WORKING PAPER 7

Using Evidence to Reflect on South Africa's 20 Years of Democracy

Insights From Within the Policy Space

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Insights From Within the Policy Space

- Policy development and decision making is influenced by many factors, not the least of which is history.

- It is important to understand "evidence thinking" if evidence-based policy making is to be embedded into policy development and decision making. Critical considerations that define the way evidence is valued, acquired and used in the policy space are: Who is asking developmental questions, and what are they? Who generates the evidence? Who interprets and analyses the findings?

- Navigating the policy landscape requires strategic oversight, as there are complex webs of actors who influence policy. There is a divide between those who are seen to be producers of evidence (e.g. researchers) and those expected to use evidence (e.g. policy makers). Overcoming the research-policy divide is not just about bridging the gap through intermediaries who can translate research and other evidence into strategic and policy relevance. It involves building effective relationships and collaborative networks.

- There is a need to respect that, while both researchers and policy makers engage with evidence, the role and purpose of evidence differs. Policy makers engage with evidence in its broad sense, though with differing degrees of intensity and purpose. The question of capacity to use evidence at individual, organisational, system and institutional levels must be addressed as a collective.

- It is agreed by both researchers and policy makers that evidence cannot "speak for itself". When making decisions, all factors influencing policy need to be taken into consideration. Public opinion, political feasibility, policy impact and knowledge of local contexts are all forms of legitimate evidence for policy makers.

- It is important to understand that increasing access to more evidence will not necessarily lead to better policymaking. As more evidence is generated, stronger administrative and procedural capacity will be needed to harness the sheer volume of data and information.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

DPME	:	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
DST	:	Department of Science and Technology
HSRC	:	Human Sciences Research Council
M&E	:	Monitoring and Evaluation
PCAS	:	Policy Coordination and Advisory Service

Executive Summary

Many countries engage with evidence-based policy making and have adopted this approach and methodology to influence policy. Yet embedding it within differing contexts has remained elusive, especially in developing countries and younger democracies like South Africa. This working paper contextualises evidence-based policy making through a case study of using evidence to review and reflect on 20 years of democracy in South Africa. This review was done by a central government agency and provides insight into acquiring, analysing and using evidence from within a policy space.

The policy-research interface is a highly contested space where the extent to which evidence is actually used remains a socially constructed phenomenon based on what evidence is valued, and why. History matters, as policy development and decision making is influenced by many factors. It is important to understand "evidence thinking" if evidence-based policy making is to be embedded into policy development and decision making.

The Government of South Africa has committed to undertaking five-yearly reviews, reflecting on its work and progress to inform the next administration. The review process was an ambitious task which mobilised sector-wide researchers, key research institutions, government, business and civil society to use data and information to develop an evidence-informed narrative of where South Africa has come from as a country, how it arrived at where it is today, and what it needs to do going forward.

Navigating the policy landscape requires strategic oversight, as there are complex webs of actors who influence policy. Critical insights documented in the review process served to strengthen the evidence-based policy making approach in the South African context:

- Factors other than evidence influence policy review
- Building consensus and intermediation between researchers and policy makers depends on evidence champions
- Senior public service managers can be generators of evidence
- Constructing the narrative must involve all relevant stakeholders early in the process

Complexity in the public sector is inevitable when multiple agencies operate in the same policy space and when the rules of the game are not clearly communicated or interpreted by all actors in the same way. Complexities are also inherent in public administration and management systems, which influence several processes and systems important for evidence use. These include data and information systems, acquiring best available evidence, generating knowledge through effective analysis and synthesis, deliberative

processes in engaging with evidence, improving responsiveness, and building relationships and collaborative networks.

The review experience demonstrated that policy makers engage with evidence in its broad sense, though with differing degrees of intensity and purpose. Senior government officials who reviewed the content emphasised critical appraisal, interpretation, analysis and synthesis of the evidence base in a deliberative way. This was a key lesson that arose from the review process. The question of capacity to use evidence at individual, organisational, system and institutional levels must be addressed as a collective. Institutional restructuring is necessary to embed and support evidence practice, especially where new structures are introduced. Thus, conceptualising evidence use within contextual realities requires actors to move beyond the divide between policy makers and researchers in promoting evidence-based policy making.

1 Introduction

The role of evidence in decision making is well documented. There is general acceptance that the extent to which evidence is actually used is socially constructed, based on what evidence is valued, and why. This understanding ultimately influences "evidence-seeking behaviour". Increased attention on evidence in policy has resulted in a particular discourse among producers and users of research and other types of evidence (Sutcliff et al. 2005; Davies & Wright 2009; Newman et al. 2012; Liverani et al. 2013; Oliver et al. 2014; Wesselink et al. 2014). Originating from the UK Government, the evidence-based policy making approach has become sought after as a methodology to mobilise various role-players into actively sourcing, analysing and using evidence in the policy-making process. Many countries have taken up lessons from the UK experience and have adopted the approach and methodology, yet embedding it within differing policy contexts and practices has remained elusive, especially in developing countries and younger democracies like South Africa. As more efforts are made to engage with and use the approach within South Africa, the practice of evidence-based policy making has been documented with mixed experiences and perspectives. Positive and negative criticisms are emerging on its logic, mechanisms and inherent assumptions.

Public officials rarely document and share their experiences and practices in how evidence is actually sourced, analysed and used in a policy context, especially in implementing and reviewing policy. Yet accessing, interpreting, analysing and using evidence to inform the progress and performance of government interventions is core to all public policy processes.

This working paper contextualises evidence-based policymaking through a case study of using evidence to review and reflect on 20 years of democracy in South Africa, thereby providing insight into using the evidence-based policymaking approach from within a policy space. Reaching 20 years of democracy was an important milestone for the country, when change could be effectively measured at a national level. The intention from the outset was to use evidence to tell the story of how far the country had come since 1994. The 20-year review lasted for 18 months, and its main outputs were a synthesis report with 21 thematic background papers. This review led to significant lessons learnt in pursuing the evidence-based policymaking approach within the South African context.

Evidence-Based Policymaking in South Africa

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History matters. The policy-research interface remains a highly contested political space in South Africa in ensuring that relevant policies are developed and strategic priorities are on the agenda. Before 1994, the apartheid regime depended on science councils as government research agencies in generating selective evidence to prove pre-determined outcomes. This compromised the independence of research evidence, especially evidence generated by social scientists. The new democratic government used available evidence to design legal and policy frameworks based on human rights, drawing mainly from the advice of the Presidential Commission for Public Service Reform, set up by President Nelson Mandela. The Commission led to the restructuring of the Presidency and the establishment of the Policy Coordination and Advisory Service (PCAS) in the second term of office as a think tank for cabinet advice and policy management. PCAS introduced five-yearly reviews as a new way to engage with research evidence. These 5-yearly reviews commenced during the second presidential term of office, which led to documenting the Ten Year Review as the first comprehensive review after democracy. The experience of this review, demonstrated that the South African Government was weak in terms of systematically collecting and using evidence to develop policy and deliver services.

There was a positive shift in emphasis on evidence-informed policy and decision making in 2005 when a government-wide monitoring and evaluation (M&E) policy was adopted by Cabinet. This policy sought to institutionalise M&E practices in government. Drawing from restructured and transformed science councils and universities, there was a growing need to understand the contribution and impact of research and other forms of evidence on policy outcomes and societal progress. In 2009, a new administration increased the focus on M&E as a mechanism to improve service delivery, with the establishment of the Department for Performance (now Planning), Monitoring and Evaluation. The purpose of the department was to strengthen the use of M&E in government, and so contribute to strengthening government performance. Underlying this was the paradigm that improving the use of evidence could strengthen policy and decision making, as well as implementation. Thus, the ethos of evidence-based policy making and its core principles of sourcing and using evidence to inform decisions were embedded early in South Africa's democracy. In a critical analysis of the use of evidence-based policy making in South Africa in 2012, Du Toit called for re-conceptualising the current approach and contextualising it to South Africa's realities. He argued that it was not so much that policy makers did not have access to enough scientific evidence, rather that there was a lack of "decent analysis". The challenge was to provide the evidence as well as develop

convincing analysis on social change that is grounded in social realities. He posed core questions: What counts as evidence? What does this evidence mean? Who gets to be part of the conversation? How is it communicated? These are inherently political and contestable and it is all about making sense of the evidence where "…both scientists and policy makers engage in sense-making practices in which evidence plays a crucial, if contested role" (Du Toit 2012, 5).

2.1. Institutional Arrangements

As part of the scientific community's post-democracy transformation, political and economic drivers led to the development of a National System of Innovation and Research to reconstruct a capable scientific community aimed at ensuring the supply of high quality research evidence. This required the establishment of several new institutions and the restructure of existing ones, including the

transformation of management practices and how information is sourced and used to inform decision making, policy and practice.

Since 2008, the South African Government has become a major funder of research and development activities, with the majority of funding directed at higher education institutions and science councils. Despite a well-established research system and recognised experts, policy makers and members of the research community are questioning the contribution and impact of research and other forms of evidence on developmental outcomes and societal progress. A major gap has been identified in the generation of policy-relevant and implementation research to inform how progressive policies are translated into programmes and interventions, as well as how they inform efficiency, effectiveness, contribution and the impact of research on the national developmental agenda. Figure 1 is a mapping of current actors influencing

Figure 1: Mapping of Actors Influencing DPME Evidence Agenda
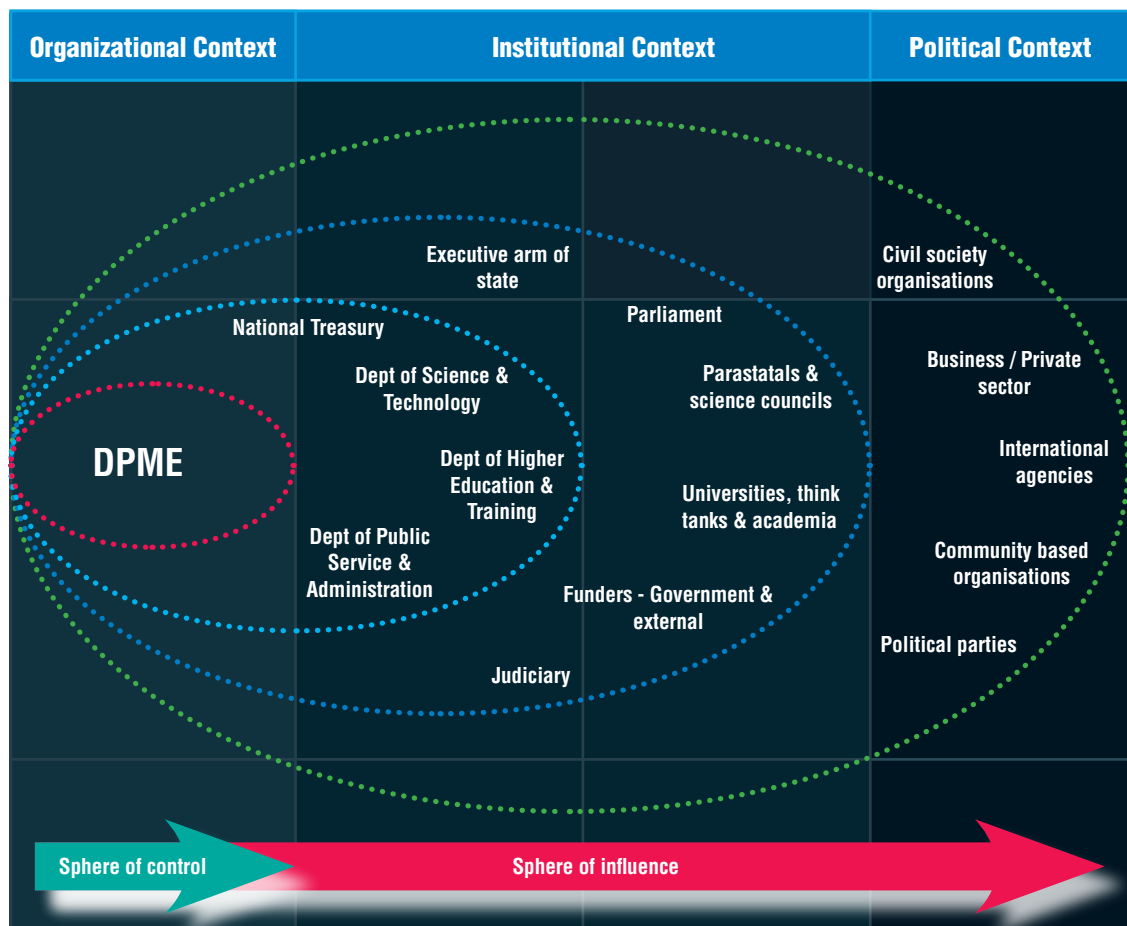
the evidence agenda since the establishment of the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in 2010. Central government departments that guide research policy development are reviewing their roles and functions in promoting evidence-informed decision making. They are coordinating efforts to strengthen the role of government in the knowledge economy. Building institutional capacity to embed the evidence-based policy approach will require that roles and responsibilities are defined as functions, that they are shifted to relevant and new structures, and that they include the coordination and integration of activities around evidence work. The roles of setting the research agenda, knowledge broker, policy research champion and capacity building have been identified as core to central government departments in order to impact on developmental objectives.

2.2. Understanding "Evidence Thinking"

It is necessary to understand the nature of "evidence thinking" among policy makers if the demand for and use of evidence is to be influenced positively. In 2010/2011, the Government commissioned a study to assess the attitudes of senior policy makers towards the use of evidence, interviewing 55 senior managers in the public service. The study showed that policy makers tend to use less formal sources of evidence although they do recognise the need for more substantive, scientific and rigorous evidence (see Figure 2). Other than evidence, they feel that experience and expertise, judgment, values, habits and traditions, resources and pressure groups are the main factors influencing policy (see Figure 3). The current situation was gauged against future shifts in what factors "should" be influencing policy. Figure 3 thus demonstrates recognition of a greater need for evidence to influence policy.

Figure 2: Types of Evidence Most Often Used for Policy and Decision Making
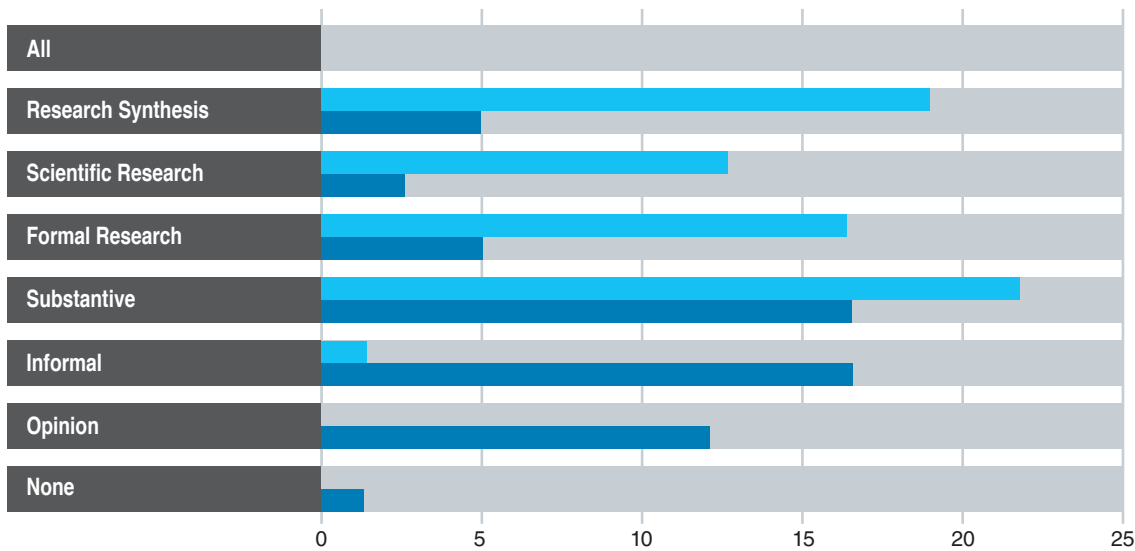
Current — Source: Paine Cronin, G. & Sadan, M., 2015, 'Use of evidence in policy making in South Africa:
More of — An exploratory study of attitudes of senior government officials', African Evaluation Journal 3(1), Art. #145,

Figure 3: The Main Factors That Influence Policy

Source: Paine Cronin, G. & Sadan, M., 2015, 'Use of evidence in policy making in South Africa: An exploratory study of attitudes of senior government officials', African Evaluation Journal 3(1), Art. #145, 10 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aej.v3i1.145
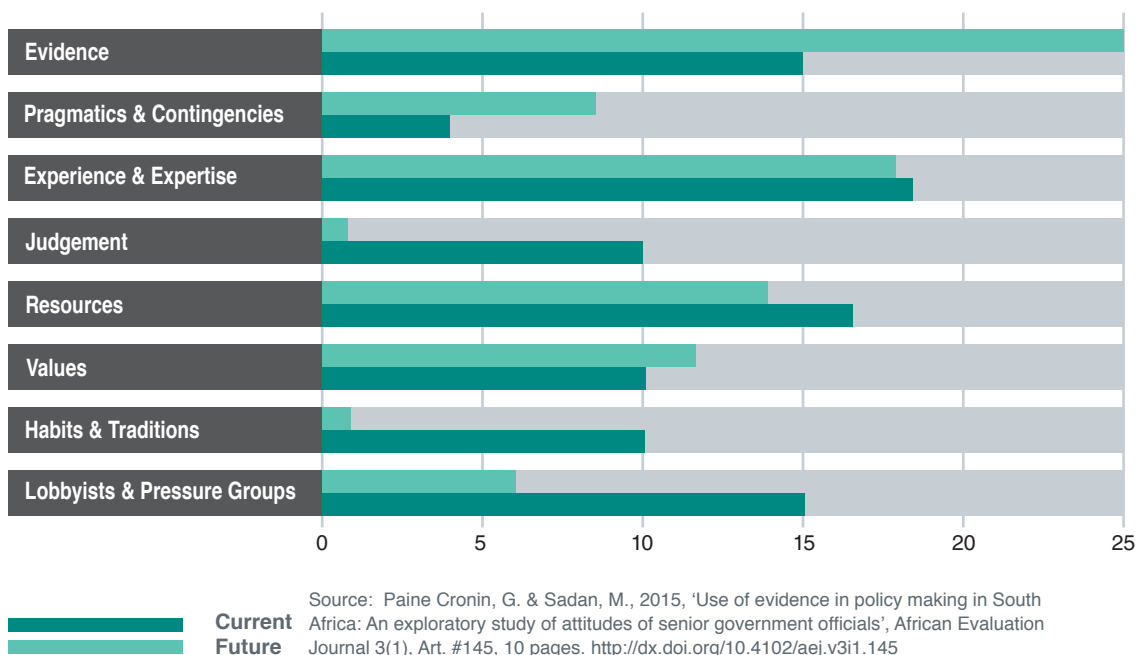
These findings are significant, as they position evidence against other considerations and important factors such as resources that influence policy and decision making. Many South African researchers and think tanks have contributed to the evidence-based policy making approach through developing guidelines, communication tools and methodologies to ensure evidence is taken up in the passage of policy development (ASSAF 2006; Du Toit 2012; Grobbelaar 2014; Bullen 2015). Emerging criticisms of the evidence-based policy making approach have opened up the debate about its conceptualisation and simplified application based on major assumptions within the South African policy environment.

Surprisingly, lack of ease on the discourse of evidence-based policy making comes equally from prominent researchers and policy makers, where the approach has been described as "overrated" (ASSAF 2006) and "a meta-political project" (Du Toit 2012), as well as sceptical policy makers who continue to view it as a foreign concept. Nonetheless, the evidence-based policy making approach remains a critical contribution to the policy-making discourse and challenges policy makers and researchers to ensure that decisions and policy making are evidence-informed.

2.3. A Question of Trust

The issue of trust in using evidence in the South African policy space is a historical one. When selective evidence was specifically generated to justify apartheid policies and deliberately used to exclude the majority of people from the developmental mainstream, context did matter. Roots of mistrust run deep between policy makers and researchers due to this history, and present the first barrier to be broken down in using effective research within the policy review process. Data and statistics, which were inherited by the new democracy, were questionable in their credibility, validity and representation of South African society. This required a complete revamping of the data and information context as the basis of evidence generation. Critical considerations that define the way evidence is valued, acquired and used in the policy space are: Who is asking developmental questions, and what are they? Who generates the evidence? Who interprets and analyses the findings?
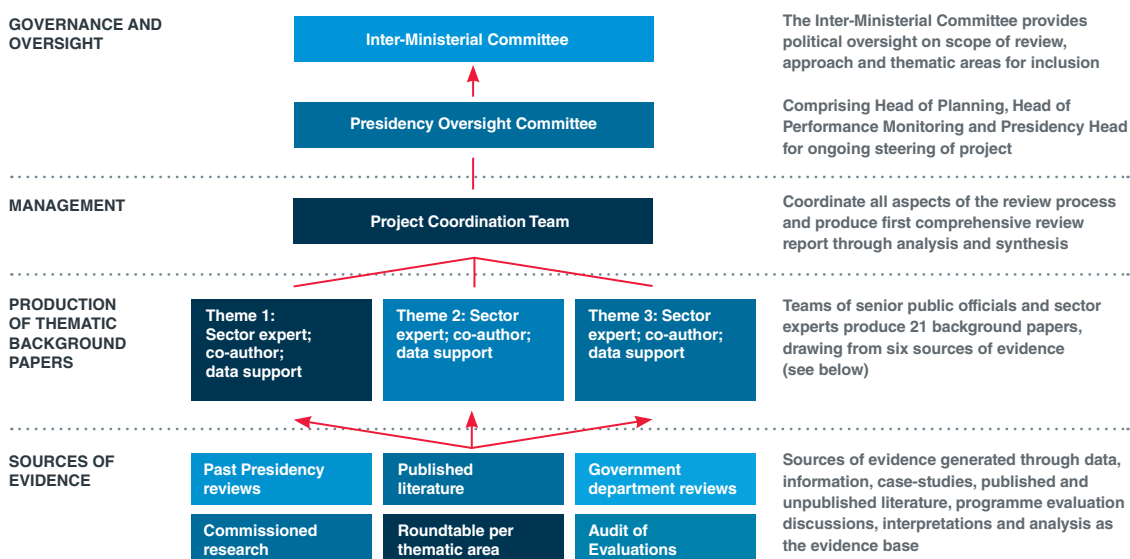
The 20-Year Review Process – A Case Study

The new democratic government of South Africa committed to undertaking five-yearly reviews to reflecton its work and progress, in order to inform the next administration. These reviews were ambitious tasks involving sector-wide researchers, key research institutions, government, business and civil society to use data and information as the basis of an evidence-informed narrative. This narrative examined where South Africa had come from as a society, how it had arrived where it was, and what needed to be done differently in future. Research evidence was generated and used extensively when the 10- and 15-year reviews were undertaken. The data and information landscape had greatly improved in quantity, quality and relevance. Yet there were limitations in what findings research could offer, due to insufficient and often unreliable data. Drawing on lessons from these previous reviews, the generation and use of evidence was approached in a deliberate way for the 20-year review, which was to be a more comprehensive and reflective "state of the nation" review of progress as a country since democracy.

In 2012, the Cabinet approved the overall plan for the 20-year review, followed by the establishment of a committee of ministers and heads of department to guide the management and implementation of the review process. There was a clear and functional governance structure to provide oversight and strategic direction to the overall management and implementation of the project, as outlined in the process map below.

Figure 4: Management Structure of Evidence Sourced for the 20-Year Review

GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT		Inter-Ministerial Committee		The Inter-Ministerial Committee provides political oversight on scope of review, approach and thematic areas for inclusion
		Presidency Oversight Committee		Comprising Head of Planning, Head of Performance Monitoring and Presidency Head for ongoing steering of project
MANAGEMENT		Project Coordination Team		Coordinate all aspects of the review process and produce first comprehensive review report through analysis and synthesis
PRODUCTION OF THEMATIC BACKGROUND PAPERS	Theme 1: Sector expert; co-author; data support	Theme 2: Sector expert; co-author; data support	Theme 3: Sector expert; co-author; data support	Teams of senior public officials and sector experts produce 21 background papers, drawing from six sources of evidence (see below)
SOURCES OF EVIDENCE	Past Presidency reviews	Published literature	Government department reviews	Sources of evidence generated through data, information, case-studies, published and unpublished literature, programme evaluation discussions, interpretations and analysis as the evidence base
	Commissioned research	Roundtable per thematic area	Audit of Evaluations	

Data, information and findings were acquired from six sources, aimed at developing a comprehensive evidence base to inform each of the 21 thematic areas for inclusion in the review process:

1. A review and synthesis of existing data and information within the Presidency – These were identified as the first source of evidence to be consulted, drawing on institutional memory since the first democratic government.

2. Commissioned research – Specifically addressing the gaps identified by senior government officials in the evidence base. Researchers, think tanks and academia were mobilised to generate research evidence per thematic area to inform the review process.

3. Reflections by Government departments on progress made/challenges remaining – An invitation was extended to all national and sub-national levels to undertake their own reviews, based largely on administrative data and monitoring information, qualitative case studies and localised knowledge.

4. A scientific literature search – This was undertaken for each of the 21 thematic areas by an information specialist to ensure that critical research outputs were not missed in the initial sourcing. This was guided by a search strategy designed to include the scope and purpose of the review.

5. Hosting of 21 roundtables as platforms for engagement – This involved public officials, policy makers, researchers, civil society and citizen representatives engaging collectively on the knowledge base. Evidence was generated through interpretation and analysis of available data, information via dialogue and discussion per thematic area for content developers to take into consideration.

6. An audit of evaluations – This was presented as a newly emerging source of evaluation evidence to assess government performance on key interventions implemented.

Findings from the review process were validated through both formal and informal methods. Teams that included 52 senior managers wrote thematic papers as synthesised background papers of the evidence available. These were peer-reviewed by external sector experts using a double-blind approach. A series of internal workshops followed where themes were clustered to validate separate inputs and capture key or cross-cutting themes.

The task of undertaking a review of this nature and ensuring that it was evidence-informed encompassed two complex processes. The plan outlining the approach to the review clearly stated, "…using evidence to inform policy makers, the public and stakeholders about the progress and challenges encountered…" (DPME 2012). Yet there was little guidance on what evidence to access, where to access it, when sufficient evidence would be acquired, who would assess and interpret the evidence and how evidence would be used to inform the review process.

3.1. Navigating the Policy Landscape

Strengthening evidence-based policy making in a young democracy and knowledge economy like South Africa presents both opportunities and challenges in promoting a culture of evidence use. Political will is necessary to drive a planned and strategic national agenda where politicians respond to the "evidence" they acquire from their respective constituencies, based on the mandates they receive. Translating visionary and strategic goals into policies for public good occurs in a socially dynamic context where many interventions and various factors influence outcomes and may lead to desired or undesired impacts. Understanding what policies are working, why and for whom, is critical for policy makers. Citizens in turn need to hold policy makers accountable and use evidence from their own lived experience. The research community is needed to generate relevant evidence that reviews

the effectiveness of policies. Business and civil society are expected to contribute to developmental goals and national priorities through generating new knowledge and social innovation.

Thus there is a complex web of actors who influence the policy process. However, the ongoing separation of those who are seen to be producers of evidence (researchers) and those expected to use evidence (policy makers) into two camps is often a simplistic and convenient divide, leading to increased efforts in bridging the divide through research communication and intermediary services. Many researchers remain oblivious to the realities of policy processes, and there is little demand from policy makers for research evidence.

3.2. Managing Complexity to Promote Evidence Uptake

Complexity in the public sector is inevitable when multiple agencies operate in the same policy space and when rules of the game are not clearly articulated or interpreted in the same way by all agencies. Coping with complexity in government requires effective strategies in the management of actors and related processes in order to move forward and achieve results or desired developmental outcomes. The review process exposed the management team directly to complexity in the public policy space and the need to manage several actors and processes simultaneously if the objective of using evidence was to be successful.

Complexity in undertaking the review therefore had to be managed in a deliberate and proactive manner in order to deliver the product. Some of these complexities are inherent in public administration and management systems, as listed below, while others are critical to strengthening evidence-based policy making and therefore analysed further.

- Capacity to review policies by public officials is weak from an administrative view and this weakens the executive in

policy implementation;
- Evidence was understood and approached differently from sector to sector within government;
- Uneven availability of data/information, with oversupply in some sectors and undersupply in others;
- Briefing of policy makers and political principals who did not have time to engage with critical findings in documents;
- Despondency and lack of motivation among public officials on public policy and priorities of government; and
- Poor knowledge management systems and practices across government.

3.3. Data and Information System Challenges

South Africa has a well-established and internationally renowned research community. The country has overcome historical limitations of poverty of data, although integration and coordination challenges still remain. Data scientists were recruited on the project to guide data validation, with strategic direction and oversight provided by management. A key observation made during the sourcing of evidence was the dearth of data and information available in certain sectors, as well as inadequate and unreliable information in critical social sectors. Where information was available it required a process of sifting through and filtering evidence that was deemed useful and relevant for policy analysis. Where evidence was limited, it was necessary to document it as a finding in itself for intermediate action. The impact of the data and information revolution had to be managed to reduce the risk of information overload.

Data alone cannot tell a story, though it forms the basis from which evidence is generated. The table below captures the key data and information challenges during the sourcing of evidence.

Table 1: Data Challenges Impacting on Evidence Use

Challenges Identified	Lessons/Opportunities	Relevant Actors in the South African Context
Not all sector experts, government officials and senior policy makers and shapers understand the value of evidence	Awareness raising and training of senior policy makers on evidence use	Senior policy makers and shapers; government officials who commission research
Belief that only sample surveys can provide insight into complex social phenomena and therefore new forms of data not seen as evidence, (e.g., visual, qualitative and meta data)	Qualitative analysis and the narrative of how far South Africa came as a country was best depicted through visual evidence, especially where there was no data to prove progress	National statistical agencies to explore the value of new data for real-time descriptions and analysis; Government communications recognised as a credible actor in the production of new data from social media
Limited access to social sciences data and key social science experts not available for policy work	Identify all barriers to accessing social sciences data, especially if generated through publically funded research. Link social sciences data to policy outcomes/impact.	Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) to facilitate and regulate access to social sciences data
Lack of consensus on definitions and classifications leading to inconsistent methodology in collection of data	Data on poverty; Rural/Urban definitions; Medical to social definition of disability; Gender.	CSOs, academia and government to agree on definitions
Historical data not available prior to 1994 for purposes of comparison	Humanities and historians to play a more active role in collecting, archiving, managing and storing historical data	National Humanities Institute; Departement of Higher Education and Training; HSRC
Shortage of statistical skills and uneven capacity for analysis of all types of evidence	Data forums to become engines for the transformation of the data environment; Promote policy relevance and interpretation of statistical information in undergraduate social sciences curricula.	Universities, DST and the Science Councils to direct resources into training
Identifying evidence gaps to inform policy and development	Duplication of data collection and efficiency gains made in setting national, provincial and local evidence plans as a collective, which will determine data needs, e.g., it was found that there is minimal data on small business	Policy makers, business and sector experts to regularly track sector developments, policy development and implementation
Poor quality administrative data	Attention to the collection, storage and management of micro-data at the facility, local, provincial and national levels across sectors. Computerised systems require effective IT systems in place for technical support.	Programme managers, M&E units and researchers in government to have data plans documented
Minimal preservation and integration of data: micro data, meta data	With improved generation of data, preservation of data sets through curation services and effective communication will facilitate re-use of data for analysis	Data First to be adequately resourced and develop effective partnerships with other data curators to become a national asset

3.4. Acquiring Best Available Evidence

To address the lack of data, a concerted effort was made to source the best available evidence to inform the review content. The six sources of evidence that were mentioned earlier aimed to provide a balanced approach using both scientific findings and unpublished literature as evidence. However, the assumptions that adequate evidence existed, and that there was clear access to existing data, information and policy research, was disproven. This became a significant obstacle, and reinforced the critics of evidence-based policy in their analysis of the weaknesses of the approach.

Lack of adequate policy research, ineffective measures of social change and inaccessibility to social sciences data were limitations in assessing and interpreting evidence in a rigorous way. However, some sectors, such as health, security and service delivery, maintained strong and active citizen involvement over the years in ensuring Government accountability, and these sectors enjoyed the availability of relatively better evidence from a balance of sources. Thus, there were different starting points across the sectors in "evidence thinking", and challenges in the availability of the "best" and "right" type of evidence.

A knowledge base for economic infrastructure, for example, did not exist for South Africa, leading to the Government spearheading primary research in this field over subsequent reviews. A scientific literature search generated many studies that were single studies with small samples, findings that were not generalizable and minimal research synthesis outside of the health field. Thus, policy makers and senior officials as thematic champions were left to generate evidence through their collective experience, analytical thinking and interpretation of the evidence that was available to them.

3.5. Generating Knowledge Through Effective Analysis and Synthesis

Various methodologies promoted by the evidence-based policy approach have been developed to facilitate the uptake of research into policy. Rapid Evidence Assessments, Evidence Mapping and Gap-maps present adapted methodologies and effective communication tools for policy relevance and produce timely results. Despite these developments in evidence-based policy, research synthesis is not widely practiced across the South African research community. Therefore, the supply of adequate Systematic Reviews and Rapid Evidence Assessments remains extremely limited to inform specific policy review processes. Policy makers who were exposed to the methodology of research synthesis required the research community to supply policy relevant research. At the same time, many senior officials and policy makers were unaware of the existence of this methodology and therefore no demand existed. If evidence is to be actively promoted and uptake facilitated in the policy space, there needs to be adequate supply of relevant evidence from the research community to inform policy development.

Single study research findings are unable to provide solutions to policy questions and inform future directions. The South African experience demonstrates that ideology and consensus building is critical to engage with and guide the identification of the best available options. This is what ultimately informed the choices made in 1994 when different political ideologies had to work towards agreed strategic goals.

3.6. Deliberative Processes in Engaging With Evidence

During the full 20-year review, deliberative processes were adopted to ensure that each step of the review was documented, and that information was extracted and communicated to respective teams. The objectives of the review, research methodology and analytical framework were widely and constantly communicated, which pulled all stakeholders in the same direction, especially when confusion arose. The platforms that were created for policy makers, researchers, data scientists, think tanks and analysts to engage in dialogue,

generated critical content development which had to be captured and communicated to relevant teams and integrated with cross-cutting themes.

Effective rapporteur note taking and minute taking were essential tools to map the issues raised, details of discussions and what positions were taken when engaging with the evidence base. These provided the management team with the authority to guide content development. Many internal meetings were set up to ensure dialogue and debate among senior officials involved in content development.

Research management and project management as two processes had to intersect at several points across the strategic areas, and depended on effective and efficient administrative teams to draw out the emerging evidence and knowledge streams. This was generated through competent individuals, though on an ad hoc basis, for the lifespan of the project rather than from existing and functional systems. Over the 20-year period, this led to the exposure of weak administrative systems, and often an absence of any knowledge management systems, as well as organisational ineffectiveness in some government departments.

3.7. The Role of Evidence Champions

An intermediary group of senior officials within the review team became "evidence champions" in facilitating and translating research evidence into policy relevance. Uneven engagement with evidence across the sectors provided insights into which senior officials in government were assessing progress based on their experiences and expertise in the policy context. These "evidence champions" were able to defend positions by providing the latest trends and statistics, drawing from their own evidence base. Researchers who were experts in their field dominated when senior public officials did not have adequate evidence or confidence to debate relevant issues. Interpretation of statistical data and research evidence

differed when a balance of evidence, other than research, was taken into consideration. This included citizen input, public opinion, qualitative analysis and case studies. Effective analysis was strengthened when all available evidence was sourced, communicated and assessed for its relevance and quality. A key challenge, however, was that content developers felt overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information generated. Without effective administrative support and capacity, maximum uptake of evidence (published and unpublished) was hindered and uneven across the teams. Thus, the critical area of relationship building and strengthening of existing networks in the generation of relevant research evidence became a key focal area of work for the evidence champions.

3.8. Improving Responsiveness – Understanding Demand

Uptake of evidence increases when there is a demand from those who shape and influence policy and when administrative support is responsive by providing timely, relevant and valid data and information. An understanding of who depended on what type of evidence, and when, in the review process generated insight into how different stakeholders should be managed. The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation operates within an environment where there are challenges in the uptake of evidence in the policy space and where relevant research outputs are largely inaccessible to policy makers. These challenges have direct implications on what data is collected (policy relevance), why it is collected (new knowledge through scientific research versus national priorities and developmental objectives), how it is collected (methodology) and by whom (government, independent research entities).

Different types of evidence are needed at different stages of the policy cycle. The policy cycle, while never followed in a logical, systematic way, needs to be understood for its complexity, and its related chaos/"messiness" needs to be managed. At the core is the

capacity to document, evaluate, reflect and learn from each phase. An iterative process of engaging with evidence in South Africa in 2014 led to the development of an integrated model to locate where and what type of evidence is needed within the policy cycle (refer to Figure 5).

As a result, the DPME has identified the need to invest in building research infrastructure and networks that facilitate the supply of policy research, implementation research and research synthesis. These are considered essential mechanisms to facilitate demand for evidence in South Africa, ensuring that those promoting the evidence-based policy making approach are being responsive to the needs of policy makers.

This lesson has been reinformed by a more recent diagnostic on research in DPME (DPME 2015). It revealed that demand for evidence differs depending on the level of seniority. Those who source, collate, store and synthesise evidence need access to a balance of evidence. Those who analyse, interpret or judge which evidence is relevant, credible and of sufficient quality to inform decisions, need timely evidence, and the capacity to critically appraise research evidence and build collaborative networks to engage with the evidence in a deliberative way. This requires a differentiated approach when being responsive to evidence needs.

3.9. Building Relationships and Collaborative Networks

Overcoming the research-policy divide is not merely about bridging the gap through intermediaries who are competent knowledge brokers and effective communicators in translating research and other evidence into strategic and policy relevance. It involves building effective relationships and collaborative networks by both researchers and policy makers to deepen an understanding of the two worlds, engage in ongoing dialogue and debate and guide the generation of relevant knowledge towards national priorities. There is a need to respect that, while both researchers and policy makers engage with evidence, the role and purpose of evidence differs. The scientific community is driven by contributing to new knowledge and policy makers are driven by social action, change and political aspirations. Yet the risk of losing their independence is high for researchers, specifically those who network closely with policy makers – in particular those policy makers who follow a clinical/ technocratic approach to policy making, and find themselves "hitting the target, but missing the point" (Davies & Wright 2009).

Figure 5: Location of Evidence Type Within the Policy Cycle
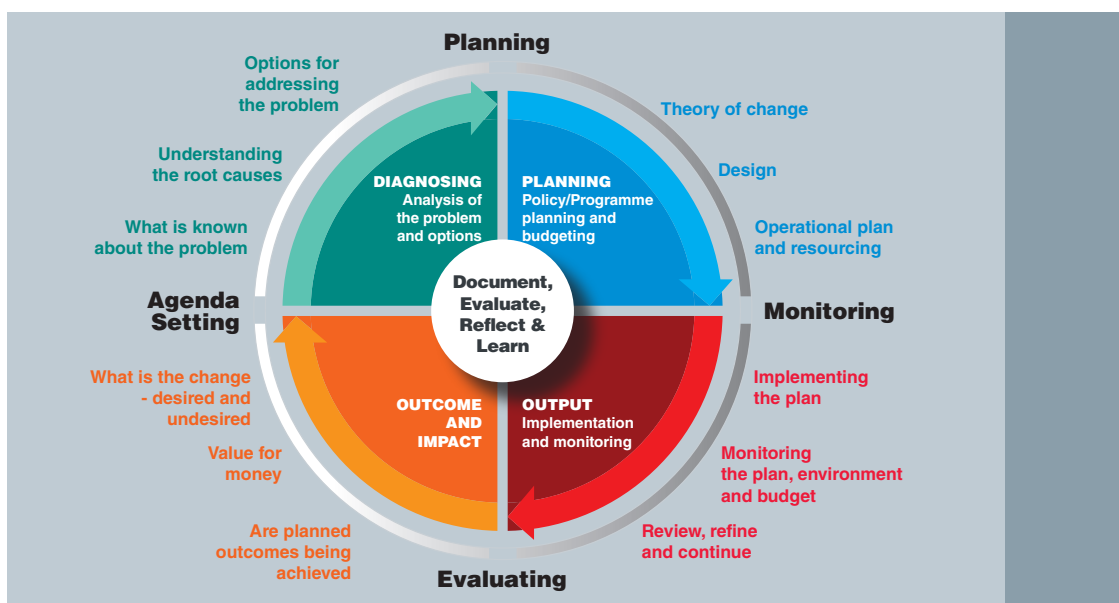
Source: DPME, 2014

4 Translating Lessons Into Action (and Back Into Theory)

Building on initial lessons learnt from the 10- and 15-year reviews, the experience of the 20-year review led to critical areas of work to be taken forward if "evidence thinking" and practice were to be embedded in public policy and decision making. The development of effective knowledge management systems is emerging in select government departments, but these remain as a few good practices. In a young bureaucracy like South Africa, building a "capable state" was prioritised as a key area in the recently published National Development Plan (The Presidency 2013). Related work to professionalise the public service has begun. Those promoting and using evidence-based policy are required to have a firm understanding of the context within which they are operating and undertake a bottom-up approach for embedding and integrating "evidence thinking".

4.1. Building Distributed Capacity for Using Evidence

Challenges identified and documented through the many efforts in promoting the evidence-based policy making approach in South Africa point to capacity constraints at individual, organisational, system and institutional levels. There are potentially negative consequences of implementing the evidence-based policy making approach in a bureaucracy where public servants demonstrate minimal "evidence-seeking behaviour". When public officials are required to engage with evidence in a deliberative way, it appears to challenge "business as usual". The current status is that evidence, even in its broadest sense, is engaged with in an ad hoc manner, as and when the need arises. Those public officials who do engage with evidence in more deliberate ways depend on effective and functional organisational processes, systems and research infrastructure to sustain evidence practice and embed it in their day-to-day operations. In ensuring improved supply of policy research and evidence synthesis, it is necessary to be mindful of the underlying assumption that increasing access to more evidence will lead to better policymaking. As more evidence is generated, stronger administrative and procedural capacity will be needed to harness the sheer volume of data and information as evidence. However, without an adequate supply of relevant policy research and adequate engagement with the evidence through critical appraisal, analysis, synthesis and interpretation of the evidence base, there is little value in promoting an evidence agenda.

Recent work in the DPME contributed first-hand knowledge to understanding demand. As referred to earlier, the investigation in 2010/2011 on senior managers' attitudes to evidence generated important insights into how evidence is understood. The findings

were used to plan an initiative in building demand for evidence from senior managers. It was piloted in 2013 and 2014 as a three-day executive course on evidence-based policy, targeted at senior policy makers (Directors General and Deputy Directors General) to help them engage with evidence and understand the factors impacting on evidence use. The demand for this was high and two courses were run in 2015. The course content is relevant to the needs of the policy makers and senior managers and is therefore reviewed regularly, especially with the generation of new evidence research.

Developing a systems approach to support evidence generation and use in the public sector has been initiated. This involves discovering and opening up access to a range of scientific data, administrative data and grey literature to inform reporting and decision making. The South African Government has developed a partnership with two consortia funded by the UK's Department for International Development to influence uptake of research in policy as part of an international project called Building Capacity to Use Research

Evidence (BCURE). One project concentrates on capacity building involving mentorship and training opportunities to promote and facilitate evidence use in Government, while the other project seeks to develop tools and embed evidence practice at an organisational level. Both projects are coordinated by the DPME to ensure relevance to the South African context and are already contributing insights into understanding and being responsive to the demand for evidence to influence policy and practice.

5 Conclusion and Key Messages

Promoting evidence-based policy making within South Africa and internationally has led to many professional exchanges and sharing of lessons on best practice. However, these remain dispersed activities, with ongoing challenges to deepening an evidence-based policy approach, particularly in a diverse society like South Africa. Researchers and academia are contributing to knowledge generation on evidence-based policy, though this provides perspectives of social scientists attempting to look into the policy process using an academic lens. Public officials and policy makers in turn are not documenting sufficiently to contribute to strengthening the evidence-based policy making approach within government, using a policy lens. Social scientists propose the construction of a theory on evidence-based policy making for the South African context to help guide stakeholders, but this will need to be reviewed regularly to remain relevant in a dynamic context.

The high-level review to reflect on 20 years of South Africa's democracy was unique, yet peer countries intending to do reviews, or which have already done regular reviews, may identify with the process that unfolded. The review experience demonstrates that policy makers do engage with evidence in its broad understanding, even though at differing degrees of intensity and purpose. Emphasis is placed on critical appraisal, interpretation,

analysis and synthesis of the evidence base in a deliberative way. It is agreed by both researchers and policy makers that evidence cannot "speak for itself". All factors influencing policy need to be taken into consideration when making decisions. What remains legitimate evidence for policy makers are public opinion, political feasibility, policy impact and knowledge of local contexts. There is a need to move beyond the divide between policy makers and researchers, as bridging the gap is not only the responsibility of knowledge brokers. A theory of evidence use, as promoted by the social science researchers in South Africa, may assist in understanding what evidence will be used, and how it is meant to work in reviewing national policies and progress, and informing social change. In navigating the policy landscape through this review process, critical insights are reflected on below. This assisted in strengthening an evidence-based policy making approach in the South African context.

Factors other than evidence influence policy review.

The 20-year review showed that research is not the only form of evidence, as discussed earlier, but it dominates the policy context. Policy formulation involves a range of factors to be explored and choices to be made, including (but not limited to) an assessment of available resources, spatial inequalities and critical

analysis based on experience. It also needs the expertise and judgment of senior public officials and policy makers to interpret what trade-offs are necessary for the broader public good. Many challenges were experienced in implementing progressive policies post-democracy, as the review documented, yet the choices considered at the time were necessary for South Africa to emerge as a peaceful and democratic society.

Strategic goals can be difficult to achieve if quick fixes and short-term solutions are pursued to address long-term problems. Scenario planning and the analysis of future trends depend on the availability of longitudinal, spatial and panel data, which remains inadequate in South Africa. Where available, it is not accessed and used effectively. When the scientific evidence base is not easily accessible, is not communicated using effective messaging, and those producing evidence are not able to translate their findings into policy relevance, there is little success in embedding "evidence thinking" within an organisational culture.

Building consensus and intermediation between researchers and policy makers depends on evidence champions.

Recent restructuring and the establishment of the DPME included the recruitment of sector specialists whose function is to facilitate the process of assessing government performance, based on 14 priority outcomes and using effective M&E mechanisms. Due to their established networks and existing relationships with other government departments (national and sub-national) as well as with the research community, academia and think tanks, these facilitators became champions to navigate known, as well as emergent, pathways in building consensus on the narrative, through analysis and interpretation of the evidence. They worked strategically to bridge the divide between researchers and policy makers. In some instances they were successful, but in many other situations, misinterpretations and

different understandings prevailed, with little time to engage on the issues.

Senior public service managers can also be generators of evidence.

An initial engagement with sector specialists and senior managers generated insights into current sector developments, scoped existing knowledge and contributed further literature to the evidence base. These experts were internal in the department, some with an academic background and others with experiential knowledge of the policy space, particularly on the performance of government. The engagement provided a focused view on where to start in navigating the evidence landscape per strategic area. It also naturally progressed into a dialogue with other government departments, researchers and a network of external sector experts to provide relevant evidence on policy issues. This process led to the identification of gaps in the evidence base for which specific research could be commissioned, thereby ensuring its relevance and use.

Constructing the narrative must involve relevant stakeholders early in the process.

An important strategy in constructing the narrative was to encourage wider participation in the review process before the final product was developed. Researchers, think tanks and academia were invited to present their findings and review policy on the same platform as senior government officials and state agencies early in the review process. Differences were inevitable when perspectives, experiences and interpretation of findings presented opposing standpoints. In some instances, weaknesses in government performance identified by data analysis could be explained by policy makers based on the interpretation of collective evidence. Clustering and extracting key messages from various findings provided the basis for an emerging narrative.

The message was clear from the politicians: South Africa had a good story to tell, despite the many challenges that remain. If evidence

suggested otherwise, the discussion was open to interpretation and further analysis. Remaining challenges in government performance were thus documented as part of the narrative in a frank and honest reflection. A parallel process unfolded where separate and independent reviews were undertaken on selected policy directions that were useful in enriching the evidence base on South Africa's developmental trajectory (Cameron 2013; Coleman 2013; Sit aet. al 2013). The evidence-informed process, strengthened by dialogue and discussion, proved to be a constructive one.

As the review process unfolded, many more internal and external engagements and discussions ensued, emerging into a national reflection and dialogue on how far the people of South Africa had come since 1994. Backed by a media campaign on "20 Years of Democracy" the review process snowballed into a national campaign of mobilising South Africans to reflect on their own contribution to the country's democracy, with the following key messages:

1. A broadened understanding of evidence, including ideology, democratic values and citizens' views, will assist in building consensus and the credibility of the evidence base.

2. Answering key developmental questions requires building and actively managing networks and relationships through facilitated and regular platforms for engagement with evidence, thereby ensuring transparency and inclusivity.

3. Embedding "evidence thinking" and "evidence-seeking behaviour" at an organisational level requires administrative capacity, a functional public sector knowledge management system, demand for high quality evidence and a consistent supply of policy-relevant research.

4. Research findings do not provide answers and evidence itself does not point to solutions. This requires interpretation, synthesis that draws from a body of evidence, and effective analysis.

5. Professionalising and strengthening the public service through generating relevant evidence, interpreting and using evidence, will advance evidence-based policy making to its strategic and symbolic value, not only for its instrumental use.

6. Evidence-based policy making has the potential to develop "administrative will" to empower public officials at all levels with knowledge of public policy processes and social change through effective analysis, thereby facilitating government as a contributor to the knowledge economy.

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