

# Capacity building for decision makers to use evidence in policy making in Sudan

**Bashir Ali & Amira A. Osman discusses the gaps, needs and challenges faced by policy makers and civil society on gender issues in Sudan**

Sudanese public policy is often seen as typically based on party ideology and the changing interests or socio-cultural beliefs of the National Congress party, which is a leading political party in the country. This is particularly the case with policies that disproportionately affect women such as the Public Order Laws. Many trainers, including from the Gender Centre for Research and Training (GCRT) have delivered training to policymakers on gender-related issues in the past with the goal of mainstreaming gender in development policies and practices. The training activities have often focused on specific issues such as engendering constitutional reform or Female Genital Mutilation and on presenting specific research findings to policymakers.

The GCRT recognized that there was a need to move towards a more sustained approach to promoting the consideration of evidence in policy development in Sudan. In previous discussions between the GCRT and officials from the Ministry of Labour, officials had expressed an interest in a more methodical use of gender research in policy, and referred to a lack of knowledge when it came to accessing and using research evidence and understanding research methods within the Ministry. Decision makers also viewed finding and using data and research as a time-consuming effort and were not incentivized to consult



*The participants at the training workshop held in Khartoum*

existing evidence in a routine way.

## The gap in accessing the data

There is an abundance of easily accessible data collected by international agencies such as the United Nations, including UNIFEM and OECD and national agencies such as the Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics. However, the GCRT found that this data is rarely accessed by officials and often only used during elections. Policymakers do not tend to consult the available data and relevant research when formulating public policies that are meant to address the needs of women and girls. Research evidence is also not routinely used, even though locally produced knowledge is often open access and easily available. For example, the University of

Khartoum, the leading university in the country, has made most of its journals free and easy to access on its website.

The GCRT, therefore, recognized a need and interest in building the capacity of government officials to use data and research in policy making. It also recognized the value of increased dialogue between researchers and policymakers, and the need to promote critically, open debate amongst policymakers and citizens in order to encourage and incentivize officials to consider research evidence and data in the policy development process.

## Capacity-building approaches

The project aimed to build the capacity of policymakers in the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry





*A trainer talking about the challenges and opportunities during a training held in Khartoum*

of Education to find, critically assess, and use data and research evidence in policy making through training workshops and a public conference. At the beginning of the project, the GCRT conducted three focus group discussions to enable participants to raise their training

needs and to identify capacity gaps. The GCRT received a higher level of interest from potential participants than expected (87 ended up taking part in the focus group discussions although we had planned for 30, we allowed more to join at the request of the Ministries).

The findings from the focus group discussions were then used to tailor the training materials to the needs of the participants. A combination of capacity-building sessions and a conference was then adopted.

The training sessions were the first in the country to specifically address the issue of using evidence to inform policy. Four modules were prepared for the training, based on the focus group discussions and INASP's training materials, but considering local needs. Gender aspects, including gender mainstreaming, were developed and added to the materials in order to develop the capacity-building sessions.

30 participants took part in a four-day training course for

each ministry. More than 70% of participants were female, and the level of policymakers taking part was mid-level staff. Participants from the Ministry of Education included the Head of Girl's Education, Manager of Adult Education, Director of Presidential Affairs and Director of the General Department of Planning. From the Ministry of Labour, participants included Chair of Project Planning, Head of Training Department, Head of Archive and Libraries, Head of Documentations and Periodicals, Manager of Secret Office, Administrative Monitoring, Aliens Department and Media and External Relations. Support staff from the department of Training, Curriculum Development and Library (Ministry of Education) and Monitoring and Evaluation and Quality Control (Ministry of Labour) also participated.

Topics covered at the sessions included introduction to evidence-informed policy making, research strategy, assessing evidence research and gender and gender analysis to inform policy making.

### Findings from the focus group discussions:

Policy planners and decision makers do not rely on research when drafting their policies and making decisions, research findings remain unused and kept on drawers, lack of availability of libraries in the Ministries and lack of access to universities' libraries, lack of knowledge/training to do research and to use evidence to inform policy, and lack of gender analysis and gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes.



The latter was developed to address the gender needs in research and policy making as well as gender analysis to inform policies.

Following the training, a one-day conference was organized to initiate the debate about the use of evidence in policy making and encourage critical discussion amongst policymakers, researchers, journalists, civil society and grassroots organizations. The conference acted as a platform for many stakeholders including representatives from local NOGs, universities, women's groups and journalists to contribute to the debate and to highlight the possibilities of their engagement to shape the practice of how to use research evidence to inform policies and projects and how to make women's needs visible in policy making process. It also enhances networking between policymakers, researchers and civil society groups.

The diversity of presentations and discussions from development practitioners, statistical experts, policymakers, professors, and journalists showed that the conference provided a rich forum for bringing together different perspectives on evidence and policy in Sudan. The training workshops and conference were also reported in the media by

two journalists in two different local newspapers, thus taking the momentum to a wider audience.

## Gender mainstreaming and challenges

Although women are highly represented in the both Ministries at decision making and mid-career levels, there remains a huge capacity gap to address gender issues by policymakers and to conduct gender analysis to inform policy. This gender gap has led to inequality and the marginalization of women's talents, experience, skills and abilities. Gender disaggregated data and gender analysis are not routinely considered to inform policies and projects. Bridging this gap is crucial to mainstreaming gender perspectives into the Ministries' policies and to equip policymakers with skills and knowledge necessary to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment at all levels.

The political and social nature of gender training raised challenges at individual and institutional levels. Challenges at the institutional levels included a lack of political will to address gender issues, the dominance of one party ideology and lack of gender units to provide training on gender issues including data collection and gender analysis.

Challenges at the individual levels included misconception of gender concepts (some participants viewed gender as a western concept), norms, and traditions. All these challenges were raised or confirmed by participants. However, cases studies, examples, questions and answers presented at the sessions (by both the trainers and participants), acted as a means to challenge some of the misconceptions and to link gender concepts with local needs and reality.

## Improvement of skills and knowledge of training participants

The conference was organized six months after the training sessions were conducted. At the conference, some participants shared what they have gained at the training workshops and expressed how the project has enhanced their knowledge and built their confidence in using evidence to inform their policies. They also highlighted the positive influence of this project and how it positively changed their working environment in a short-time period. One female participant from the Ministry of Labour explained how the performance of her own team improved following the project as they aimed to establish an archive

**“Designing policies and projects to help street children, for example will not succeed unless we base our intervention on evidence. Where to look for evidence, but what is evidence? This is the most important thing I learnt today...implementing any project without using evidence would be waste of resources. It would be a failure.”**

**A narrative by a female participant from the Ministry of Labour**





**“This is a great training and the trainers have learnt a lot on how and why to use evidence to inform our policies and programmes, but the challenge is how to transfer the knowledge and skills we gained into practice. In other words how to use them to improve our policies and programmes not only in Khartoum but, also in remote areas far from the centre.”**

**Narrative from a male participant from the Ministry of Education**

in the Ministry. She shared that her department had reviewed the project and subsequently created a strategy with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Other participants expressed their appreciation for the gender training module and said that their knowledge and understanding of the concept of gender equality had improved.

### **Working with government: A challenge and an opportunity**

The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour were chosen due to the fact they are both responsible for a wide range of educational, social and economic policies covering pre-education, girl's education, basic and secondary education, employment, migration, labour, and insurance. The ministries, however, do not routinely rely on evidence

to inform their policies and programmes.

As indicated earlier, in recent discussions between the GCRT and officials from the Ministry of Labour, officials expressed their interests and needs to have a more methodical use of gender research in policy to bridge their gaps in using evidence and understanding research methods. Also, the two Ministries are less politicized than to the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Although decisions in Sudan are usually influenced by politics, there are some Ministries such as the Ministry of Education that rely on professionalism and experience of their staff rather than their political interests. The Ministry of Education works with international actors such as UNESCO, which makes the Ministry more open to new and external ideas to improve its policies and programmes and more accountable to international norms.

Furthermore, the ruling party of Sudan, despite its undemocratic nature, is trying to enhance its image at the international level by responding to international pressure and engaged in a wider debate on current international issues such as access to evidence and using evidence to influence policy and gender mainstreaming.

Mid and senior staff from the two Ministries often attend international events (conferences and workshops), and are therefore keen to improve their knowledge and skills on many topical issues including gender. They want to be knowledgeable and up to date on gender issues including how to engender their policies and programmes and what evidence they need to consider to mainstream gender and to achieve gender equality. They want to contribute to debates/discussions when these issues are discussed at international levels. In response to this pressure, there has been increasing demand from

### **Challenges faced by women in Sudan**

The participants discussed barriers to female children's education mainly in remote rural areas, where girls' education is perceived less important than boys' education. Many parents prefer to send their sons to school, which could be far from the residential area, and keep girls at home, believing that girls' main roles are to help in the household work e.g. to help their mothers with childcare, cleaning and fetching water. To challenge this tradition it requires policies informed by evidence to make education accessible to both boys and girls. These policies may involve making more schools in rural areas for boys and girls so that the children don't have to travel far.



### About GCRT:

The Gender Centre for Research and Training (GCRT), Sudan is a pioneering non-governmental institution working to ensure gender mainstreaming in development programmes and government policies. It combines research and training with advocacy and networking in order to raise awareness of gender inequalities and equip Sudanese women with the skills needed to access decision-making structures.

the Ministries for training to equip staff with the relevant skills and knowledge needed.

The training also provided an opportunity for the GCRT to work with the Ministries and build trust. The GCRT expects this relationship to contribute to bridging the gap between research institutions/NGOs and the Ministries.

### Feedback and discussion outcome

Although it is still early to measure comprehensive outcomes, the GCRT plans to conduct support and monitoring visits to the Ministries in six months. Preliminary monitoring and evaluation has shown promising trends. A one-page evaluation sheet was designed for the modules, which participants completed and submitted. The results of this evaluation plus follow-up discussions with participants showed the following:

- At least 75% of participants stated that the overall training was between excellent and very good.

- Around 25% of the participants requested in-depth training on the issues addressed.
- The majority showed interest in gender training and gender analysis and mainstreaming and expressed interest in more sessions on the subject.
- Other sessions required are time management, computer, report writing.
- One participant suggested a review of all previous decisions/policies and addresses setbacks and shortcomings and suggested new policies.
- A participant suggested encouraging decisions makers to change the traditional ways of taking decisions and explore new ones.
- A participant requested access to the GCRT's library and resources. The GCRT arranged a visit for this participant and her colleagues, and we are jointly considering ways to sustain their access to the GCRT resources.
- The head of archive and library department at the Ministry of Labour started gathering more useful materials/evidence such as gender disaggregated data to be used by the Ministry on daily basis.

### A way forward:

Participants and the heads of the Ministries requested that the GCRT deliver further training to participants, it was also requested that the GCRT deliver the training to policymakers working in other regions outside of Khartoum where resources are more constrained, such as Gedaref in Eastern Sudan and Obied in Western Sudan. The GCRT is considering these requests as well as other opportunities to build on the work delivered as part of this project.

The learning and dialogue captured during the training workshops and the conference created space for better coordination, collaboration and networking between representatives of policymakers, independent research and statistics bodies, academic institutions, grassroots organizations and media and civil society organizations. This potential platform gains ground from joint efforts and collective actions to promote evidence-informed policy and advocacy through popular participation and community engagement in policy matters that affect the life of poor communities and marginalized groups. The GCRT will utilize this learning momentum and use the opportunity to effectively and efficiently contribute with other social actors in the long-term social transformation.

1. These laws placed restrictions on the way women dressed and behaved in public and introduced punishments such as lashing (Amnesty International, 2010).

### 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. For more information see [www.inasp.info/vakayiko](http://www.inasp.info/vakayiko).