Enhancing the use of evidence in South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs

Lessons learned

Ajoy Datta, Louise Shaxson and Mapula Tshangela

13 December 2016

Table of Contents

Acronyms

B&C	Biodiversity & Conservation
BCURE	Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence
CD	Chief Director
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
DEA	Department of Environmental Affairs
Defra	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (UK)
(D)DG	(Deputy) Director General
DG	Director General
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
DST	Department of Science and Technology
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
KZN	KwaZulu Natal
MinMEC	Ministers and Members of Executive Councils
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NSSD	National Strategy for Sustainable Development
RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
RD&EF	Research, Development & Evidence Framework
SAMEA	South African Monitoring & Evaluation Association
SD&GE	Sustainable Development & Green Economy
UCT	University of Cape Town

Introduction

Efforts to improve the use of evidence amongst policymakers have largely taken an individual approach – focussing on training and mentoring – assuming a lack of knowledge and skills. Whilst there was value in this, policymakers were often unable to put this into practice because of the constraints they faced in the form of institution-wide systems and structures. It was thus seen as essential to work at the level of the whole institution (called 'department' in this report). The VakaYiko project in South Africa aimed to test this organizational approach through its work with the Department for Environmental Affairs (DEA).

Background

The links between the VakaYiko project and the Department for Environmental Affairs (DEA) in South Africa can be traced back to a joint workshop on the science-policy interface held by DEA, the Department for Science and Technology (DST) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in collaboration with the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2008. This was attended by, amongst others, Mapula Tshangela, a policy manager from DEA, and co-facilitated by Louise Shaxson who would subsequently become a research fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)'s Research and Policy in Development Programme (RAPID). Since 2008, the policy manager has worked with colleagues to put the lessons from the workshop into practice. In addition to her regular jobs within DEA, Mapula developed a framework for implementing an evidence-informed approach to DEA's policy making—the Research, Development & Evidence Framework (RD&EF).

The policy manager worked on attracting the attention of senior DEA management to the need for an evidence-informed approach across the organization. Senior managers agreed that the development of the RD&EF should be part of Branch and Departmental Annual Performance Plans, which set out the activities for which DEA is accountable to the Auditor General for delivering. In 2012, the RD&EF was approved by MinMEC (a Ministerial-level body). It was the only framework of this type that had been developed across government. Funding from VakaYiko enabled ODI to support DEA (already a high capacity ministry in relation to research and information management) in its attempt to embed the RD&EF across the department and subsequently continue the process of strengthening the use of evidence across the department and sector. At an initial meeting between DEA and ODI, various ideas were discussed that could mesh DEA's needs for support with what the ODI-led team would be able to provide.

What was planned

Early on in the project, a steering group was formed that had good representation from key transversal departments - the Department for Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and the Department for Science and Technology (DST) as well as from the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), a major EU-funded programme focused on the provision of evidence to support pro-poor policy development. ODI also invited the ex-Chief Economist in the Office of the Presidency, now running the executive course on evidence for Director Generals (DGs) and Deputy Director Generals (DDGs) at the University of Cape Town, to be on the steering group, to provide a more academic perspective to VakaYiko. These external representatives would ensure that the project would be relevant to more than one department, as required by the funder, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

In order to support DEA, ODI brought together a team made up of researchers from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the CSIR as well as a freelance consultant with experience of working in the South African government. A workplan was drafted and redrafted a number of times over a three-month period and was to be delivered over two years comprising of four stages:

• A diagnostic stage
• Synthesizing the findings and developing a department wide strategic plan
• Implementing the strategic plan

- Reviewing progress toward implementing the plan

The diagnostic stage comprised five discrete research projects that were decided by and agreed to by DEA, the steering group and ODI. These projects were:

- An analysis of the role that evidence plays in DEA from an organizational perspective
- The role of evidence in policy making internal to DEA, with a focus on good practices
- An analysis of how DEA consults/promotes participation during the policy-making processes
- An analysis of how DEA's evidence and policy documents are used by more senior parts of the South African government
- An discussion document to inform a decision by DEA on whether or not to recommission the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD)

The work was to be implemented collaboratively by representatives of DEA, ODI, HSRC and CSIR.

ODI developed a strong relationship with DEA, underpinned by a letter of support signed by the Director General and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between DEA and ODI signed by the Deputy Director General, to guide the governance of the project.

What happened

Each diagnostic exercise was led and facilitated by the aforementioned DEA policy manager (who in essence was the evidence 'champion') working constantly with other DEA theme managers. Together, these exercises aimed to supplement DEA managers' perceptions of the role of evidence (or knowledge) in the department's work, what worked well, areas for improvement, its potential to excel, and the processes of change required (to operationalize the R,D&E framework). This was important as it would provide the basis for dialogue with senior management later on.

Once each research project started, they required further scoping in order to develop an analytical framework, generate interview questions and produce a list of interviewees. Part way through the study on the NSSD, the department decided not to re-commission it. The focus subsequently changed to identifying good practices in how the department was facilitating sustainable development and what more the department might do to.

The frameworks for the various studies were brought together at a later stage to form an overarching framework for the whole project. In preparing the reports, researchers were careful in framing criticism constructively, to induce a sense that the current situation was not optimal but also provide people in the department with a sense of purpose and a feeling that change was possible. However, this required additional time as well as skill on the part of the team: reports had to go through many drafts before the wording was agreed with DEA. Findings from the diagnostic phase were discussed in a number of meetings throughout and after the diagnostic period including during three theme Managers' meetings; four project team meetings; bilateral meetings with theme managers; and two steering group meetings. A summary of the findings from the five studies, together with the analytical framework that informed them, were published in late 2016 (https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11009.pdf and https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11010.pdf).

The DEA evidence champion supported by ODI endeavoured to turn the diagnostic into an action-oriented department-wide strategic plan, which focussed on the use of evidence. This would provide detailed guidance to the department about what specifically needed to be done to improve the use of evidence. Key observations from each of the diagnostic papers were extracted and grouped together, resulting in a list of 52 observations that highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in DEA's use of evidence.

Drawing on guidance from DPME, these were grouped into five broad improvement areas. Within each of the improvement areas, a number of improvement objectives were identified, which related to one or more of the individual observations from the diagnostics. This was then translated into a set of activities. The development of the change strategy started in mid-2015 and ended by the end of the first quarter of 2016, taking about nine months in total. The DEA management continued internal discussions on prioritizing the key issues for immediate action.

To complement the objectives and activities set out in the strategic plan, a set of guidelines was drafted for policy managers to 'hold in mind' when taking a strategic approach to improving the use of evidence in DEA (see https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11011.pdf). Inspired by work in the UK, it was a short document which became a part of the messaging to senior management and was subsequently published with the other two papers referred to on the previous page.

Once drafted, the change strategy was discussed with the relevant Deputy Director General who suggested implementing it in three phases:

- Sensitization (2016-17): raising awareness of the core messages from the diagnostic phase across the department
- Piloting (2017-18): using the sensitization phase to identify appropriate interventions that could embed those messages in the department's routine business processes to help make an improved role for evidence in policy become part of 'business as usual'
- Scaling up good practices (2018-19): both in DEA and across the sector including other stakeholders (within and outside government)

As part of the initial phase of implementing the change strategy, it was presented at a senior management meeting attended by 150 DEA senior managers (including the Director General (DG), Deputy Director Generals (DDGs), Chief Directors (CDs) and Directors) representing all branches of the department. Senior management appreciated the work that had been done (the Director General called it 'mind-blowing') but acknowledged that more work still needed to be done to sensitize DEA staff about the plan and what changes they were expected to make and how.

This was followed by a series of presentations at branch level, as part of an overall sensitization process that was expanded to include DDGs, CDs, Directors, Deputy Directors and Assistant Directors (i.e. the top five levels of the organisation) with other junior officials represented in some cases. Specifically the sessions were with Biodiversity & Conservation 30 participants, Chemicals and Waste 70 participants, Environment Programme 20 participants, Environmental Advisory Services 15 participants and Legal Services 40 participants.

This was followed up with an engagement with Working Group 3 (a formal cross-sectoral working group for the environment sector, comprising officials from DEA and the provincial governments) inter-governmental stakeholders attended by 41 officials (including Directors, Deputy Directors and Assistant Directors) representing DEA centrally; provincial stakeholders from North West, Mpumalanga, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Western Cape and Eastern Cape and; Entities from Kwazulu Natal and KZN Ezemvelo. The group suggested that the presentation was so useful that it should be repeated at other sectoral meetings.

Efforts were being made to attract senior management attention to endorse and allocate resources to a department-wide evidence-focussed strategic plan. In addition, between the end of 2015 and the end of the project, the DEA evidence champion and ODI also pursued engagement with specific policy themes, especially to help them develop evidence strategies. This served to pilot one of the activities which the strategic plan suggested that all policy themes do on a periodic basis.

Policy managers from the Biodiversity and Conservation (B&C) theme and the Waste and Chemicals theme both expressed an interest, in receiving support from ODI on improving their 'evidence processes'. ODI subsequently provided support to the development of a research implementation plan for the B&C theme. However, due to a significant workload and inadequate capacity, policy managers for the Waste theme were unable to make the time to engage with the project. However, at short notice, the Sustainable Development and Green Economy (SD&GE) expressed interest and received support to enhance its own draft evidence strategy process and content.

ODI supported policy managers from the B&C and SD&GE themes to run evidence strategy processes. In both cases, a survey was sent out to policy officials and stakeholders from other government departments and provinces to identify their evidence needs. This was followed by a stakeholder workshop where consensus was reached on what the priority evidence needs were, whilst governance arrangements were put in place to ensure policy goals and evidence needs were revisited periodically. The National Biodiversity Research and Evidence Strategy and associated implementation plan were published in March 2016 and updated with a sector-wide Indaba (stakeholder meeting) in August 2016.

A note guiding readers through developing and updating an evidence strategies was drafted by CSIR with support from ODI.

Preliminary outcomes

Outcomes from capacity development work usually takes time to emerge. However, some early, albeit incremental, changes were identified, as discussed below.

By the end of the diagnostic phase, individuals that were brought together under the VakaYiko project, from DEA, ODI, HSRC and CSIR were a more coherent group, with higher levels of trust and a greater ability to contest ideas with one another in an open and frank manner. This was particularly so for trust between the VakaYiko project team and DEA. For example, the decision to allow publication of the three documents demonstrated significant levels of trust as the team was analysing and assessing the content of what DEA was doing, some of which was potentially sensitive.

Towards the end of the project, the individuals from CSIR and HSRC had established and/or strengthened relationships with counterparts in the South African government, especially those from DEA, DPME and DST. Further, researchers from HSRC and CSIR were more able to write 'appreciatively' and to engage more constructively with government policy managers.

The DEA evidence champion, with support from ODI, attracted considerable senior management attention and interest to both the VakaYiko project and to the role of evidence in policymaking within DEA. Senior management reaffirmed that the evidence work should continue to be part of DEA's Annual Performance Plan and Five-year Strategic Plan - as it is also already part of the Presidential Medium Term Strategic Framework 2014-2019 and the associated national-level outcomes. As discussed earlier, the evidence work was presented at a number of senior management meetings in DEA: to provincial government staff at the sectoral Working Group meeting and in theme-specific stakeholder workshops / Indabas.

At the invitation of DPME, DEA's Director General was asked to present the work with VakaYiko at the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) conference and during the University of Cape Town training course for senior policymakers. This was done with support from the DEA policy manager and ODI. The VakaYiko project and its aims to reform the use of evidence across DEA subsequently received significant exposure with senior management across the South African government. To date, the DEA presentation on evidence has been delivered three times to the UCT course (October 2015 as well as May and October 2016). In the October 2016 session, the DEA presentation on evidence was delivered by the Deputy Director General for Biodiversity & Conservation, who subsequently increased the support for work on evidence across the branch.

In another DPME development, following a presentation about the project's work, DEA's DG nominated 14 policy managers to attend the UCT/DPME course on evidence, stating that she wanted them to attend as a group so that they could discuss the implications of the evidence work for the department. In a letter from the DG of DEA to the DG for the presidency about this, she stated that "the VakaYiko project has brought to light critical observations on the use of evidence in various phases in particular policy development, implementation and, to some extent, in monitoring of delivery within the Department for Environmental Affairs".

Following publication of the B&C evidence strategy and implementation plan, the theme held a stakeholder meeting (Indaba) to encourage engagement from the broader environmental sector in the evidence strategy process. This was intended to ensure that the annual implementation plan was up to date and reflected a range of views from across the sector. Attendance was much higher than expected with about 90 people attending over two days. Provinces, other departments, other themes within DEA, universities and research councils were all represented. The Minister of Environment was scheduled to use the 'Indaba' to formally launch the Biodiversity & Conservation National Research & Evidence Strategy. Although she was unable to attend, it demonstrated the traction that evidence-related work had at a political level. A senior South African scientist who is integrally involved in the B&C theme noted about the evidence strategy work that "everything is moving in the right direction".

However, one project participant suggested that "processes of drafting submissions and motivations to perform respective functions as part of business plans is starting to consider problem statements and

evidence needs, but since this is not mandatory, uptake is slow and limited to a few champions that are driving the evidence agenda".

The VakaYiko project took place in a context of an increasing focus on evidence across the South African government. Toward the end of the project, a senior DPME manager noted in an email "As you know, my own keen interest in the progress and success of this work was to use the DEA as a case study in our broader Diagnostic of research and evidence use in Government. Not only has the team provided in-depth, organizational level insight but also instrumental resources and guidelines to apply to other national departments."

However, outside of DEA it is difficult to disentangle VakaYiko's outcomes from those achieved by its sister BCURE project at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). VakaYiko and the UJ team worked together to learn lessons from each other and ensure that work plans were aligned. Both also fed into wider work on evidence being led by four centre–of-government departments: DPME, DPSA (Department of Public Service Administration), the Programme for Supporting Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) and the National Treasury. With ongoing support provided by the UJ team, this senior level group continues to discuss how the full range of work on evidence-informed policy making can be taken forwards across government

Lessons learned

The lessons for DEA are noted in the report of the final workshop and associated slides, which will be published later this year. Here we reflect on some of the lessons that the team has learned through the course of the project:

Setting up the project

- Existing relationships with key in-country stakeholders were key to identifying demand for support, establishing a steering group and in convening a team which could provide support to DEA.
- A steering group helped to shape the project plan, make sense of the findings, and find creative ways to communicate the findings to senior management within DEA in order to attract interest and attention.
- A steering group made up of South African stakeholders worked well, especially given DEA's requirement for confidentiality where relevant.
- The design of the diagnostic phase wasn't an entirely demand-led process. It was also informed by the skills and expertise of the team convened by ODI to provide support to DEA.

Assembling a support team

- The presence of an evidence champion is a minimum requirement in improving the role of evidence in a government department.
- However, there are limits to what one individual can do to put evidence on the political agenda, hence engaging other theme managers in the organization and other government Departments is key.
- The workload on any institutional change project is very high: an evidence champion ideally needs to be supported by a team, preferably within the same institution and networks with other related Departments.
- An international presence on the support team can provide insights from efforts to improve the role of evidence as well as institutional change from elsewhere, but if it is not based in the country it will not be well placed to help the internal team navigate the internal political economy of the department.
- Trust was a crucial ingredient in enabling the VakaYiko project to achieve what it did. The long diagnostic phase in particular was critical in generating relations of trust amongst members of the support team (ODI, HSRC, CSIR) and between the support team and DEA.

- A collaborative approach to managing the project facilitated by frequent and good face-to-face communication was/is crucial. This is difficult where the project lead (in this case ODI) was based in the UK.

Approach to managing change in DEA

- During the diagnostic phase, researchers trod a fine line between openness of analysis and acceptability of the findings.
- The diagnostic suggested the branches and policy themes that made up the department each had their own unique dynamics. Working with these groups individually, in addition to a whole institution approach could be more fruitful but would take more resource.
- Given the wider context of DEA's policy work and the different cultures of evidence uncovered in the diagnostic phase, it was important to allow different groups and individuals the space to respond in their own time and their own way. Some people engaged regularly attended steering group meetings but were not very vocal. While the team was unable to work with them or track specific changes, their willingness to engage suggested that there is a good chance they will take up some of the lessons from the project through their own processes.
- The analytical framework, which identified four evidence processes and three sets of organizational development issues was useful in guiding the DEA evidence champion and ODI in taking a structured approach to improving the use of evidence. It also instilled some confidence in the steering group and DEA senior management that the approach being taken was credible.
- Unexpected events happened on a regular basis limiting the usefulness of plans and planning processes to some degree. The support team made up of a DEA evidence champion and theme managers and ODI had to improvize from moment to moment; skill, creativity and a sense of purpose were key.
- The process of developing a department-wide strategic plan was not only about producing a document, but also provided a vehicle for structured interactions and discussions about what needed to happen across the department to improve people's evidence-related practices.
- Change objectives that are proposed ought to become self-sustaining and become part of everyday practice. Care needs to be taken to ensure that they are both technically sound and politically feasible.
- While senior management are influential in a government department, where possible, capacity-development processes should also engage with the 'hearts and minds' of those at the 'coalface'. Focusing too heavily on one at the expense of the other may be counterproductive.
- If work to improve the role of evidence is seen as a burden by some policy managers, it may be helpful to approach 'evidence' differently – as a means to achieving a better outcome rather than as an 'end' itself. This could be done by taking an issue-based approach to evidence, focusing on policy issues rather than the organization.

Inspiring change beyond DEA

- By illustrating the potential benefits of improving the use of evidence in a government department, the work with DEA could provide inspiration to other government departments to do something similar – through a peer learning process.
- However, on its own, the VakaYiko project would have struggled to engage other government departments effectively, although it worked well within the sector and with the environment functions in some of the provinces. What has made the difference to the project's potential long-term cross-government impact is how closely it worked with the sister UJ-BCURE project, and with DPME, which was already putting considerable effort into improving the use of evidence in other Departments. Their endorsement gave the DEA work greater legitimacy. This also led to a VakaYiko final workshop that was attended by almost 40 stakeholders from various sector departments and Provinces and who are also keen to take the DEA lessons further, in line with what they are already doing.

GINKS is a network of individuals and organisations sharing information and knowledge that facilitates capacity building for ICT use and evidence-informed policy making in Ghana.

HSRC is a research institute conducting large-scale, policy- relevant, social scientific research on the African continent for public sector users, non-governmental organisations and international development agencies.

INASP leads the VakaYiko consortium. It is an international development charity working to improve access, production and use of research information in Africa, Asia and Latin America. By collaborating with a global network of partners, it aims to put research knowledge at the heart of development.

ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. The Research and Policy in Development programme works to understand the relationship between research, policy and practice and to promote evidence-informed policy-making.

ZeipNET coordinates overarching national processes for evidence-informed policy-making in Zimbabwe through capacity building and active engagement of all stakeholders in the policy-making matrix.