Faul 2018; Amisi et al. 2020).

The second category are relationships between state agencies and non-state actors such as researchers, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the public. In addition, the relationship between various non-state actors can also facilitate or impede the use of evidence (Amisi et al. 2021). Non-state actors can vary from small community-based organisations, local and international non-governmental organisations and those representing the voice of communites. Sherriff et al. (2019) stressed the importance of including communities in research processes designed to shape their lived experiences, particularly disenfranchised communities that are extensively researched.

Although the relationship between researchers and policymakers receives attention in studies on evidence-informed policy and practice (Stewart et al. 2017), the relationships within government, between state and non-state actors and amongst non-state actors are also important predictors of the degree to which different types of evidence are used and the quality of the use. This article takes a closer look at the relational aspects that enable evidence use by drawing on data from the four case studies to argue for the importance of relationships and dialogue in evidence use.

Background

This article shares lessons from four of eight case studies carried out to understand the facilitators of, and barriers to, evidence use in Africa. The case study research took place in five countries and one explored policymaking at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The eight case studies were published in a book edited by Goldman and Pabari (2020).

The research used an analytical framework (Figure 1) drawn from existing work by Langer et al. (2020) and Weyrauch et al. (2016). The framework recognises evidence use as behaviour change, meaning individual policy actors, implementers and researchers or evaluators need to act with intent (different from the traditional ways they do their work) for evidence to be used in practice. The framework further recognises and works with the complexity of evidence use, considers contextual influencers and breaks down an
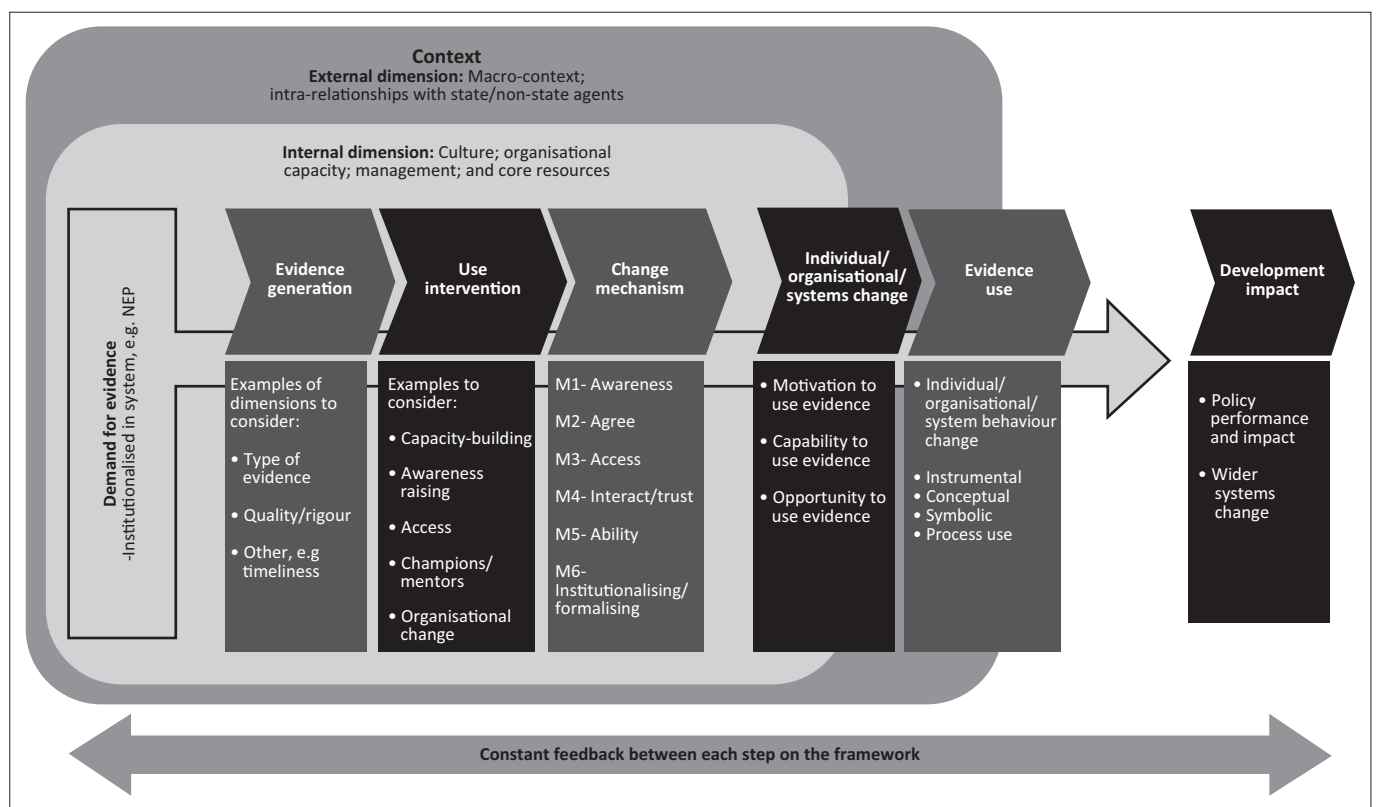
Source: Langer, L., Goldman, I. & Pabari, M., 2020, *Analytical framework used to guide case study research. In Using evidence for policy and practice - Lessons from Africa*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, NY.

FIGURE 1: Analytical framework.

evidence journey into the ways in which evidence is generated, the interventions made to ensure evidence use, the change mechanisms that arise as a result and the relationships between the evidence journey and the immediate and wider outcomes that emerge.

An important element of the framework is the recognition that context matters and that relationships are a core contextual factor influencing evidence use in policymaking and decision-making. The framework acknowledges that relationships function within broader systems of organisations, values, incentive mechanisms, culture, and so on, which influence decisions taken. This article will illustrate how relationships and dialogue mediate, and moderate evidence use in the selected case studies. The article will explore use interventions implemented through the evidence journey that strengthened and built relationships between stakeholders, how that activated different mechanisms to produce individual, organisational and system changes.

The article departs from a tendency to focus on evidence generation tools (Stewart & Smith 2015) to understand how evidence is used in policy. It also offers a different perspective to evidence use literature that has focued on institutional arrangements or forms of systems government implement to support evidence use (Chirau, Blaser-Mapitsa & Amisi 2021; Goldman et al. 2015).

Methods

The eight case studies were from countries linked to the Twende Mbele programme. Twende Mbele is a partnership of African governments promoting the collaboration in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to improve the government performance. Focusing on countries collaborating in Twende Mbele offered the research ready access to policymakers and the potential to use the book itself as a change intervention in these countries (Goldman & Pabari 2020). Researchers of the original case studies and this article worked with policymakers who played an active role in the research and writing of case studies. This provided insights to the internal working of the policy environment that would otherwise not be possible.

We draw on four case studies: (1) the ethnographic case study of the diagnostic review of South African government's response to violence against women and children (VAWC); (2) the case study traced how the evaluation commissioned under the National Evaluation System by the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and Department of Social Development (DSD) was used (Amisi et al. 2020); (3) the Kenya case study focused on the role of a Parliamentary committee in the revision of *Kenya's Wildlife Conservation and Management Act of 2013* (Pabari et al. 2020) and (4) the Ghana case study looked at the role that civil society at district level can have in enabling use of data in the improvement of sanitation services (Smith et al. 2020). Unlike the other case studies, the EVOWAS case study focused on policymaking at

regional level. The case study traces a policy process to get a new directive on tobacco taxation adopted (Mane, Diagne & Tiemtore 2020).

These four case studies were selected as relational aspects to evidence use had been identified. Each of these case studies were reanalysed using the analytical framework (Figure 1) with a focus on identifying inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral relational aspects that enabled evidence use. We focused on the external context dimension of the framework to identify significant relationships, use interventions implemented and change mechanisms activated and how they enable use. In addition, the authors were involved in various roles in the original research teams and were able to draw on their insights from the research process.

Limitations

Most of the data collected in the case studies were qualitative and relied on self-reporting from the research participants. Efforts were made to triangulate self-reported data with other records and existing literature where possible. The intention of the research was not to arrive at definitive 'causes' of evidence use, but rather to understand and explain the facilitators and barriers to evidence use. Therefore, in this article, we do not present any quantitative measures but draw on reflections of key stakeholders interviewed and other available records.

Findings: The relational aspect of evidence use

We present findings and lessons from the four case studies about how relationships can be pathways through which policy actors and practitioners acquire evidence, evaluate its usefulness and act on it while also enriching the process of empirical knowledge generation.

Collaborative management of knowledge generation

One of the findings from the case studies is that evidence use must be considered during the design of the evidence production process. For example, in the tobacco control in West Africa case study, where action research in ECOWAS countries was commissioned to support tobacco tax reforms. The Consortium for Economic and Social Research, in Senegal, was hired to lead the action research. Participatory approaches were used, involving several stakeholders, particularly influential actors such as the chairperson of the Customs Commission of ECOWAS. Structures were established to enable stakeholders' effective participation. Steering committees were set up in each country and regionally to oversee the project, and a scientific committee was set up as the validation body for the documents and procedures. The different committees held several meetings and discussions as and when needed and these discussions were facilitated to ensure that participation of all stakeholders and productive engagements and committees provided

space for ongoing dialogue and debate on the research and the policy at hand. Interaction between researchers and policy actors was weaved into the methods of the action research, with officials from the tax administration, customs administration and statistical bodies participating in the research. The diversity of the participating voices demonstrated political commitment to solving the problem of tobacco use, and open communication and trust between the stakeholders enabled the action research process to shape individual countries' tobacco policies and their collaboration within the ECOWAS.

In the Ghana sanitation case study, a consultative group was set up to facilitate the co-creation of methodologies and approaches used to generate the evidence as well as jointly engage in making sense of the evidence. A consultative group of government data-producing agencies at the central government level was formed, which were responsible for all sectors assessed in the District League Table (DLT), together with the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and UNICEF, Ghana. The group meets annually to review the indicators used in the DLT performance assessment. This annual review enables the building of relationships and creates a sense of ownership, ultimately strengthening evidence uptake from the findings of the DLT.

These case studies demonstrate that formalised multi-stakeholder project-management processes such as steering committees, reference groups and advisory groups can be valuable use interventions that build relationships and ensure that the voices of important stakeholders are included in the evidence-generation process. The involvement of different stakeholders during evidence generation enabled a sense of ownership and built trust. This created opportunity to use knowledge from different sectors and stakeholders in shaping the way in which a problem is understood, and policy questions framed.

Relationships between state agencies

In many policy areas, there are a range of policy actors and implementers who need to agree on policy changes, allocate resources, implement the policy and monitor the implementation. One of the observations from the VAWC case study is that the different ways in which the social sector departments and the criminal justice sector understood the causes of violence and how to respond to the problem shaped much of policy and the prevailing policy fragmentation in South Africa's response. The evaluation steering committee offered a space for some of the different institutional interpretations of the problem and policy positions to be debated. Although these discussions were not adequate to produce alignment of policies implemented by different ministries, it was an important starting point that this contestation was addressed and documented in the evaluation report.

This experience highlighted the need for government departments, who should be working together to address

complex social problems, to have ongoing intersectoral, evidence-informed policy discussions on the nature of the problem, how it is changing, what is working and not working and how to strengthen collaborative responses.

In the Kenyan case, the relationship between influential leaders in the executive and the legislature was central to the successful review of wildlife management legislation that resulted in the *Wildlife Conservation and Management Act of 2013*. Attempts to update the legislation had previously failed on multiple occasions. The two arms of government worked closely together throughout all stages of the review process, enabling meaningful consideration of evidence from a variety of different sources.

Relationships between non-state actors

Contradictory evidence from a diversity of sources can be a significant barrier to evidence use in policymaking processes (Goldman & Pabari 2020). In the case of Kenya, non-state actors were required to engage with one another during different unsuccessful attempts over the course of many years to revise out-of-date wildlife management legislation. Consequently, they were given the opportunity to engage with one another, exchange and negotiate evidence from different sources and perspectives and to build relationships. Relationships previously established between non-state actors meant that they were able to present shared evidence and positions to the policymakers. Establishing trust between non-state actors was the change mechanism that enabled them to reach agreement on the position to be tabled. This provided an opportunity and motivation to use the evidence because it made it easier for policymakers to act on the evidence. It also meant that time and energy could be focused on the policy questions as opposed to negotiating conflicting positions.

The importance of dialogue

The framework identifies interaction between stakeholders as needed mechanism to facilitate evidence use. In the long process of developing and implementing policy, stakeholders need to interact regularly. In these interactions, effective dialogue is important to ensure that different perspectives and a range of evidence are considered, and differences handled constructively. Dialogue between stakeholders provides a process for thinking together that creates new knowledge beyond individuals' understanding of an issue.

The four case studies found that interactions between individuals who are doing research and or evaluation, generating data, making policy, working with communities, and so on, allowed for mutual sharing of knowledge which were crucial for evidence use. Such interactions increased the likelihood that different forms of evidence would inform the thinking of policy actors and implementers, and that experiences from policy and implementation would, in turn, shape the kinds of questions researchers were asking. In the VAWC, the policy officials who participated in the evaluations

steering committee were participated in crafting the purpose, questions and scope of the evaluation. The team that was developing the terms of reference for the evaluation will consult with the policy units to understand the policy needs and invited inputs on the actual evaluation questions. Though this process was laborious, it took more than 6 months to agree on the questions and scope, and this was an important use intervention. The officials who participated in the evaluation steering committee later promoted the evaluation, and the process built agreement on the evaluation evidence to be generated and strengthened the capacity of policy units to demand evaluations.

In the Kenya case study, stakeholder forums were carefully facilitated to ensure that all participants had an equal voice and to avoid influencing the submissions to parliament. The Parliamentary Committee also used interventions such as convening debates between individuals with opposing views and arranging breakfast meetings to provide policymakers from both the executive and legislature the opportunity to engage with experts and to broaden their understanding of the realities and needs of the sector.

The sanitation case study in Ghana also demonstrates that the facilitation of regular meetings and engagements at multiple government levels to discuss the evidence allowed the development and fostering of relationships between researchers and policy actors. Consequently, it strengthened trust in the evidence and built abilities and confidence to use the research evidence. The findings reaffirmed the importance of interaction to build trust, and the role dialogue played in generating common knowledge.

Relationships enable information flow

The case studies found that interpersonal and organisational relationships that are trusting, appreciative and reciprocal facilitate intersectoral information sharing that is crucial for different types of evidence to be used in policy and practice. Trust between stakeholders is often cultivated in interactions that happen outside of the formal discussions. One of the reasons why bringing people together for dialogue facilitates use of evidence is that it allows people to make connections beyond the professional aspects through informal conversations and other such opportunities.

The VAWC case study demonstrated the importance of interpersonal networks in how the diagnostic review was interpreted and used. One of the respondents indicated how getting access to spaces of engagement is about relationships:

> 'This is all about relationships, who you know and who have access to, how much energy you have and how much you wish to engage, and how useful it is for you to engage, and how much they listen to you'. (Think tank)

A good example of this is how the DPME and the DSD were invited to share lessons from the VAWC diagnostic review and participate in several CSO dialogue spaces like the Soul City social innovation process and the Violence Prevention Forum. The invitations were often facilitated by individual researchers and CSO representatives who participated in the evaluation process at different stages. These individuals often shared information about the evaluations in their interactions with other civil society actors, researchers and donors. This type of sharing was better targeted and, together with other evidence-sharing tools used by DPME and DSD, ensured that the evaluation was well known and became an important input to the process for developing the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide.

Information flow is also important within a sub-sector. The Ghana sanitation case study demonstrates how established relationships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) enabled flow of information between international, national and local CSOs. The Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation (CONIWAS) coordinated international and local alliances for advocacy purposes, ensuring that information is not concentrated in big CSOs. Also, the DLT project is a process of translating and transferring complex government performance data into information that can be understood by local actors and community members.

An instructive lesson from the Ghana case is the importance of an empowered citizenry in evidence use. Civil society organisations hold workshops on DLT data with communities, providing data in infographics and other means which communities can understand. In addition, there is an SMS service through which communities can text requests for information and the information can be sent to their phone. Information flows to citizens communicate government performance, and they are given space to interrogate the data and interact with policy actors at district levels. This was found to improve the quality of the evidence generated by government and create pressure for policy actors to use the available knowledge.

Effective use of evidence requires flows of knowledge and information between different actors. As the case studies show, this should be understood as multidirectional. It is a dynamic process whereby different forms of knowledge are shared, made sense of and acted upon, and this is facilitated by improved relationships between actors in different sectors.

The important role of policy analysis or monitoring and evaluation units in facilitating relationships

Establishing relationships is demanding and an ongoing process. Even when trust has been established, it can be eroded easily if lines of communications are not kept open or problems are not addressed. From the case studies, we found that individuals and units responsible for research or policy analysis or M&E within public institutions often mediated relationships within government and between government and non-state stakeholders in the evidence journey. In the VAWC case study, the Chief Director of M&E within the DSD and an evaluation director at DPME mediated and facilitated relationships between evaluators, policymakers

and implementers, CSOs and other stakeholders. This included meeting different stakeholders outside of official steering committee meetings to identify needs, solve problems, keep policymakers engaged and promote the use of findings.

Similarly, in the case of Kenya, the Parliamentary Research Services played a critical role in establishing and maintaining relationships between the different stakeholders in the evidence journey. The Principal Research Officer supporting the Committee responsible for the revision of the *Wildlife Act* regularly and proactively reached out to stakeholders of the Act to ensure that they were informed about the process and about opportunities to provide submissions. In addition, the Committee chair was fastidious in ensuring transparency in the process – documenting the outcome of dialogue and debate and ensuring that the reasons for accepting or rejecting evidence and positions were communicated widely.

Discussion and implications

The findings demonstrate how interaction between stakeholders, both amongst state actors and between state actors and non-state actors, facilitates the use of evidence. However, interaction goes beyond actors coming together, and research being translated or transmitted from producers to users. Interaction implies a dynamic exchange between actors that allows information flow between actors and institutions. This process influences both the production of research evidence and its utilisation.

Quality relationships between state institutions, between state and non-state actors and between non-state actors are pathways through which policy actors and practitioners acquire evidence, evaluate its usefulness and act on it while also enriching the process of empirical knowledge generation (Amisi 2020). However, relationships are not always positive; a country's historical context, competition for resources and influence, politics, personalities, organisational cultures that encourage operating in silos and different beliefs can all militate against trusting relationships, particularly between sectors.

The case studies found that relationships can be, and must be, cultivated. Relationship building requires both quality and quantity of interactions and formal and informal meetings (Sherriff et al. 2019). In their work with Aboriginal communities, Sherriff et al. (2019) found that stakeholders often need frequent, small and informal interactions to build trust and mutual understanding. This was supported by Ward et al., quoted in Oliver and Faul (2018), who found that frequency of interactions and encounters was the key factor that led to agreement of goals and consensus on the meaning of evidence.

Attending meetings, responding to phone calls, meeting people for coffee or lunch and meeting to resolve problems, all of which are important to build and sustain professional relationships, takes working time. This is something that much of evidence-generation planning and funding does not cover, neither is it recognised as legitimate use of time in government nor NGOs.

The required level of investment in relationships cannot happen unless there is institutional commitment to collaborating with other agencies, where working together to solve complex problems is seen as a necessity not an inconvenience. Investment in collaboration and building relationships must be desired, valued, planned for and resourced. Policies can set the tone by demonstrating the value placed on collaboration. For example, the South African National Evaluation Policy Framework (2011) set necessary conditions to encourage collaborative evaluative processes (Chirau et al. 2021; Goldman et al. 2015). This enabled the evaluation of government's response to VAWC to be carried in ways that maximised relationship building.

Funders can also structure evaluation and research funding to allow researchers or evaluators to invest in building connections with programme implementers, participants and other stakeholders who will use the evidence. As the Ghana case study demonstrates, even government monitoring systems can be opened to collaborative generation and evidence interpretation. However, there must be the will and concomitant investment in changing the culture because organisational planning and delivery systems inadvertently encourage pursuit of narrowly defined products often at the cost of relationship building.

The case studies demonstrate that spaces for multi-sector dialogue need to be created to overcome organisational tendencies to work in silos and draw from limited sources of evidence. Dialogue is a deeper form of information sharing, and it is the direct relation between people, sharing thoughts and knowledge, collective thinking in a context where participants put aside their opinions and conclusions to fully understand the intended message (Jenlink & Benathy 2005; Rallis & Rossman 2000). This requires far more than having seminars, meetings or workshops where researchers or evaluators present their findings followed by a hurried discussion. It requires creating space for different voices to be heard, deliberately flattening knowledge hierarchies and cultivating trust. It also goes beyond evidence generators using their authority to push a specific evidence-generation tool to creating space for different forms of evidence and ways of knowing to equally shape what is known about a problem and potential solutions. This form of dialogue is a function of established relationships that allows professionals from different sectors to interact and constructively engage on complex problems where facts and values may be in dispute (Amisi 2020).

Creating spaces for dialogue means creating spaces for contemplation and engagement which can allow actors in a policy ecosystem to engage more directly with others that they otherwise might not engage with (Amisi 2020; Stewart & Smith 2015). Such spaces for interaction can be created as

part of the research process, such as the steering committees and discussion forums used in the tobacco and VAWC case studies. The case studies found that the involvement of different stakeholders during evidence generation can enable a sense of ownership and trust. This is supported by Sherriff et al. (2019) who also found that involvement of diverse stakeholders in research processes increased appreciation of the process and the outcomes. Also, research into the South African DPME evaluation system found that involving policymakers in the evaluation process increased integration of experiences and knowledge from implementation in the interpretation of evaluation findings and produced more actionable recommendations (Amisi 2015). Creating space for collaborative management of the evidence generation process can build on existing relationships in a sector and facilitate new ones as people get to know each other over the course of the evidence journey.

Collaborative evidence management can also be established through a policy coordination platform, as was the case with the DLT in Ghana. If connections between stakeholders are facilitated, actors exercise agency in pursuing relationships and communicating beyond the meetings in ways that influence policy changes (Oliver & Faul 2018). For interactions to be catalysts for further connections and information sharing, it is important to be conscious of the power dynamics between actors, different values, expectations, and so on. Language that assumes deficiency in government or communities or language that is too technical can also be a barrier to effective dialogue and therefore evidence use (Amisi 2020; Sherriff et al. 2019; Stewart et al. 2017).

Having a steering committees and reference groups, although important, is not adequate to enable relationships based on trust. There must be demonstrated commitment to collaboration, particularly from the chairperson or facilitator of the process and from the political leadership. Decisive, but empathetic, leadership and inclusive facilitation of the steering committee meetings was found to be crucial to elicit both subject matter knowledge and the relational expertise of participants in collaborative research processes. High levels of relational expertise, which refers to understanding one's own motivation, values and beliefs, and that of others (Rickinson & Edwards 2021), enable stakeholders to fully participate in the process and share their individual and organisational institutional knowledge. When motivations and expectations are articulated or are clear, it is easier for participants to find areas where they connect and enables them to trust the motives of others. Trust is a key ingredient for relationships that allow for knowledge exchange.

Effective interaction that facilitates dialogue that is meaningful enough to shift how actors and their institutions understand the issue at hand requires attention to issues of power and hierarchy. Therefore, it is important that such dialogue spaces, be it policy coordination platforms or evaluation steering committees, are sensitively convened and facilitated.

Sensitively facilitated dialogue that recognises and manages power can be facilitative of evidence use because individuals make sense of new information through a social sense-making process. Meaning and sense-making inherently is a result of sharing and testing emerging ideas with others (Ancona 2012). As the case studies show, people (institutions) use knowledge cumulatively. When coming across new information, individuals rely on existing mental structures that simplify and guide their understanding of a complex reality. They use existing cognitive frameworks to structure information and situations to foster understanding (Schoemaker & Russo 2016). These frames assist in the sense-making process but in cases where there are limited intersectoral or intercultural interactions, these frames can also lead to narrow interpretation and use of evidence. The Kenya and Ghana case studies demonstrate how dialogue and relationships of trust across sectors can enable individuals and institutions to draw on a range of sources of information and personal experience when acting on an issue, assisted by a social process of making sense of the evidence. This is supported by Palazzo, Krings and Hoffrage (2012) quoting Weick (1995) who argues that in the process of sense-making, people pull from several vocabularies that are mainly shaped by the dominant ideology of their society, by organisations they work for and their professional education.

It is important to recognise that researchers and policy actors do not always have the skills to facilitate dialogue and build cross-sectoral relationships. Researchers, evaluators and other knowledge generators often have a good understanding of research and their evidence-generation tools and methods; however, these tools are not capable of providing the technical and supply-side solutions policy actors are looking for (Stevens 2010; Stewart & Smith 2015). Yet, to effectively ensure use of knowledge generated through these different tools requires an understanding of the policy environment. It is not possible for those producing evidence to have all the knowledge of the policymaking departments (Amisi 2015; Stewart et al. 2019). At the same time, policy actors and implementers cannot be expected to have expertise in all evidence-generation processes. Therefore, skilled facilitators need to be used in intersectoral interactions particularly when dealing with complex social issues where there can be differing evidence, competing interests, differing values, and so on, which are rarely acknowledged or talked about (Amisi 2020). For example, having skilled facilitators (not researchers or government) in CSO-driven process in the VAWC case study enabled actors to be aware of different forms of evidence which informed decisions made by government.

All the case studies show that relationships must be built at an individual level and institutionalised at organisational level. Individual interpersonal relationships are the mechanisms through which individuals build trust, share information, and so on. However, if the established relationships are to have a sustained effect on how the

organisation accesses and uses information, it is important that there are institutional mechanisms established to sustain relationships.

The case studies also question the place of community voice and experience in current debates on evidence use in policy and practice. Traditional evidence-use interventions that focus on pushing research to policy actors can undermine non-research-based evidence (Du Toit 2012; Parkhurst 2017). Traditional research approaches have been shown to contribute to further marginalisation of disadvantaged communities through culturally inappropriate data collection and decontextualised interpretation (Sherriff et al. 2019), or the use of measurements that are deficient and inapplicable to certain contexts (Boswell et al. 2019) or the exploitative nature of the research processes (Margaret 2005). The four case studies demonstrate that platforms for dialogue that allow for interaction between researchers, CSOs, government and international NGOs can democratise evidence-generation processes and mitigate against any one stakeholder having undue influence in policy. As the Ghana and Kenya cases show, these spaces can offer means to elevate communities' experiences and voice and avoid essentialising researcher or evaluator perspectives.

Conclusion

This article shares lessons from four African case studies that sought to explore the importance of relationship in evidence use. The research on which the policy brief is based used an analytical framework that recognises evidence use as a form of behaviour change. The article illustrated that to effectively shape the behaviour of policy actors and evidence generators in ways that support evidence-informed policy requires trusting relationships between individuals and organisations.

Interpersonal and organisational relationships that are trusting, appreciative and reciprocal facilitate intersectoral information sharing that is crucial for different types of evidence to be used in policy and practice. Relationship-building interventions can be implemented during the evidence-generation process and as part of follow-up and learning. Processes to build relationships must recognise and manage power and hierarchies of knowledge to limit domination of one form of evidence. The article shows how sensitively facilitated policy dialogue spaces are essential for building relationships between knowledge producers and users, as well as between users.

Monitoring and evaluation or research units within government and parliament can facilitate relationships between knowledge producers and policymakers and implementers, and this needs to be considered more explicitly in the management of these units. The article concludes with the caution that it is important to ensure that emphasis on evidence does not circumvent community choice and voice, as well as practitioners' experience.

Because of the methods used in the case studies, it is not possible to know if the level of evidence use could have been achieved without efforts to build relationships and spaces for dialogue. Perhaps, this can be a focus of future research. What the article does indicate is that where there are positive inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral relationships it makes sharing evidence and integrating that evidence to policies and decisions much easier. Therefore, in efforts to improve evidence use, it is important to pay attention to individual and organisational relations.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

M.M.A. is the lead author and contributed to the VAWC case study; M.S.A is co-author and contributed to the Ghana sanitation case study. M.P. is co-author and co-editor of the book from which the cases are drawn, and contributed to the case on civil society engagement in the *Wildlife Conservation and Management Act*, Kenya. D.B-A. is co-author and contributed to the Ghana sanitation case study.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

Amisi, M.M., 2015, 'Development of South Africa's national evaluation policy and system 2011–2014', *African Evaluation Journal* 3(1), 7. https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v3i1.109

Amisi, M.M., 2020, *The Violence Prevention Forum: A model for intersectoral collaboration to prevent violence*, The Violence Prevention Forum, viewed n.d, from https://www.violence-prevention.org/docrepo/VPF%20-%20A%20model%20for%20intersectoral%20collaboration%20to%20prevent%20violence%2012.1.21.pdf.

Amisi, M.M., Awal, M., Pabari, M. & Bedu-Addo, A.D., 2021, *How relationships and dialogue facilitate evidence use*, CLEAR-AA. Results, Johannesburg, p. 6.

Amisi, M.M., Buthelezi, T. & Magangoe, S., 2020, 'Use of evidence in a complex social programme: Case of an evaluation of the state's response to violence against women and children in South Africa', in I. Goldman & M. Pabari (eds.), *Using evidence in policy and practice: Lessons from Africa*, pp. 92–132, Routledge, London.

Ancona, D., 2012, *The handbook for teaching leadership: Knowing, doing, and being*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, CA.

Boswell, B., Erasmus, Z., Johannes, S., Mahomed, S. & Ratele, K., 2019, 'Racist science: The burden of black bodies and minds', *The Thinker: A Pan-African Quarterly for Thought Leaders* 81, 4–8.

Chirau, T., Blaser-Mapitsa, C. & Amisi, M.M., 2021, 'Policies for evidence: A comparative analysis of Africa's national evaluation policy landscape', *Evidence and Policy* 17(3), 535–548. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16104826256918

Du Toit, A., 2012, 'Making sense of "evidence": Notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policy making', PLAAS Working Paper, 76, s.n., Bellville.

Goldman, I., Mathe, J.E., Jacob, C., Hercules, A., Amisi, M., Buthelezi, T. et al., 2015, 'Developing South Africa's national evaluation policy and system: First lessons learned', *African Evaluation Journal* 3(1), a107. https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v3i1.107

Goldman, I. & Pabari, M., 2020, *Using evidence in policy and practice: Lessons from Africa*, London, Routledge.

Jenlink, P.M. & Benathy, B.H., 2005, 'Dialogue: Conversation as culture building and consciousness evolving', in P.M. Jenlink & B.H. Benathy (eds.), *Dialogue as a means of collective communication*, p. 162, Kluwer Academic and Plenum Publishers, New York.

Langer, L., Goldman, I. & Pabari, M., 2020, *Analytical framework used to guide case study research. In Using evidence for policy and practice - Lessons from Africa*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, NY.

Mane, P.Y.B., Diagne, A. & Tiemtore, S., 2020, 'Using evidence for tobacco control in West Africa', in I. Goldman & M. Pabari (eds.), *Using evidence in policy and practice: Lessons from Africa*, pp. 206–223, London, Routledge.

Margaret, K., 2005, 'Emerging from the margins: Indigenous methodologies', in L. Brown & S. Strega (eds.), *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*, pp. 19–36, Canadian Scholars' Press/Women's Press, Toronto.

Oliver, K. & Faul, M., 2018, 'Editorial: Networks and network analysis in evidence, policy and practice', *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice* 14(3), 369–379. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426418X15314037224597

Pabari, M., Tessema, Y., Abdalla, A., Wakhungu, J., Odhowa A.J. & Kaka, A., 2020, 'Parliament and public participation in Kenya: The case of the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act', in I. Goldman & M. Pabari (eds.), *Using evidence in policy and practice: Lessons from Africa*, pp. 169–187, London, Routledge.

Palazzo, G., Krings, F. & Hoffrage, U., 2012, 'Ethical blindness', *Journal of Business Ethics* 109(3), 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1130-4

Parkhurst, J., 2017, *The politics of evidence: From evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Rallis, S.F. & Rossman, G.B., 2000, 'Dialogue for learning: Evaluator as critical friend', *New Directions for Evaluation* 2000(86), 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1174

Rickinson, M. & Edwards, A., 2021, 'The relational features of evidence use', *Cambridge Journal of Education* 51(1), 1–18.

Schoemaker, P. & Russo, J., 2016, *Decision-making*, The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Strategic Management. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-94848-2

Sherriff, S., Miller, H., Tong, A., Williamson, A., Muthayya, S., Sally, R. et al., 2019, 'Building trust and sharing power for co-creation in Aboriginal health research: A stakeholder interview study', *Evidence & Policy A Journal of Research Debate and Practice* 15(3), 371–392. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426419X15524681005401

Smith, L., Bedu-Addo, D., Awal, M. & Mensah, A., 2020, 'The contribution of civil society generated evidence to the improvement of sanitation services in Ghana', in I. Goldman & M. Pabari (eds.), *Using evidence in policy and practice: Lessons from Africa*, pp. 188–205, London, Routledge.

Stevens, A., 2010, 'Telling policy stories: An ethnographic study of the use of evidence in policy-making in the UK', *Journal of Social Policy* 40(2), 237–255. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279410000723

Stewart, E. & Smith, K., 2015, '"Black magic" and "gold dust": The epistemic and political uses of evidence tools in public health policy making', *Evidence and Policy* 11(3), 415–437. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426415X14381786400158

Stewart, R., Dayal, H. & Langer, L., 2017, 'Terminology and tensions within evidence-informed decision-making in South Africa over a 15-year period', *Research for All* 1(2), 252–264. https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.2.03

Stewart, R., Dayal, H., Langer, L. & Van Rooyen, C., 2019, 'The evidence ecosystem in South Africa: Gresilience and institutionalisation of evidence use', *Palgrave Communications* 5, 90. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0303-0

Weber, E., Belsky, J., Lach, D. & Cheng, A., 2014, 'The value of practice-based knowledge', *Society and Natural Resources* 27(10), 1071–1088. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2014.919168

Weyrauch, V., Echt, L. & Suliman, S., 2016, *Knowledge into policy: Going beyond 'Context matters'*, viewed n.d., from https://www.inasp.info/sites/default/files/2018-04/Going%20beyond%20context%20matters%20%E2%80%93%20framework.pdf