

Online course promotes the use of knowledge and evidence in policy

Training addresses needs of mid-level policymakers in Latin America

There has been an increasing interest and institutionalization of knowledge in public decision making over the last few years. However, the experiences of Southern-led think net Politics & Ideas (P&I) and its members in Latin America with regards to political leaders show that many mid-level policymakers need support, new tools and new ideas to foster effective changes within their agencies to promote a better use of research. With a grant awarded by INASP as part of the VakaYiko project, P&I recently ran an online course to help address this gap for Latin American policymakers. Here Vanesa Weyrauch and Leandro Echt of P&I describe the need for this type of training and what they have learnt as a result of the course.

Addressing policymakers' needs

Based on our experience in virtual learning, we decided to create an online course focused not only on supporting the development of technical ability with concrete tools and methods, but also on how to approach common challenges that arise when promoting the use of evidence, taking the political economy in these processes into account (for example, things like resistance, power games and ideologies).

Building a relevant and useful curriculum for the course was an important challenge and we deployed a set of strategies that



Colombia was one of the countries with participants on the course

allowed us to unravel policymakers' needs and experiences. Firstly, we turned to specialized literature. Secondly, we launched a brief questionnaire for policymakers to contribute ideas on what they would like to address in this type of course. We also interviewed a range of public officials in several countries to understand how they are currently using evidence to ensure that we took a realistic view on the topics covered.

Co-constructing knowledge with policymakers

The P&I team possesses vast experience in working with the supply side in terms of promoting the

use of evidence in policy making; we have conducted several initiatives with researchers, think tanks and civil society organizations. However, addressing the demand side was an engaging challenge. We were convinced of the value of engaging and building on the experience of those working in the policy making environment.

Consequently, besides doing the survey and conducting a series of interviews, the curricula of the course was developed with the help of a strategic group made up of eight former or current senior policymakers (national and provincial ministers, secretaries and directors, among other). The group included people with a significant academic or research background



from different Latin American countries. They contributed to the design of the course in terms of relevant content and several of them reviewed and commented on modules as they were being developed. Some of the group were invited, along with interviewees, to share their experience and reflections in our webinars.

We also made the decision to focus not only on supporting the development of technical abilities but also on how to help participants approach common political challenges that arise when seeking to strengthen the use of evidence. These include lack of incentives from higher-level policymakers and dealing with sharing conflictive information. Besides sharing specific tools, methods and experiences regarding how to technically ensure quality, relevance and adequacy of research, we covered issues such as taking into account different decision making styles in order to better assess what type of knowledge should be shared and how.

The other side of the co-construction of knowledge involved the contributions made by participants across the seven weeks of the course. By the end of course, we felt inspired by what participants had shared. Their continuous engagement in relevant discussions, their concrete experiences that will expand and refine the content of upcoming capacity-building activities and the collective spirit of thinking about this complex interaction in new ways, will all work to make this course more effective and fruitful in the future. Moreover, some concrete ideas to improve the content were suggested by the participants. These ideas include: the role of citizenship in decision making (not only at the stage of diagnosing public policy problems but also in the design, implementation and evaluation phases); the challenge to combine

Politics & Ideas

About Politics & Ideas

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data from the national level with the local one (how much flexibility should be allowed); and how to refine policymakers' typologies to better address their needs. (Are they seeking visibility? Are they more concerned with building internal political support?)

Selecting participants

We received more than 350 applications for the course, from most of the countries in Latin America and were then faced with the challenge of selecting only 25 of them to fill the available spots. For that purpose, we used a mix of criteria such as geographic diversity, experience in the use of research/evidence in their working environments, needs and motivations to learn and use that knowledge within their organizations, and individual and organizational commitment to share knowledge with their peers.

The result was a very rich and heterogeneous group from Guatemala to Argentina, working at the national, subnational and local levels, and with diverse profiles ranging from a member of a public/private corporation in Colombia,

committed to strengthen research on rural issues, to a member of the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation in Peru engaged with developing policies and tools related to science and technology.

Without this course, these people would probably never have had the opportunity to "meet" each other and learn together for any period of time. The project budget would not have allowed us to bring them all together for a week, but it enabled us to develop the content and conduct the seven-week online course so they could share knowledge and experience virtually.

Horizontal learning at the core

One might think that the lack of face-to-face meetings for participants would hinder their chances to interact and discuss challenges and share relevant experiences. However, we found that the online platform, combined with theoretical modules and practical exercises, plus a series of webinars and a live workshop, provided a good opportunity for participants to significantly develop their own and others' capacities to tackle the complex interaction between knowledge and policy.

One advantage of the online course in comparison to a face-to-face workshop (although ideally we would have loved to combine both) is that participants have a longer time to digest content and link it to their ongoing work. The course takes place over seven weeks so we were able to space out the content, addressing two or three big issues per week; in our experience a week was equivalent to a module. This is a crucial strategy for the course, due to the high level of complexity and depth of many of the issues we reflect upon, starting from internal capacities to how the overall political context or the behaviour of



other stakeholders can pose several challenges to this type of work.

Online tools also allow us to promote horizontal learning. Online exchange provides the feeling of a network, where many can bring both ideas and problems and where the experiences of one can shed light on the questions of another. As the weeks progressed, participants became engaged and shared real-life examples of what they are doing well, as well as current dilemmas and obstacles. Reading each other's experiences, pausing one or more times a week to reflect (many did the course on the weekends) and selecting when to process the modules all contribute to the possibility of each participant finding his/her unique pace. They could also select which topics to bring into discussion. Moreover, this same feeling of being part of a network discouraged anyone from monopolizing the discussions. This gave everyone the space to intervene, even people who are shy and might be reluctant to share or pose questions in a face-to-face setting.

One region, common challenges

Besides using the guidance of experienced policymakers, taking the horizontal approach and having a very active group of participants who were thirsty for sharing and learning, another factor that contributed to the success of the initiative was the common challenges that participants face even when working in different contexts.

Informality or scarce information management, the absence of high-level champions who can support evidence-based decisions, lack of resources allocated to these processes, low levels of social valuation of science, and low involvement of society in decision making were some of



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the main worries and contextual characteristics that gave participants a common ground to exchange experiences and generate empathy. All this is underpinned by a region with transversal political, economic, social and cultural challenges, as well as policy frameworks to address them.

Throughout the course, participants advised their colleagues on how to approach different opportunities and/or threats and how to manage strengths and weaknesses related to the use of knowledge in their practices. Several participants offered their experience to help course colleagues to develop new information systems, set up monitoring and evaluation processes or shape innovative formats for communication with their authorities or the citizenship. This solidarity was a key factor for the success of the course.

It should be acknowledged that not all participants were able to offer the same level of depth and commitment. Two dropped out of the course at the very beginning and another three left the course by the third week, even though they had sent letters of institutional commitment. Dropouts are common in online courses, which is why we

usually have some extra spots at the beginning in anticipation of this. Also, due to electoral contexts, trips or peaks in working agendas, some participants were silent for long periods of time. However, most of them wrote to explain their reasons and regained rhythm as soon as they could.

The potential contribution to public-sector decision making

We can highlight several positive outcomes and achievements of the initiative:

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- Innovative content was produced and enriched by on-the-ground experience
- A solid group of committed colleagues within the region was shaped
- A horizontal learning approach was tested with good ownership by the participants
- New issues to address in future capacity-building activities were detected

There were also other positive outcomes. However, identifying concrete changes in policymakers' practices is not an easy task at this stage. Changes in practice take a long time and it is not possible for us or the participants to see how all this knowledge will be applied in their daily work at this early stage. As recognized in their forum discussions, there are different aspects and issues of the course that are more relevant to participants. The degree of institutionalization of the use of research within their agencies also varies. Thus, the introduction of knowledge as a factor to be valued and used in the different stages and aspects of decision-making processes requires an understanding of their complexity and dynamism.

By understanding the inherent complexity and multi-player features of these processes, participants are now more capable of identifying the different paths to bring evidence to the debate so it can inform

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decision making. Most of the participants have clearly expressed how the course has changed their perceptions of how they can now tackle challenges. They expressed that they now have an awareness of how communications can play a pivotal role and they have an understanding of the functions that research might play in different stages of their policy processes.

In addition, the results of the course evaluation show that some participants have already started to apply concrete tools to their daily practices. For example, some have begun developing more innovative presentations of evidence for decision makers; others have been developing a set criteria to consider when doing policy recommendations, both internally and when dealing with external evaluators. Other examples are carrying out stakeholder mapping to identify players in their working

field and contributing to knowledge-management processes.

Two thirds of the participants were able to share the content and reflect on it with their peers at their organizations. One participant stated that “one of the most interesting points of the course was that the content enabled further analysis in our field of work”. Several participants have also put in requests to their authorities to raise the importance of the use of knowledge in their areas.

In this sense, the course sought to encourage participants to become leaders of change within their agencies and work spaces. For this purpose, we shared not only content about the policy making process but also introduced participants to systemic and adaptive leadership frameworks.

An adaptive approach helps us consider how to promote a culture that uses evidence in organizational contexts characterized by relationships of power, as well as a mixture of short, medium and long-term interests. The theory of adaptive leadership enables individuals to visualize strategies that navigate through challenges and make a change that fosters a better use of information in their work spaces.

It is possible that, given participants' place within their workplaces, generating a cultural change at the organizational level does not depend only on them. Rather it is the

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About VakaYiko

The VakaYiko consortium is a three-year project managed by INASP and funded by DFID under the Building Capacity for Use of Research Evidence (BCURE) programme. As part of the project, grants have been awarded to seven organizations in low and middle income countries to build capacity for research use through projects that enhance our understanding of how policymakers can be supported, through practical measures, to make more effective use of evidence. These organizations are the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS), Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, the Center for Public Policy Alternatives (CPPA), the Gender Centre for Research and Training (GCRT) in Sudan, Jimma University in Ethiopia, Politics & Ideas in Argentina, and the Universidad del Pacifico in Peru. **For more information see www.inasp.info/en/work/vakayiko.**

responsibility of the authorities and higher-ranking positions. However, if they want to contribute to promoting a wider use of evidence, any intervention they can contribute from their position should be useful and may encourage colleagues and co-workers. In fact, four participants from the same agency expressed that they had continuous discussions related to course content as it evolved and this broadened and enlightened the decisions to be made in their organization. This signals a very promising opportunity for the future - to develop capacities of a group of policymakers already working together with these shared interests and purposes.

Challenges ahead and next steps

As a result of this course, 20 policymakers have been trained and are enthusiastic to promote the use of knowledge in their agencies, acting as agents of change. Hopefully, they have acquired useful skills to embark on this journey. However, our work is not finished. We will continue to support them and they have asked us to continue with the horizontal initiative. At the

moment, we are analysing how to continue working with the group, discussing various options such as social media tools and specific training in their countries or for their agencies. The potential of horizontally sharing experiences and practices has been acknowledged and valued by the majority of participants.

We had 350 original applications for this course and so know that there are many policymakers interested in improving the use of evidence in their work spaces and many Latin American policymakers could benefit from this initial effort. One thing is clear to us: any new initiative in the region must build on what we have done so far and must involve former participants because they are enthusiastic, they want to continue learning, they have the necessary experience and they have the willingness and capacity to help their colleagues.

A major opportunity is to expand this initiative to other developing regions. Several African and Asian policymakers, but also development organizations and donor agencies, contacted us when we launched the course because they believed

it could be of benefit to them. Although online learning is still a challenge for many organizations in those regions, piloting a similar format could be a wise step to assess the potential of bringing this new knowledge into their working spaces. For this purpose, we have recently partnered with the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) in Kenya to deliver the course for African policymakers. We also look forward to forming new partnerships in other regions to work together on innovative approaches that foster a more fruitful dialogue between knowledge and policy in developing countries.

Finally, P&I seeks to build on this initiative by conducting a study with INASP called 'Going beyond context matters', which has two main objectives: firstly to detect windows of opportunity of different contexts for researchers and policymakers to better interact with each other or work jointly; and secondly, to inform the design and delivery of capacity-building efforts with regard to the use of research evidence in policy making, by better deciphering how to deal with the context. To address these objectives, we are currently developing an analytical framework and an emergent practices guidance, building on literature and relevant experiences from organizations and individuals working in different regions on large initiatives which engage policymakers and policy making institutions. We believe in the value of co-producing knowledge and that there is surely a critical mass of relevant experience in Southern countries on how to grapple with the challenges of using research at public agencies. The results of this effort will benefit all of us who are striving to improve how research is used in policy processes.

