Improving effectiveness of evidence use to support Zimbabwe's youth

Knowledge, information and policy making in the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment in Zimbabwe

The Research and Policy Coordination Unit (RPCU) of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment (MYIEE) is tasked with promoting effective evidence-based action by the country's Government and others to support and meet the data needs of the ministry's Youth Development Directorate and to facilitate research and innovation on youth development (see box: The Research and Policy Coordination Unit). However, there are several challenges with this work due to the politicized nature of the working environment, the organizational context and perceptions of the meaning of 'evidence'. This article discusses how organizational change is addressing these challenges.

Between January 2014 and March 2016, the Zimbabwean NGO ZeipNET, together with the UK-based NGO INASP, supported

Ronald Munatsi (left) and Gilchriste Ndongwe (right) of ZeipNET, with researchers: (middle, l-r): Simbarashe Musarira and Lennet Munjoma of the Ministry of Youth and Ayan Kachepa of the Ministry of Industry & Commerce

individuals from the unit to improve their knowledge and skills in relation to evidence and its use in policy making through a number of training workshops, drawing on the EIPM Toolkit, which was developed through the VakaYiko project (www.inasp.info/EIPMtoolkit).

As part of a mentoring programme and to complement this and with the approval of senior management within the MYIEE, between April 2016 and March 2017 expertise from within the VakaYiko consortium was mobilized to support the RPCU to put these newly acquired knowledge and skills into use through an organizational change approach.

The approach taken aimed to help employees (mainly from the RPCU) with their most pressing needs, and identify how knowledge, information and/or data might be used as a resource to support them.

Organizational change and complexity

Approaches to organizational change are often underpinned by the following assumptions (rooted in concepts brought over from the natural sciences - see Stacey and Mowles, 2016):

• The capacity to change is located primarily in autonomous individuals who act more or less rationally

Author

Ajoy Datta, Research Associate, Research and Policy in Development programme, ODI

As part of the VakaYiko programme, Ajoy worked with ZeipNET and the Ministry of Youth to explore approaches to organizational change.

- A group or organization is a system which is separate from the individual and has a 'mind' of its own

- Change tends to happen if it is planned for, and the only alternative is chance happenings which are said to emerge

Drawing on these assumptions, it is tempting for senior management (in some but not all cases) to commission an expert who, like a doctor, undertakes a diagnostic, which can, through the subsequent use of tools and instruments support them to develop and implement solutions to take the organization to a higher level of effectiveness. A lot of time and energy is then spent setting out what an organization and its employees should do in future through the development of strategies and plans. Senior management are then tasked with shaping the behaviour of employees to adhere to the plan (which might aim for employees to be more oriented towards evidence) by handing out forms of punishment and reward.

However, experience of the author has shown that regardless of

Simbarashe Musarira (left) and Lennet Munjoma from Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth - Research & Policy Coordination Unit (RPCU)

how clear the strategy or plans are, they are usually pulled out of shape by chance, unintended consequences and the complexity of brute reality. Moreover, the motivations of employees are shaped by several factors and following the instructions of senior management is merely one of them – albeit in some cases influential (see Downs, 1965 for a theory of a bureaucracy).

The above assumptions and interventions tend to be taken for

granted. But they tend to side-line important characteristics of organizational life such as inter-dependence (between individuals and groups), unpredictability, power, ordinary day-to-day activities such as conversation and politics and the general make up of organizational life.

We therefore aimed to take a more critical approach, informed by a combination of complexity thinking, psychoanalysis and various political theories (see

The Research and Policy Coordination Unit

The Research and Policy Coordination Unit (RPCU) of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment (MYIEE) is relatively new. The Unit is housed within the Youth Development Directorate of the Ministry.

The Youth Development Directorate comprises three functional units: Skills Development, National Youth Service and Programmes and Advocacy. The terms of reference for the RPCU (developed with support from INASP) states that between 2016 and 2018, the unit should, amongst other things, promote effective evidence-based action by Government and other relevant actors, provide support to, and meet the data needs of, the Youth Development Directorate within MYIEE and facilitate research and innovation on youth development.

At the time of writing, the main responsibilities of the unit are administrative in nature. Personnel within the unit provide support to the management of key youth development programmes, coordinating, monitoring and reporting, doing research and impact assessments, undertaking regular business processes and providing ad hoc support to senior management. The work of the unit over the last two years has been primarily donor-funded with administrative support emanating from the Treasury.

The RPCU operates in a highly dynamic and politicized environment. The Minister of Youth has changed three times since 2014 (although the permanent secretary has remained in post throughout and is supportive of the work of the RPCU). And over the last year or so the Zimbabwean economy has faced severe challenges.

Approaching the issue of evidence

Experience suggests that the term evidence is often seen as an abstract term. Some decision makers have said they don't have time to use evidence: they have more pressing things to do, or that it simply isn't possible to use evidence in the 'real world' given political constraints (See Paine Cronin and Sadan, 2015 and du Toit, 2012). Evidence is intimately bound up with what employees in government institutions do in their day-to-day work. But they may not refer to what we call evidence as evidence. For instance, the term evidence might have legal implications: as something which is presented in a court of law. Or government employees might view evidence narrowly as, for instance, a piece of academic research that is rigorously peer reviewed in a top journal. Nevertheless, policymakers will often draw on information of some kind when drawing up plans and strategies or in making a decision, which could include experiential knowledge, an anecdote or the perspectives of powerful stakeholders.

The group of policymakers in Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth importantly were given the opportunity to discuss in some depth what they understood by evidence before discussions about how they could improve its use had started.

Ajoy Datta at the VakaYiko Symposium in Accra, Ghana in 2016

Stacey and Mowles, 2016). Together, these suggest that organizational life and what employees do unfolds through communication and conversation amongst staff and between them and their stakeholders. As sociologist Andrew Pickering has expressed, in practice "hand often precedes head"; most of us act into an unpredictable future and then try to make sense of it, both in the moment and thereafter and usually on an informal basis (Pickering, 1993).

So we aimed to take an iterative, participatory and deliberative approach which centred on helping employees (including managers) understand how they were working together in the 'here and now', what they were grappling with in their daily work, the dilemmas they were facing and how they might improve their use of information as a resource in their work. It was only when employees themselves recognized the patterns of acting and relating they were engaged in, that they might be able to change those patterns. As such, rather than pre-defining the specific objectives or outcomes, they would arise from the process itself (in other words from the workshop deliberations, as we describe below).

But this approach was not seen as a new 'silver bullet' to replace conventional approaches in facilitating change. Instead they were viewed as something that might 'bear fruit', but at the same time, something which could lead to a 'dead end'. However, even if specific changes did not arise, encouraging people to reflect on their work was beneficial in itself.

This resonated with approaches advocated by movements such as Doing Development Differently (DDD) and Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), which recognized that change processes were complex and political.

Between June 2016 and March 2017, three workshops were held, each one or two days long. Monitoring and learning was integrated into these workshops through a discussion-based review session at the end of each workshop.

Supporting reflection and action

Workshop 1: June 2016 and follow up

During the first workshop in June 2016, five participants (comprising a range of staff mainly from the RPCU) undertook a combination of action learning and storytelling. They were asked to develop and share stories with one another about situations from the last few months where they were part of a conversation, meeting or set of

Discussions during a workshop at the Research and Policy Coordination Unit (RPCU)of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment

circumstances that they wanted to understand better. There had to be something in the situation that they were curious about, something they wanted to learn more about. The story could have a title; provide a context; have a location; have characters; have a plot, which might feature a problem, a challenge and a turning point; and a course of events. Participants were asked to choose one of 12 pictures that best described their feelings about the situation/story and to explain their choice.

Once participants told stories, the other participants were asked to initially ask clarification questions, before asking more open-ended questions (starting with why, what, when, who and how). The aim was for the other participants to listen and to question – not necessarily to provide advice. Once the questions were asked/answered, the storyteller/presenter would reflect on how they experienced the process and what they might have learnt. The other participants were then invited to offer their own reflections to the storyteller.

There were five stories in total: 'a lone traveller in the road' about a member of staff's efforts to persuade a manager to take her advice in relation to youth entrepreneurship; 'policy dialogue cancelled' about the last minute cancellation of a policy dialogue on what was perceived to be a controversial issue; 'chaos factor' about the organization of the annual junior parliament event; a story about the wide-scale implementation of a project to grow jatropha, which the government thought could be used to produce biofuel; and 'surprised' about a member of staff being asked to brief a manager ahead of his tour to China. After the workshop, the stories were written up and sent to each of the storytellers. The storytellers were asked to look at them, and ensure they were an accurate reflection of their story by editing them and sending them back.

During the workshop participants identified common themes from the five stories. They included:

• The wide variety of work that staff do: for example RPCU staff

had prepared speeches for the minister, organized a 'junior parliament', prepared a briefing for a senior manager who was travelling to China on a study tour; managed a stakeholder dialogue; and undertaken field work to put into practice a national-level project.

• Communication, especially that which is directed up and down the hierarchy and how that is taken up is clearly shaped by politics and power.

• Directives from 'above' can rarely be questioned. Influencing people more powerful than you is difficult. Management styles tend to be personality-based. Assertiveness can be interpreted as being oppositional and insubordinate.

• The work of staff in the RPCU is usually dependent on the work of staff 'below' them in the hierarchy, at provincial, district and ward level. However, the quality of work from these levels was uneven.

• Conflict, especially between superiors, can shape your day-to-day work.

Simbarashe Musarira of the RPCU and Ronald Munatsi of ZeipNET at a recent Ministry of Youth workshop

- People are under continual time pressure, so tasks have to be proportional to the time available.

- How information is packaged to inform people's engagements and arguments can shape how they are received, accepted or rejected.

- The need to manage expectations of how suggestions made by individuals might be taken up by more senior people; the need to use diplomacy and tact in engaging with management and to use various forms of evidence wisely to help make a case.

Workshop 2: October 2016

The second workshop in October 2016, attended by five members of the RPCU, aimed to continue the discussions that had been started during the first workshop. This was done by asking participants to select scenarios (from amongst those discussed during the first workshop or additional ones) that continued to puzzle and challenge them, or a strategic issue that they were currently struggling with. The aim was, through further inquiry (this time involving discussion and role play) to support the team to explore how/what they might think and do differently, what this meant for how the scenario might unfold and how knowledge and information might be used (more effectively) as a resource to aid them. This was called live scenario planning.

Scenario planning has its roots in the Royal Dutch Shell Group in the early 1970s. Traditionally it explores possible future scenarios. However, the aim during the workshop was to explore scenarios that have happened, and are likely to happen again (next week or next month). The use of live scenario planning is said to be better suited to improving the future than forward-looking planning (Bhatti et al, 2016). The

academic literature suggests that this type of scenario planning can be used for correcting decision-making biases, supporting more effective learning, changing team roles, building new social capital, assessing disputed values, appreciating complex situations, clarifying issues and better interpreting what customers (or stakeholders) might actually be saying and meaning.

Although they would in some cases be hypothetical scenarios (at least in part), participant responses would build on their 'lived experience'. The aim was to bring the real world into the workshop - as we started to do in mid-June during the first workshop.

After some discussion, participants decided to address the following two scenarios:

- Working and engaging with senior managers (which covers several of the scenarios that the

www.inasp.info   @INASPinfo

team face day-to-day)

- Working with colleagues in the provinces (as staff from the RPCU needed to aggregate timely information from the provinces and districts in order to fulfil upward reporting requirements)

In relation to their work with senior management, participants chose to discuss senior management's decision to instigate the development of a National Youth Economic Empowerment Strategy (NYEE) - based largely on a desk study. This strategy appeared to participants to be in conflict with an existing policy - the National Youth Policy – a document broadly owned by a number of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. After significant discussion, participants found that working indirectly, through (both informal and formal) contacts and networks (especially with those in international agencies) might be a better way to challenge and for potential grievances to be brought to bear.

A specific scenario was performed by some participants through role play. In the role play, a member of the RPCU approached a donor representative to explore how the latter might be persuaded to approach senior government managers and push back against the launch of what seemed to be parallel strategy. Other participants took up the role of directors - providing advice on how, for instance, the RPCU member might make the case to the donor representative and how the use of information might aid them to do so.

On the second scenario – working with local level officials to provide better data – the discussion highlighted a number of important contextual factors that constrained and shaped the choices local-level officials made in collecting and communicating data according

Ronald Munatsi (first left) and Gilchriste Ndongwe (third left) from ZeipNET with staff from the Ministry of Youth at a recent workshop

to centrally designed templates. These included the number of people involved in the information 'value chain'. Participants suggested that a fruitful strategy might be to engage directly with a handful of local-level officials (such as provincial-level youth development officers) to discuss how they might improve their practice (including the gathering and communication of information) within their current constraints.

Workshop 3: March 2017

The final workshop did just this – by bringing together members of the RPCU together with a group of 10 provincial youth development officers over the course of a day to explore how they might work together better. As well as identifying how provincial officers might support RPCU staff to fulfil their reporting requirements, the workshop aimed to explore how the RPCU might support provincial officers in their own work.

Group work and a plenary before lunch subsequently facilitated dialogue about what provincial

officers do, what challenges they face, and the role of information and data. It also helped identify how the RPCU might provide them with better support (especially in the production, communication and use of information).

After some impassioned exchanges, provincial officers together with staff from the RPCU made a number of suggestions about what the RPCU could do to support provincial officers to address some of the challenges they faced. These included:

- Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of key officials in head office

- Sharing good practice (acquired whilst on study tours) with provincial officers whilst at the same time representing their interests in discussions within head office

- Requesting information from provincial officers in a more collaborative way, stating why they needed information and providing feedback on, for instance, the quality/content of

reports on a regular basis

Participants in groups discussed monthly, quarterly and annual reporting processes, some of the challenges they faced and what they might do to improve their reporting efforts. Drawing on this, participants then described how they would prepare for the next quarterly reporting deadline which was due at the end of March 2017. Once again a number of suggestions were made with relevance to different parts of the process: namely before, during and after the reporting process. Staff from the RPCU said they would liaise with provincial officers to explore how they might put these into practice after the workshop.

Emerging effects

Here, we discuss the effects the workshops seem to have had on participants based on discussions with participants after each of the three workshops.

An opportunity to reflect formally as a group: Generally, the workshops gave members of the RPCU the opportunity to come together as a team (and with colleagues from other levels of governance within the MYIEE). They provided a space to step back from the day-to-day rigmarole of their work and reflect on what they do, how they were going about their tasks and the difficulties they faced. Formal team meetings on a day-to-day basis rarely allowed for this. Reflections about people's work, if they happened at all, tended to happen informally in the margins of employee's official work.

Novel and participatory methods: Although participants were familiar with some of the techniques used during the three workshops (such as storytelling, the use of visual hooks or role play), they hadn't seen them used in workshops for government employees. Participants were more used to attending workshops where either experts or senior officials would present an issue, policy or programme and ask for feedback or where they would be asked to plan for the future. They had rarely attended a workshop where they reflected on what they did and some of the difficulties they faced.

One participant emphasized the novelty of the methods used as well as their participatory nature:

"When people hold workshops and dialogues, people always want to do tried and tested things. It gets boring. I go to meetings, and I usually leave early, because the methodology is always the same: someone who is always going to stand in front of you, explain everything to you, and tries to do a plenary. But they've already inputted what they want…for us, this [set of workshops] was always an eye opener, all the time, there was something we were doing differently…".

Developing empathy in relation to others: The workshops helped participants (with some more experienced than others) to learn from each other about the work of the RPCU and how certain challenges were being addressed/negotiated. In telling stories and answering open-ended questions during the first workshop, participants were able to gain new insights to their own and each other's work and discovered possibilities of doing things differently in future. For instance, the discussion during the second workshop helped to clarify the relationships the RPCU had with both senior managers and provincial officers in MYIEE. It also helped acknowledge the often multiple relationships that staff from the RPCU had with a range of people in different stakeholder groups (including government, NGOs, the international community and the private sector).

And, although uncomfortable for some participants, with some issues being hotly contested and participants often making impassioned requests, the third workshop attended by members of the RPCU and provincial officers enabled participants to develop some empathy for one another and understand some of the constraints they were under both in provinces and at head office. One participant suggested he was able to understand the impact of his actions on provincial staff, saying that:

"You'd feel the sentiment at provincial level towards people in head office, when you demand this, you're likely to make their job difficult".

Improvement in relationships: Some participants suggested that the workshops helped to improve relationships between members of the team. For instance one participant said that:

"It generated a ripple effect amongst colleagues: we may not be in the same unit, but we work together, it improved a lot of coordination issues, especially at [head office]".

Engagement with senior management: As a result of the first and second workshop, some participants said they would go about arguing their case to management differently. For instance, one participant said:

"How do you deal with your boss when you've got stats which speak differently to what he says? It's how you frame it."

Another said: *"I present something to you initially, maybe stats, then you compare my objectives and*

the political objectives that senior management wants to achieve. I can come and present the very same thing, just phrased in a bit, altered way, the same information, and it achieves both parties' objectives."

Identifying possible changes to improve reporting processes: The third workshop helped participants identify a number of ways in which they could improve reporting processes, albeit in small incremental ways such as the RPCU providing feedback to provincial officers on the quality of their reports.

Key lessons

Here, we identify some important lessons to hold in mind if taking this approach in future.

Ownership and openness to alternatives: As one participant from the RPCU said:

"We were the ones who were kind of imposing. It was demand driven, we knew what we wanted, and the short comings."

Despite a reliance on aid and external actors, staff from the RPCU were in charge of the overall process. Consultants if they are brought in, need to be wary of providing advice about what to do and may be better off asking questions of employees and getting them to acknowledge what they do and how they work with colleagues to get things done. But the lack of a structure associated with a conventional strategy workshop may lead to some anxiety amongst participants and facilitators. Participants will subsequently need a degree of openness, curiosity and patience if taking this approach.

Small group discussions with a range of participants: Participants commented on the small number of participants, which lent itself to a more

interactive process and a depth of discussion that is often lost in larger-scale workshops. One participant said:

"We had one workshop where we were about five to six where we did storytelling. We got all that value from that small group. It's more intimate, it's more engagement. If you've got 20-25 people, someone wants their voice to be the main attraction, digressing from what you came to do."

> ## "We were the ones who were kind of imposing. It was demand driven, we knew what we wanted, and the short comings."

The workshops also benefited from the perspectives of a range of participants including an administrator, researchers and a manager. If other groups (or their representatives) are to be brought into the discussion, the number of workshops might need to be increased and/or a facilitator might need to sensitively broker relations between groups.

Flexibility and a focus on the present: Given the highly fluid and politicized environment that the RPCU worked in, policy priorities could change from day to day, making forward planning very difficult. The iterative, participatory and deliberative approach which focussed on the 'present' was subsequently a strength as it left significant room for manoeuvre.

Contestation and debate: Taking a more reflective approach is time- and labour-intensive. Moreover, there may well be a lot of disagreement about the nature of the problems being experienced, potentially leading to finger pointing, blame and fall out (as there was between staff in the RPCU and provincial officers), before people are willing to 'let go', discuss constructively and compromise.

Continual engagement, uncertainty and timing: The work with the RPCU spanned three workshops over nine months. However, change processes tend not to take place neatly within pre-defined timeframes. Efforts should be made for groups within an institution to continue the conversation. For instance, asking participants after the first workshop to edit their stories encouraged them to take ownership over the process and fostered further reflection whilst the head of the RPCU suggested that a WhatsApp group that was established to help organize the third workshop should stay active to enable some of the conversations started during the workshop to continue online.

The social dimension of learning: One participant suggested that the social dimension was crucial in enabling learning to take place during the workshops:

"With all the storytelling, especially the sharing part, if I don't share it with anyone, I will still maintain that I was right. But having other people react to my story and hear what their view on the situation was and hearing other stories enabled learning to take place. It actually dawned later on, after you'd gone back home, another day, when we were sitting, you start thinking about some of the stories we shared, you realised....you draw conclusions

from each story, learning from somebody else's experience, it develops certain attributes in you...learning takes place in a social context, hearing about other people's problems helps you to draw lessons from them. When you are confronted with a similar situation, your memory automatically draws from how that was handled in the [past]."

Practical implications often emerge after the workshop: However, given the primary emphasis on reflection, participants weren't always able to see the practical implications of the workshop immediately. In some cases, this only became clear days or weeks after the workshop. One participant when asked about his reaction to the first workshop said he:

"...was trying to make sense about this: so we've done this, but now what? But then it evokes the introspective questions, me and the minister, changing goalposts, every now and again, how does that fit in? Then the next question is why did the minister change goalposts? Was my reaction to this appropriate? How should I have done it differently? Then you start putting the pieces together. And then you find actually, I was actually wrong in this case. Confusing initially, but it then becomes something useful."

Another participant in a similar vein stated that:

"When you sit down later and start thinking about the whole process, you start doing things in a very different way – you actually start realising that you are the one who made a mistake in dealing with a situation or dealing with a request – or overall, it was very encouraging – it was very insightful – in terms of engaging with provincial people."

The length of the intervention: Participants felt that another

workshop would have been useful to, for instance, explore what participants had done to put some of the recommendations from the third workshop into practice. However, there was no 'minimum requirement' for how long the intervention should last and how many workshops should be held. Each workshop provided a time for employees to reflect and was valued in itself.

Sequencing vis-à-vis other interventions: This intervention and the training modules may have been better implemented in parallel, rather than sequentially. Although this would have made managing the process more difficult, the discussions during the workshops may have influenced the nature of the training whilst the training may have offered participants the chance to review and test ideas discussed during the workshop.

The limits to sustainable progressive change in a difficult context: Civil servants in the RPCU worked in a difficult political and economic environment which shaped what sort of change was possible. For instance, one participant said:

"Our context has shaped our outlook significantly, it will continue to shape our outlook. Until there is a significant change, the trajectory still remains the same. You talk about generations, which is up to 30 years: Are we looking at 30 years or 60 years to see out this particular perspective?"

Whilst another participant who was less pessimistic said:

"Maybe 10 years down the road, there'll be greater emphasis on evidence-based programming."

With large-scale change unlikely anytime soon, the only hope was incrementalism and small piecemeal changes to people's

practices. However, the butterfly effect could not be ruled out, where small changes to patterns in relationships and practices in one part of an institution could result in large changes across the institution as a whole.

The latent nature of capacity: Although participants might not always be able to break out of regressive patterns of behaviour and ways of relating because of specific features of the political context, it did not mean they could not act or relate differently in a more conducive environment, something which might not happen for years.

References

Bhatti, Y., Ramirez, R. and Riaz, S (2016) 'Using Live Cases to Learn Scenario Planning – How the Purpose Matters for Impact and Meaningfulness'. Said Business School, University of Oxford. Research Paper

Du Toit A (2012) 'Making sense of "evidence": Notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policy making', Working Paper 21. PLAAS, UWC: Bellville

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

Pickering, A. (1993) The Mangle of Practice: Agency and Emergence in the Sociology of Science, American Journal of Sociology, 99(3): 559–89

Stacey, R.D. and Mowles, C. (2016) Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics: the Challenge of Complexity to Ways of Thinking about Organizations, London: Pearson Education, 7th Edition