Lesson Learning / Promoting Uptake and Use of Evaluation Evidence by Policy and Decision Makers

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January 2010
1. Types of evidence and the rationale for using evidence by policy and decision makers

1.1 The purpose of using evidence

Over the past decade the UK government has increasingly been promoting the concept of Evidence Based Policy (EBP). EBP is an approach that “helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation” (Davies 2004: 3). The pursuit of EBP is based on the premise that policy decisions should be better informed by available evidence and should include rational analysis. This is because policy that is based on systematic evidence is seen to produce better outcomes (Sutcliffe and Court 2005).

Needless to say, there are many clear benefits in promoting the use of systematic evidence in policy. Without evidence, policy makers must fall back on intuition, ideology or conventional wisdom. Policies that haven’t been informed by good evidence and analysis are more likely to result in costly mistakes (Banks 2009). Evidence and analysis that is robust and publicly available can serve as an important counterweight to the influence of sectional interests, enabling the wider community to be better informed about what is at stake in interest groups’ proposals, and enfranchising those who would bear the costs of implementing them (ibid). In some cases reaching consensus is made easier by the presentation of evidence (Bullock et al. 2001). Monitoring and evaluations provide evidence which is necessary to achieve evidence based policy making, evidence based management and evidence based accountability. For this reason, M&E should not be viewed as a narrow, technocratic activity (MacKay 2007).

There are countless success stories of evidence influencing policy. For instance, a comprehensive research report produced by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) provided the information and data required for policymakers to develop a model legislation on telecommunications in Somaliland (IDRC 2009). In Guatemala, USAID’s programme research is used by the government as evidence to justify reforms in key areas of education. From the UK, examples may be drawn particularly from cases regarding health, literacy, labour market participation and pre-schooling (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). Davies (2004) highlights some notable examples as being: Sure Start Programme, the Educational Maintenance Allowance, the Connexions programme (DfES), and the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Demonstration project, amongst others. Bullock et al (2001) lists examples from around the UK drawing on the experience of various sectors to demonstrate that evidence does influence policy.

1.2 Types of Evidence

The breadth of what is considered evidence is wide and dynamic, with the UK Cabinet Office defining it as “expert knowledge; published research; existing research; stakeholder consultations; previous policy evaluations; the Internet; outcomes from consultations; costing of policy options; output from statistical modelling” (Cabinet Office, 1999: 33, White Paper Modernising Government in Sutcliffe and Court 2005:3). Due to the limitations in scope, this report will interpret evidence broadly as any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge. The discussion below will refer to any systematic processes of critical investigation and evaluation, including data collection and analysis and the different types of action research. However, it is important to emphasize that in reality not all forms of evidence share equal importance. Departments and units within governments tend to make hierarchical judgements in choosing what evidence to use. These decisions are deeply embedded in assumptions over validity and power (Sutcliffe and Court 2005).
2. Factors which shape the use of evidence and promote learning

There seems to be general agreement in the empirical literature on the themes emerging as key to understanding whether evidence gets used. The factors shaping the uptake of evidence relate to the nature and distribution method of the evidence, the links between researchers/evaluators and policy/decision makers and the policy context. Each of these factors can be unwrapped to display inherent complexities.

2.1 Types of Evidence

2.1.1. Quality & Accuracy

The quality of the evidence is a crucial factor shaping whether or not it will be used. A key reason given by policy makers and practitioners for not using evidence is doubt about its methodological adequacy. However, the relationship between quality and use of evidence is not straightforward as it depends on how “quality” gets defined. Questions about the quality of evidence are linked to what counts as good, or appropriate, evidence in different sectors and settings. For instance, it is often assumed that policy makers prefer quantitative research that offers statistical, objective data and “hard” facts (Nutley et al. 2007: 68). According to ODI (2005), government departments prefer empirical, “hard” evidence, viewing it as the most reliable form of evidence. But different sectors and disciplines establish a different hierarchy of evidence.

As regards evaluation evidence, there are also major disagreements as to what comprises “best” evidence. Randomised Control Trials (RCT) have recently been nominated as the “gold standard” by one school of evaluators (comprising the Poverty Action Lab at MIT and the Centre for Global Development) (Bamberger 2008). RCT is perceived as being more rigorous; particularly in health type sector environments where there is primarily a deductivist research culture (while in social learning disciplines RCTs are critiqued for lacking validity by not capturing social complexities). Bamberger (2008) points out that the debate on what constitutes good evidence has created additional challenges for ensuring the use of evaluation findings. Technical debates among evaluation specialists are now pursued to decide evaluation methods, rather than consultations with intended users, as to what methods would be most useful to answer their priority questions.

2.1.2 Credibility

Evidence is more likely to be accessed and used when it comes from a credible and trusted individual or organisation, or when it is supported by experts in the field (Nutley et al. 2007; Crewe and Young 2002). As it is very difficult for policymakers to check evidence, they often rely on the reputation of the source (ibid; ODI 2006). A donor’s credibility, for instance, opens doors in the corridors of policy making in developing countries (Carden 2009). The credibility of evidence is also judged in terms of its fit with professional or practice wisdom (Nutley et al. 2007).

2.1.3 Timeliness & Practicality

The evidence needs to match the needs of policymakers who typically work to tight timescales and need information at short notice (Nutley et al. 2007). Questions about the timeliness of evidence are in part concerned with whether the findings are relevant in the here and now to policy makers’ and practitioners’ requirements. Policy makers are also interested in practical evidence. They often want research to give definitive answers, firm recommendations and clear directions for action. They complain that evidence is often inconclusive or else offers no practical guidance for applying findings in their daily work (Nutley et al. 2007). A similar trend can be observed in evaluation evidence. According to Schaumburg-Muller (2005: 212), a frequent remark by staff members in technical and policy departments of aid organisations about the conclusions and lessons provided by evaluations is that they already know the findings. Likewise, the NAO (2009:37) interviews with DFID staff reveal that senior management teams and country heads have felt that the CPEs added little insights, and hence the recommendations did not have great impact.
2.1.4 Presentation

The presentation of findings and evidence is another factor affecting their uptake by policymakers. Decision makers are often put off by the academic style of reporting or the complex analyses that may accompany evidence findings. Presentation is crucial: evidence must be attractive, comprehensible, “user-friendly”, visually appealing, concise and jargon-free (Nutley et al. 2007; Carden 2009). Summaries and syntheses of evidence may be important too: policy makers and practitioners often say that the sheer volume of evidence that exists is a barrier to using it (ibid). On the other hand, if messages are made simple they are then more likely to be manipulated by policy makers to gloss over the complexity of proposed solutions (Crewe and Young 2002).

2.2 The links between evidence (researchers/evaluators) and policy (policy makers)

Lack of physical access to evidence, particularly if linked to poor evidence dissemination within and between organisations, is a major barrier to evidence use and learning. One of the best predictors of evidence use is the extent and strength of linkages between researchers and policy makers (Nutley et al. 2007; Crewe and Young 2002). The linkages may be formal, such as through the form of knowledge brokers (individuals and agencies who play an intermediary role between evidence and its potential users). They may also be informal and ad hoc and consist of personal contact through email exchanges or telephone conversations. Interpersonal routes for getting findings into use seem particularly effective. Studies suggest that personal contact and face-to-face interactions are the most likely to encourage policy and practise use of evidence, which suggests that evidence use may above all be a social process (Nutley et al. 2008). In sum, ongoing interaction and dialogue, a two-way communication between researchers/evaluators and users, establishing a relationship of trust, and sustained efforts towards dissemination significantly increase the chances that evidence will be used.

2.3 The context: politics and institutions

A final yet crucial factor shaping the use of evidence findings, and one which has received increasing attention in the literature, is the role played by the context in which evidence and policy takes place. Weiss (1977 in Sutcliffe and Court 2005) categorises the factors which policy and practice depend on into four I’s: information, interests, ideologies and institutions. In general, the empirical literature reviewed agrees with this classification, pointing to the fact that evidence is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for any decision making process. The context factor thickens once it is understood that policy makers and researchers/evaluators are not only limited by political, social and economic structures but also by the assumptions that underlie them, even if they push these limits on occasions (Crewe and Young 2002).

2.3.1 Interests and Ideologies

Ideology (the systems of beliefs, moral and ethical values and political orientations that guide policy makers’ actions), together with interests (which are first and foremost the political and personal self-interests of those involved) interact in shaping the way decisions are made. In general, evidence will be used where its findings are aligned and compatible with the current ideological environment, with personal values and with individual and agency interests (Crewe and Young 2002; Nutley et al. 2007). Evidence needs to fit with existing ways of thinking within the policy context, or else must be sufficiently challenging and convincing to be able to overturn these (ibid). Hence, findings that simply confirm existing policy or require small scale changes are most likely to be used. Evidence use is also more likely where findings dovetail rather than conflict with other sources of information or when only incremental changes are required from policy. In the realms of evaluation, the notion that stakeholders should recognize their ideas and experiences in evaluations if they are to utilize the results is leading to the development and application of evaluation methods and practices that increasingly focus on the user (Van der Meer and Edelenbos 2006).

2.3.2. Institutions

Institutions are the “organisations within which policy makers act with their own histories, cultures and constraints, and that in turn will determine how policy makers define their interests, ideologies and information, and the ways in which decisions are made” (Weiss 1999 in Nutley et al. 2007). Lovell and Kalinich (1992 in Nutley 2007) studied the use of research by senior administrators and programme managers within a US not-for-profit organisation and concluded that the uptake of research was most heavily influenced by personal and internal political concerns, rather than the organisational structure itself. Nevertheless, organisational cultures are likely to play a crucial role in supporting or inhibiting the use of
evidence (Nutley et al. 2007). The integration between researchers/evaluators, administrators, programme managers within the organisation, alongside the role of the research unit are of significance (ibid). Questions linked to wider organisational contexts such as lack of time to search for evidence and read about findings are commonly reported as barriers to evidence use amongst practitioners across a wide range of settings. Internal organisational politics can inhibit the uptake of evidence (Nutley et al. 2007). Many of the barriers, and enablers, to the use of evidence are linked to professional and cultural issues and hence will vary across disciplinary and organisational boundaries (ibid).

In addition to policy contexts, the context within which researchers/evaluators themselves operate can also have a powerful influence on the use of evidence.

3. How to promote evidence uptake and greater lesson learning

An enormous variety of approaches have been taken to try to improve the use of evidence. There is no substantial and robust evidence about “what works” to improve evidence use in the policy arena. Moreover, much of the best evidence available about effective evidence use strategies comes from the healthcare field and it remains unclear whether effective evidence use strategies may be diffused across contexts. Nevertheless, it seems that in order to understand the potential of improving the uptake of evidence by the policy cycle it is firstly necessary to briefly examine the policy stages and then secondly to assess how to improve evidence use in this context.

3.1 Evidence is not the only factor influencing policy making

Evidence has the possibility to influence the policy process at any stage. ODI (2005) splits the policy processes into four categories: 1) Agenda Setting, 2) Policy Formulation, 3) Policy Implementation, and 4) Monitoring and Policy Evaluation. In all four stages, the credibility and practicality of evidence are of significance (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). For each of the parts of the policy process, different types of evidence are often necessary. Therefore, it is likely that success in influencing an agenda, for example, might require a different kind of approach than one for influencing the implementation of policy. Time considerations are also likely to influence the mechanisms available to mobilise evidence.

The four stages of the policy cycle have been widely critiqued for presenting a simplistic, linear and logical view of the policy process (Nutley et al. 2007). Policy processes are messy and complex rather than linear or cyclical. Strategies promoting the use of evidence should not assume any linear logic in the ordinary course of policymaking (Carden 2009). Policymaking is inherently a political process with evidence being only one amongst many factors influencing the process (Segone 2008). Many factors compete with evidence to take centre stage in policy formulation both at an individual level and at an organisational level such as interests, values, judgements, power relations, as discussed above (Sutcliffe and Court 2005; Crewe and Young 2002; Davies 2004). In addition, time constraints and the resultant pressure stand against the use of evidence. Pressure can result in a delay in the use of evidence, while assumptions, personal and institutional values form the forefront of knowledge (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). All of this suggests that researchers and evaluators intending to influence policy might have to anticipate, educate, and inform policy decisions and policymakers, more or less consciously. Carden (2009) illustrates this point with an example from Senegal where poverty reduction researchers set up workshops for political leaders, including those in the opposition, to discuss economic developments before they emerged on the political agenda. They established their own credibility as helpful interveners so policymakers would seek out their advice when the moment arrived for a policy decision.

3.2 Ways to strengthen evaluation evidence uptake

Despite the uncertainty involved and the lack of concrete studies demonstrating the ideal ways to improve the use of evidence by decision makers, it is possible to suggest ways to strengthen the use of evidence, and specifically evaluation evidence, on the basis of the factors outlined above.
3.2.1 Creating ownership

According to Bamberger (2009), one of the key determinants of whether an evaluation will be used is the extent to which its clients and stakeholders are involved in all stages of the evaluation process. To be able to make evaluation evidence usable, the interests of the stakeholders must be correctly identified already at the beginning of the evaluation (Carlsson 2000). Segone (2008) suggests that getting policy-makers to own and use evidence involves getting commitment and buy-in at the most appropriate levels. In central government this usually means senior policy officials within the Ministry commissioning the evaluation as well as associated Ministries who would have a say in how the evaluation is used to sign up to the ownership of the project and the evidence that goes to support it. At the level of the “front line” service delivery it means getting key decision makers to “own” and champion the evidence that goes to support it (Davies 2004).

Additionally, basing the evaluation on a programme theory (logic) model developed in consultation with stakeholders is a good way to identify the key questions and hypotheses which the evaluation should address (Segone 2008).

3.2.2 Developing effective communication strategies and partnerships

Many potentially useful evaluations have little impact because the findings are not communicated to potential users in a way that is useful or comprehensible way (Barbinger 2008). Sanderson (2002) argues that it is necessary to ensure that all evaluation evidence is thoroughly reviewed and synthesized to inform policy thinking and appraisal. Certainly, different types of communication will work on different occasions according to a number of factors (Crewe and Young 2002). But it is important to “translate” the results of evaluations effectively to make them accessible to the policy making community (Segone 2008). Nutley (2004) suggests that researchers and evaluators should tell more stories when they package their findings for policy makers and place more emphasis on translating the results of their research into “good yarns”.

Another suggestion, presented by Van der Meer and Edelenbos (2006), consists of linking quantitative evaluation to qualitative analysis as these will have to be made sense by different actors concurrently and often in mutual consultation.

Concurrently, there is a need to improve the dialogue and encourage partnerships between policy makers and the evaluation community. It makes sense to expand this dialogue beyond one single policy issue or one single research project. The relationship between evaluators/researchers and policy makers shapes how much influence they have over each other (Crewe and Young 2002).

3.2.3 Including theory and expanding the scope in design

As policy influence is partly a matter of communication, technical rigour is a necessary but not sufficient part in the case of quality impact evaluations. According to White (2009), engaging policy makers entails adopting a broader range of techniques than just rigorous quantitative impact evaluation. Policy influence can be increased by using well-contextualised evaluation designs. White (2009) proposes using theory based evaluation, rather than the “black box” which simply reports the mean difference in outcomes between treated and untreated groups. For more complex interventions (including multi-sectoral), a more elaborated approach examining the theory behind the intervention – how the inputs should result in the intended outcomes – is useful. In other words, looking at policy relevant issues means moving beyond pure impact analysis and beyond purely quantitative approaches as a study simply of the impact of the treatment alone does not give all the policy information that is needed (ibid).

Additionally, a focus on outcomes may lose much of the variety and detail about interventions in which practitioners and policy makers are most interested, and which they view as critical in distinguishing between different approaches (Sanderson 2002).

3.2.4 Considering political context and timing

Context is an important factor affecting the uptake of evidence and hence understanding the political context of an evaluation is crucial. This is particularly of relevance as evaluations often address sensitive or even confidential issues, which require tact and discretion. Van der Meer and Edelenbos (2006) argue that it indispensable to give due attention to the “embeddedness of the evaluation in the policy field” which consists of examining the definitions and knowledge interests of other actors. A first step might be mapping the policy context around the issues involved and subsequently identifying the key stakeholders (Young 2008).
Considering the timing of the launch of the evaluation and its completion is likewise necessary. Evaluation evidence often fails to be taken into account by decision makers as evaluations are not undertaken when the questions being addressed are looked at by policy-makers. The timing of evaluations should be linked to the time schedule of policy processes at different levels (Segone 2008; Van der Meer and Edelenbos 2006).

3.2.5 Developing a follow up action plan

Developing a follow up action plan might prove to be a useful way to make sure that the evaluation recommendations are put into place (Bamberger 2008; Carlsson 2000). Many government and international agencies have standard procedures to monitor the implementation of evaluation recommendations. The World Bank, for instance, keeps a log of all recommendations included in its evaluations, management responses to these, and agreed actions with periodic follow-ups to report on the status of the agreed actions also taking place (Bamberger 2008). Not only should recommendations be followed up to ensure implementation but they should also be adapted to the situation of a local organisation. For instance, in his analysis of Sida’s development projects, Carlsson (2000) highlights that most organisations in Sida’s co-operating countries run their operation on a low budget and are rarely able to accommodate recommendations that require new investments.

3.2.6 Disseminating the findings to a wider audience

Finally, effective dissemination and ensuring wide access might be a key strategy to employ to get evidence into policy (Segone 2008). A major factor restricting the usefulness of an evaluation, and hence its potential for learning, is the fact that only a limited number of copies are distributed with readers usually being limited to a very small group at the core of the project (Carlsson 2000). But as more than one case has shown, activating public opinion can help attract and hold the interests of politicians and senior government officials (Carden 2009).

4. Concluding remarks

To summarise, it is seems important to take into account the strategies and mechanisms for effective evidence use as identified by Nutley et al. (2007) in the following brief list:

- **Dissemination**: circulating or presenting evidence to potential users, in formats that may be more or less tailored to their target audience
- **Interaction**: developing stronger links and collaborations between the research/evaluation and policy or practice communities
- **Social Influence**: relying on influential others, such as experts and peers, to inform individuals about evidence and to persuade them of its value
- **Facilitation**: enabling the use of evidence, through technical, financial and organisational and emotional support
- **Incentives and reinforcement**: using rewards and other forms of control to reinforce appropriate behaviour (these include mechanisms to increase the “pull” for evidence, such as requiring spending bids to be supported by an analysis of the existing evidence base, and mechanisms to facilitate evidence use, such as integrating analytical staff at all stages of the policy development process)

The reviewed literature suggests that evidence use is not likely to be amenable to manipulation through two or three key variables. This seems to be largely because policy making is usually a complex, shifting process involving a wide range of actors and underpinning assumptions. In order to maximise the use of evaluation evidence, it appears to be necessary to be as clear as possible about how policy is made at the relevant level and to discover the interests of the involved actors. It is important to improve the quality, relevance and credibility of evaluation evidence but it is also necessary to take into account the ways of communicating
findings, the establishment of a multi-voiced dialogue (drawing on personal contact) which considers the importance of context and the need for a dissemination strategy which would feed evidence into wider political debate. In the context of DFID, given the agency’s specific situation which is making policy in the UK and providing evidence into other National Processes, perhaps we need to have not just multi-voiced but multi-layered dialogues.

References


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