

Establishing a Research and Policy Coordination Unit in Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment

Research evidence and youth policy in Zimbabwe

There is growing recognition of the crucial role of research and evidence in supporting the development and implementation of policies for youth in Zimbabwe. However, other challenges remain. These include: difficulties in influencing high-level decision makers; mismatch between data collection and use; and some capacity constraints at the operational level. A new Research and Policy Coordination Unit in the country's Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment is aiming to address some of these gaps.

Data and research are identified as strategic priority areas in Zimbabwe's National Youth Policy, which highlights the "primacy of research, data and information... [for] development, empowerment

of young people and their full integration in national affairs". Needs identified include the "collection, analysis, dissemination and use of socio-economic and demographic data on youth development" as well as the "promotion of relevant policy-oriented research on key youth issues".

Research and policy in the Ministry of Youth

The Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment leads the implementation of the Youth Policy. The Ministry's Research and Policy Coordination Unit (RPCU) was established in 2014. This unit has a mixed mandate that includes producing and using research to



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The African Youth Charter calls for a National Youth Policy in every member state that is informed both by extensive consultation with young people and by accurate baseline data and situation analysis (Article 12). It also calls on all states to "address and ensure the availability of accurate data on youth employment, unemployment and underemployment so as to facilitate the prioritisation of the issue in national development programmes" (Article 15).



inform policy decisions; using focal points in other ministries to ensure mainstreaming of youth issues; and evaluating the impact of interventions.

The RPCU collaborates with development partners including UNICEF and the African Development Bank. It is currently working on a number of projects, including baseline research on vocational training centres, research to inform the design of new youth information centres, and a comprehensive national situation analysis survey on youth issues. The unit has also successfully lobbied for funds to carry out case studies to examine lessons learned from youth funds in other African countries. These insights will inform discussions around how to address issues with Zimbabwe's Youth Development Fund, which is currently faced with an average of 90% default rate on the loans it provides to young people.

Challenges

The new unit does not yet have the staff capacity or organizational processes in place to fully handle the Ministry's evidence requirements. It is dealing with a number of challenges shared by research units in other contexts where the VakaYiko Consortium is working, including limited funding and resources and lack of engagement with relevant research centres and civil-society organizations.

The unit also does not yet have processes in place for determining evidence requirements, accessing or communicating the evidence. It faces a particular issue related to baseline data, as existing national

data on youth is incomplete. Another challenge, related to the unit's policy coordination mandate, is the limited engagement and dialogue between the Ministry of Youth and other ministries.

Partnership with ZeipNET

Discussions between the Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Network (ZeipNET) and the Ministry around the need to strengthen capacity for use of research evidence at both individual and organizational levels began in 2013, and ZeipNET's engagement with the Ministry was instrumental in the creation of the Research Unit.

ZeipNET's partnership with the Ministry under the VakaYiko programme covers training for the new unit's staff; support to the RPCU Deputy Director in identifying where evidence can make a difference and it is worth spending resources and time to source it; and a series of Policy Dialogue events. The programme was launched through a Sensitisation Workshop at the Ministry in August 2014.

The VakaYiko programme through ZeipNET has trained the entire staff of the Research and Policy Coordination Unit in skills to support evidence-informed policy making, including how to access, evaluate and communicate research evidence. Feedback from the training has been very positive and participants have described feeling more confident finding and presenting evidence in their work.

In partnership with the Ministry, ZeipNET has also held two Policy Dialogues: one on strengthening

“I will now be able to compare information from various sources, critically assess, evaluate and filter information instead of presenting directly from Google searches or raw articles as they are.”

Youth Development Officer, Ministry of Youth.

youth economic opportunity, and the other on the Zimbabwe Youth Council Review. Recommendations and issues arising from these events have included the need for sustainable partnerships between different actors to support the development of the evidence base on youth issues; the need to further examine the existing evidence base of the National Youth Policy; and the importance of investigating best practices and case studies from other countries. In addition, the events have led to the formation of a Roundtable Action Group comprised of ZeipNET, the Ministry of Youth, and the Zimbabwe Youth Council to advocate for evidence use to support the Youth Council's work.





Simbarashe (second left), with his colleague and fellow ZeipNET Ministry of Youth mentee Lennet Munjoma (middle), pictured with Ronald Munatsi (far left) and Gilchriste Ndonwge (far right) of ZeipNET, as well as a representative from ZeipNET's partners at the Ministry of Industry & Commerce

Next steps

The RPCU developed an action plan that includes some areas they need to improve in order to carry out more evidence-informed work. This is currently being led by the Deputy Director of the RPCU with support from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and ZeipNET. Some of the emergent areas that need support are around communication with higher-level decision makers and navigating the difficult context for encouraging evidence use and better liaising with district-level officers that collect data.

Key factors in success

Several things stand out from the experience of ZeipNET and VakaYiko in influencing the Ministry's creation and support for the new unit:

Using a window of opportunity

The need for a robust approach to the use of research had been acknowledged in the Ministry for some time, and approaches had been internally debated. The collaboration of the Ministry with external stakeholders such as ZeipNET re-introduced the debate. ZeipNET took advantage of the window of opportunity in the debate and pushed for getting concrete commitment from the Ministry to address these demands. The subsequent creation of the new Research and Policy Coordination Unit meant that ZeipNET was able to take advantage of a second window of opportunity, namely the chance to advise on the development of a government research unit from its inception.

Ownership In working with the Ministry of Youth, ZeipNET partnered with an institution

that had already been mandated both at continental level, via the African Youth Charter, and at national level, via the National Youth Policy, to use evidence in policy making. The importance of research for youth policy had been clearly established, but what was lacking was how to implement the claims in the policy. ZeipNET's support on skills development and organizational processes came at a time when there was demand for this support. The result is that the Ministry has been very involved in the programme, particularly in shaping the Policy Dialogues, and the Deputy Director of the Research Unit has a long 'wish list' to work on via the Learning Exchange Programme in Year 3.

Networks The approach taken by the VakaYiko Consortium embraces complexity and recognizes the multifactorial and non-linear process of decision making. This



means engaging not only with those stakeholders that might directly trigger change, but also building a network of those who have the power to influence those decision makers. In their work with the Ministry of Youth, ZeipNET has benefited both from strong internal buy-in from the Deputy Director of the Research Unit, and also from external interest and engagement from a range of other government institutions, research organizations, NGOs and development partners who have engaged with the programme via Policy Dialogue events and ZeipNET's growing communications programme.

Credibility and trust ZeipNET has gradually built the trust of the Ministry throughout their working relationship. In the early days of the project, an influential factor in securing credibility was that prior to engaging with the Ministry of Youth, ZeipNET was already partnering with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. As the project has developed, ZeipNET has built close working relationships with the

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Director and staff of the Research and Policy Unit and is growing in influence as an organization

as it continues to develop its network. The level of access and trust required in Year 3 to work on sensitive internal processes is a valuable asset which was built up throughout Years 1 and 2 of the project. One indication of this is ZeipNET's inclusion in a three-way partnership between the Ministry and the Youth Council to work on evidence issues.

A holistic approach A holistic and flexible approach to promote positive change in such a complex environment is a key factor in supporting a sustainable and effective programme. ZeipNET has taken a three-pronged approach with the Ministry, comprising individual skills training, support for organizational processes, and a broader public engagement initiative. This has enabled ZeipNET to develop a multifaceted understanding of the Ministry's needs, and to identify and support links between different areas of the programme as and when they arise.



About VakaYiko

The VakaYiko Consortium is a three-year project involving five organizations working primarily in three countries in the first phase: Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Work in a fourth country, Uganda, started in late 2015. This project is funded by DFID under the Building Capacity for Use of Research Evidence (BCURE) programme.

The project starts with the understanding that the routine use of research to inform policy requires at least three factors to be in place:

- Individuals with the skills to access, evaluate and use research evidence
- Processes for handling research evidence in policy making departments
- A wider enabling environment of engaged citizens, media and civil society

The consortium works to build capacity at all three levels. For more information see www.inasp.info/vakayiko.

