



Reflections on VakaYiko's first year

Engaging with
government institutions in
Ghana, South Africa and
Zimbabwe

Shahenda Suliman

October 2014



VakaYiko is part of the
DFID programme
Building capacity to use
research evidence
(BCURE)

Introduction.....	4
VakaYiko in context.....	4
Creation of a consortium	4
Demand and relevance in South Africa, Ghana, and Zimbabwe.....	5
South Africa	5
Ghana.....	5
Zimbabwe	6
Engaging with government institutions: VakaYiko's experiences in Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe	6
Background.....	6
VakaYiko: A collaborative approach	7
Initiating engagement.....	7
Context	8
Understanding contextual fluidity	8
Aligning the project with national strategies.....	8
Being or working with a local organization.....	8
Engaging with individuals.....	9
Initiating informal engagement before formal engagement.....	9
Engaging strategically with selected individuals	9
Stimulating interest and raising awareness before seeking formal commitment	10
Maintaining engagement.....	10
Working with government institutions	10
Detailed consultation and informed buy-in.....	10
Continuous engagement and regular communication with the institution(s)	11
Limits to participation	11
Project challenges.....	11
Design constraints and implementation flexibility	11
Demonstrating commitment	12
Sitting fees for civil servants.....	12
Engaging as a consortium	13
Politics and credibility.....	14
Understanding context(s)	14
Partners as an exit strategy.....	14
Conclusion	15
References	16

Introduction

The VakaYiko consortium led by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) involves five organizations working primarily in Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to develop the capacity of policy makers to use research evidence. Funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) under the Building Capacity for Use of Research Evidence (BCURE) programme, the project operates on the assumption that the routine use of research evidence 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; and a facilitating environment that identifies and responds appropriately to research uptake needs.

In Ghana, the Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) and INASP work with the Civil Service Training Centre (CSTC) to develop a course on evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) for civil servants; in South Africa the Overseas Development Institute's Research and Policy in Development programme (ODI-RAPID) along with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) work with the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) to operationalize the latter's Research, Development and Evidence (R,D&E) framework; and in Zimbabwe the Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Network (ZeipNET) and INASP work with ministries and the Parliament of Zimbabwe to improve the use of research evidence in response to departmental priorities.

This report seeks to reflect upon and document the ways in which the VakaYiko consortium has sought to establish and maintain engagement with government institutions at different levels in Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe¹. It highlights the common themes experienced by the five organizations in their interactions with government bodies during the first year of the VakaYiko project, analyses successful and unsuccessful approaches to initiating and maintaining engagement, and explores the benefits and drawbacks to engaging as part of an international consortium.

The information for this report was derived from in-depth discussions and semi-structured interviews with VakaYiko consortium members, annual and quarterly reports and meetings, presentations and discussions with civil servants, departmental reports and policy documents, and political, economic and public administration literature.

The report begins by examining VakaYiko in context, outlining the factors that facilitated the creation of the consortium and the rationale behind the decision to implement projects in Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. It then looks at the consortium's experiences in engaging with government institutions – firstly by examining the broader collaborative approach adopted by VakaYiko, secondly by discussing both the successful and unsuccessful approaches to initiating and maintaining engagement, and thirdly by exploring the benefits and drawbacks to engaging as part of an international consortium. It closes by concluding that although there were many approaches that worked only in a specific context, there were also broader themes such as sustainability, collaboration, and contextual relevance that were pertinent to the success of most approaches in all three countries.

VakaYiko in context

Creation of a consortium

The BCURE call for proposals emerged at a time when all the aforementioned organizations² were interested in carrying out work directly relevant to the objectives of BCURE. Launched in February 2013, the call invited applications from consortia and was viewed as an opportunity to expand on past projects whilst developing in-depth relationships between the organizations and institutions.

INASP's Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) worked to strengthen research and knowledge systems in the global south from 2002 until 2013. Under PERI, the organization

¹ Institutions here refers to departments, ministries, parliaments and parastatals

² GINKS, HSRC, INASP, ODI and ZeipNET

carried out workshops with GINKS in Ghana and the current programme managers at ZeipNET in Zimbabwe. INASP had also previously interacted with ODI, specifically with the RAPID programme, whilst HSRC had approached ODI-RAPID in 2011 expressing an interest in working together. At the time, conversations between the two were limited to a document outlining how ODI-RAPID could assist HSRC in both improving the use of research evidence in government departments, and increasing the policy impact of HSRC.

The last link in the network goes back to a workshop held in 2008 in Pretoria entitled 'The Collaborative Workshop on Evidence-based Policy-making in South Africa' (Funke, Shaxson & Bielak, 2009). Organized by CSIR and funded by the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), South Africa's Department of Environment and Tourism (since divided into the Department for Environmental Affairs and the Department of Tourism), and South Africa's Department of Science and Technology (DST), the workshop's participants included Louise Shaxson (then of Delta Partnership, now of ODI-RAPID), and individuals at CSIR, DEA, and DST.

The consortium subsequently created built not only on previous relationships and interactions, but also on previous work. One of the programme managers at ZeipNET had previously worked with the Parliament of Zimbabwe, HSRC had a working relationship with government departments in South Africa, and GINKS had previously interacted with officials at CSTC in Ghana.

Demand and relevance in South Africa, Ghana, and Zimbabwe

South Africa

Broadly speaking, an interest in making the policy making process more rigorous, accountable, and informed by research evidence had existed in South Africa for a while.³ More recently, the continued prevalence of mass inequality, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and persisting poverty almost twenty years after the fall of the apartheid regime meant that a wider dissatisfaction with the general policy making process existed amongst the public. Within government, a link between the reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment, and the use of research evidence in policy making was made by initiatives and strategic programmes such as the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), the National Development Plan (NDP), and the Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation's (DPME) Outcomes Approach. There was an implication that such approaches would result in the formation and implementation of more effective policies (exemplified by the rise of monitoring and evaluation systems aimed at improving policy outcomes and the situation of DPME in the Office of the Presidency).

The consortium had first planned to work primarily with DST due to the department's government-wide role in overseeing research and development activities but later redirected efforts to working with DEA to support the implementation of the R,D&E framework. Of the three countries that VakaYiko worked in, South Africa was perceived to have the most favourable environment for strengthening the use of research evidence in policy making; a clear interest existed within two government departments, the project's objectives coincided with the needs of the departments, and considerable discussion around EIPM took place in the wider South African society with key strategies such as NDP simultaneously welcomed as 'evidence-based' by some in the business sector and conversely derided as neither 'coherent [n]or evidence-based' by others within the labour movement (Coleman, 2013).

Ghana

In Ghana there was some interest around EIPM in the form of programmes such as Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa; a five year programme which works with the University of

³ GEAR was criticized not only for its adherence to free market orthodoxy, but also for the lack of transparency in its development and for drawing extensively on international evidence rather than the South African situation (Michie & Padayachee, 1998; Segatti & Pons-Vignon, 2013), whilst Thabo Mbeki's rejection in the late 1990s of the evidence that HIV was causally linked to AIDS was widely disparaged – concerning the use of the antiretroviral drug zidovine, Marais (2011: 278) argued that 'Mbeki and other government officials seemed to draw no distinction between peer-reviewed science and allegations encountered on the Internet.'

Ghana to strengthen processes and systems to manage research uptake (DRUSSA, 2013). More conspicuous however was the proliferation of high profile donors and financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), DFID, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Ghana had witnessed a rise in the flow of aid and continuous growth of donors over the decades – imports of goods and services had steadily risen with foreign aid making up a substantial portion of imports (OECD, 2014; World Bank, 2014). Although the environment was seen as conducive for projects working to strengthen the use of EIPM at the time, in retrospect it was perhaps simply conducive to donor-funded projects more generally.

The combination of the existence of country partners in the form of GINKS, a perceived interest in promoting EIPM amongst civil servants, and a desire amongst both GINKS and INASP to use an embedded capacity development approach formed the basis of the project. CSTC had just completed a project with JICA involving the development of training courses for civil servants, and VakaYiko emerged at a time when the Centre was interested in carrying out a new project. The previous course (along with most of the existing courses at CSTC) contained components of policy making, although not in an in-depth manner. The creation of a course specifically focusing on EIPM provided an opportunity for CSTC to expand on their course offering.

Zimbabwe

A wider interest in promoting access to and use of evidence in policy making existed amongst organizations and government departments in Zimbabwe (often in relation to the economic situation of the country). This was not confined to research evidence, but rather information perceived to be of high quality and subject to review and scrutiny more generally, including statistical data⁴. Following various EIPM activities and training programmes held in Zimbabwe between 2011-2013 which were supported by INASP, ZeipNET was established as an organization *'to coordinate over-arching national processes for evidence-informed policy making in Zimbabwe'* (ZeipNET, 2013).

ZeipNET had carried out discussions with ministries interested in working with them to promote EIPM prior to the launch of the project, with some going so far as to produce letters of support. These ministries were later dissolved or absorbed into other ministries, leaving the project in Zimbabwe with no discernible interest from government institutions. As a result, the project relied considerably on ZeipNET's ability to initiate engagement with ministries and secure commitment, as the next section will detail.

Engaging with government institutions: VakaYiko's experiences in South Africa, Ghana and Zimbabwe

Background

In South Africa, interaction between the organizations and government departments had occurred prior to the launch of the project. The consortium was seen early on as relatively credible – HSRC were known for conducting large-scale policy-relevant research, ODI-RAPID had substantial credibility in the field of EIPM and in delivering outputs, and BCURE was a reasonably large name in government (partly due to the existence of two BCURE projects operating in South Africa).

In Ghana, the director at GINKS and the principal of CSTC were familiar with each other and GINKS found it relatively easy to initiate contact in order to explain the project proposal.

It was in Zimbabwe where attempts to secure engagement faced considerable challenges. The dissolution of ministries ZeipNET had planned to work with following elections in 2013 meant that the

⁴ See UNESCO's 2013 Mapping research & innovation study and the ZIMSTAT & IOM 2009 Migration in Zimbabwe: A country profile – both of which draw on a wealth of statistical data and call for greater 'evidence-based' policy development.

project had to initiate engagement almost from scratch – at one point a manager at INASP referred to their strategy as *'knocking on every ministry's door'*. This required flexibility, persistence, and creativity on the part of ZeipNET who were consequently able to secure Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment, and the Parliament of Zimbabwe.

The consortium not only adopted different approaches to engagement in different countries, but also with different institutions. Although there were some common themes across the consortium which will be highlighted in subsequent sections, ZeipNET explained that in Zimbabwe, *'we used different entry points in all three institutions [...] sometimes going to the highest authority worked, sometimes it didn't.'* This is echoed throughout the experiences of VakaYiko; approaches that worked for ZeipNET in Zimbabwe did not necessarily work for ODI-RAPID and HSRC in South Africa, and vice versa.

The following sub-sections will begin by outlining the collaborative approach adopted by VakaYiko more broadly, and then analyse what turned out to be the key approaches to firstly initiating engagement, and secondly maintaining it.

VakaYiko: A collaborative approach

Much criticism has been made from both legitimacy and sustainability standpoints of development NGOs that seek to fill capacity gaps by taking on roles that should be those of the government. On NGOs who have assumed the roles of 'gap-fillers', Dengbol-Martinussen and Engberg Pederson (2003:166) argue that such action *'frees states from responsibilities that rightly should be theirs.'* Moreover, bypassing government institutions can lead to the creation of parallel systems which may end up effectively undermining or shrinking institutional capacity instead of building it, resulting in the task of development becoming the preserve of NGOs (referred to by David Harvey [2006:52] as *'a process of privatization by NGO'*).

Promoting long-term sustainability has been a key aim of the VakaYiko project and adopting a collaborative approach has not only ensured that projects are more likely to secure buy-in, but that they are more likely to last. VakaYiko has operated on a strategy that can perhaps be described as 'collective gap reduction' rather than independent gap filling, with organizations avoiding opportunities to 'just deliver.' A case in point was the option for GINKS and INASP to independently develop and deliver an EIPM course to a select number of civil servants in Ghana. Instead, the organizations worked in partnership with CSTC to develop a course consistent with the Centre's way of working. This collaborative approach took far longer and required greater input on the part of trainers at CSTC; nonetheless it was seen to be the more sustainable option.

Initiating engagement

The six key approaches to initiating engagement identified by the consortium were as follows:

- **Understanding contextual fluidity**
- **Aligning the project with national strategies and existing priorities**
- **Being or working with a local organization**
- **Initiating informal engagement alongside formal engagement (where possible)**
- **Understanding institutional hierarchies and engaging strategically with selected individuals**
- **Stimulating interest and raising awareness of EIPM before seeking commitment (where relevant)**

Context

Understanding contextual fluidity

Contextual relevance is sometimes discussed as a binary; a project either takes into account the specific local context or it doesn't, individuals either have a sound understanding and grasp of the public policy context or they don't. The project in South Africa which first planned to trial and adapt tools developed in the UK for UK government departments demonstrated the problem with this line of thinking.

The ODI-RAPID team had previous experience of developing and using different tools inside UK government departments to systematize the use of evidence, and had developed a basic 'toolkit'. The organizations had intended to further develop and contextualize these existing tools in South Africa by *'working with them in specific situations with ministries and parliament, merging them with indigenous evidence-related tools and processes, and developing new ones as necessary'* (INASP, 2013:17). The existing toolkit would be used to initiate discussions with government departments around increasing the use of evidence at an organizational level, and in order to better understand existing capacity gaps.

Despite this, the basic toolkit was understandably viewed by government departments in South Africa as an 'imported' mechanism that was already well-developed for a different policymaking environment. As a result of this, organizational capacity considerations, and the emergence of a clear demand from DEA to operationalize their existing RD&E framework, the project was redesigned. Focusing on one rather than several departments, the revised project involves ODI-RAPID, HSRC, CSIR and a local consultant working to support the implementation of the RD&E framework. Driven by the demands and requirements of DEA, the new approach began with a diagnostic phase seeking a strong analysis of context and understanding of the apparent problem before deriving a solution.

Aligning the project with national strategies

In general, projects which were seen as aligning with existing objectives rather than creating additional or separate strands of work were better received – the revised project in South Africa which supports DEA in operationalising their existing framework is a prime example. In Zimbabwe, ZeipNET found that actively aligning their project with an economic blueprint improved their chances of securing buy-in from ministries. The Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset) is a five year plan for sustainable development and social equity formulated by the government of Zimbabwe. Launched in October 2013, the economic blueprint mentions capacity building 20 times, including in a *'capacity building of elected women MPs and Councilors'* strategy (p. 75).

ZeipNET were aware that 'Zim Asset' was a buzzword in almost every government ministry, with ministries aligning their activities with the blueprint. By linking their project to Zim Asset and explaining to ministries how the project could assist them in achieving its objectives, particularly the capacity building strand, ZeipNET were able to effectively 'get their foot in the door.' This approach not only provided a point of entry, but was likely to contribute to long term capacity development by working on ministries' existing priorities. Rather than creating additional work for government institutions, the project was then viewed as strengthening existing institutions by addressing capacity needs already identified.

Being or working with a local organization

By virtue of their position, local organizations were often better placed to meet and adapt to institutional demand as their presence was not dependent on project timescales. The Parliament of Zimbabwe signed an MOU with ZeipNET for a period of five years, longer than the life of the VakaYiko project and BCURE programme. Institutional needs rarely fit into the project timeframe and Parliament foresaw developing their capacity to use research evidence as taking more than three years. During VakaYiko's first annual meeting in Harare, Parliamentary Programme Coordinator Nesbert Samu (2014) acknowledged that funding could stop in three years, but reasoned that they would simply look elsewhere for additional funds to ensure that the work continued.

The length of the MOU was in no small part due to the fact that Parliament intended to work directly with ZeipNET, rather than the BCURE programme more broadly. Government institutions were specifically

interested in the support that organizations could directly provide rather than the wider aims of the overall project; Mr Samu (2014) explained that *'we [Parliament] refused to have an MOU based on a project; we have an MOU based on an institution.'* As a local organization based in Zimbabwe, ZeipNET were able to adjust accordingly to meet institutional demand which went beyond the life of the project, rather than expect institutions to work around the project timeframe.

Engaging with individuals

Initiating informal engagement alongside formal engagement

The majority of the organizations were not prepared for the level of bureaucracy and rigid hierarchies that existed in most government departments. In retrospect, INASP in particular wished that they had left more time for negotiations and pre-project engagement (Ademokun, 2014). The value of informal or indirect methods of engagement alongside formal engagement was evident during the first nine months of the project; GINKS and ZeipNET both found these to be more effective than formal points of entry alone and the use of previously existing relationships where possible prevailed.

ZeipNET explained that *'when you know a person prior or have a personal relationship, you can bring the topic up informally in an informal environment [before seeking formal engagement].'* INASP similarly highlighted the opportunity to use such spaces to obtain buy-in and agree on ways of working together before formalising agreement. An example given was with sensitive financial issues which were perhaps more difficult to argue against in formal meetings, but easier to discuss at a casual lunch or dinner setting.

Informal spaces were not only beneficial for securing commitment, but also for maintaining it. One organization used such opportunities to raise sensitive questions about office politics in relation to the project that individuals might be guarded about discussing around the workplace, but spoke more freely about in clear 'off the record' discussions outside the office.

In South Africa, formal engagement with DEA was considerably helped by the fact that one of the ODI-RAPID team members had participated in the 2008 workshop that began the process that led to the R,D&E framework. The consortium also found that bringing in researchers from CSIR who had worked with DEA in the past and a local consultant with extensive experience working in government (in PSPPD) improved the team's credibility. Personal contacts and networks were also seen as beneficial in the formation of a representative steering committee.

Understanding institutional hierarchies and engaging strategically with selected individuals

Navigating the various power structures and hierarchies within government institutions required a strategic and nimble approach from the organizations. In Zimbabwe, an approach adopted by ZeipNET was to initiate engagement with a relatively junior officer – in most cases it was considerably easier to make contact with a junior employee rather than the individual with the authority to enter agreements – and inform them about the project. Although these individuals did not have the power or authority to sign MOUs, they had regular and direct contact with individuals who did, and could negotiate with senior officials on ZeipNET's behalf. This echoes a piece of advice given by Nesbert Samu (2014) who highlighted the value of establishing internal contacts and taking the opportunity to meet with willing individuals – the more people in the meeting room with an interest in the project (regardless of their seniority), the better for the organizations.

Taking printed handouts to meetings

The various steps a proposal went through before reaching the desk of the permanent secretary meant that the message was sometimes distorted in the process. *'First you meet with someone who doesn't have a lot of power, and that person communicates to another, and by the time it reaches the permanent secretary, the message is lost,'* one organization explained, acknowledging that *'before we didn't really plan, we just trusted that the message would be communicated as we said it.'* Where informal relationships existed, explaining the concept to the relevant individual in advance meant that by the time it eventually reached their desk, they were already familiar with it. Where such relationships did not exist, leaving a printed page or leaflet to pass on ensured that the correct message made it through.

However, in some cases having greater involvement from senior staff within the organizations could have helped mitigate much of the bureaucracy they faced. Rather than having a mid-level officer attempt to engage with a civil servant or head of an institution, it was established that having the head of an organization directly communicate with the head of the government institution in question would have served to speed up the process of securing buy-in. In general, a conscious awareness of the power structures in organizations and government institutions and more strategic correspondence with selected individuals would have been beneficial.

Stimulating interest and raising awareness before seeking formal commitment

ZeipNET emphasized the importance of identifying individuals with an appreciation and understanding of EIPM when initiating engagement. In the case of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the acting director at the time had an interest in EIPM and an appreciation for the project's objectives, which made securing commitment easier.

In cases where an interest and understanding of EIPM did not clearly exist, sensitization workshops were beneficial. GINKS carried out a sensitization workshop with CSTC and the Office of the Head of the Civil Service (OHCS) in the first quarter which resulted in OHCS expressing an interest in actively participating in the project. In hindsight, ZeipNET believed that holding such workshops before attempting to negotiate for MOUs would have been a more effective approach. Although there was an interest in the use of research evidence to inform policy making amongst government institutions in Zimbabwe, the actual term 'evidence-informed policy making' was not widely known.

Maintaining engagement

The main challenges in Ghana and South Africa were not so much to do with finding entry points or initiating engagement, but in maintaining it and advancing the project. This section will focus less on listing specific approaches, and more on analysing broader issues and ways of working.

The six key issues that arose when it came to maintaining engagement were as follows:

- **The need to carry out detailed consultations and obtain informed buy-in**
- **The value of regular correspondence and productive dialogue with institutions to keep them engaged and 'in the loop'**
- **The limits to participation**
- **The importance of being flexible and adapting when required**
- **The risk of overemphasising short-term 'checkbox milestones' such as MOUs at the expense of long-term commitment**
- **The implications of paying or refusing to pay sitting fees to civil servants**

Working with government institutions

Carrying out detailed consultations and obtaining informed buy-in

The importance of carrying out detailed consultations and securing informed buy-in from all parties (including the implementing team) became clear when it came to advancing the project. In South Africa, the consortium had first planned to work with line departments and the transversal Department of Science and Technology in order to ensure that the demand for evidence was given support from a department with a large, cross-cutting remit.⁵ However, discussions with DST and the steering group concluded that the type of practical work envisaged – strengthening the demand for evidence by policy teams within a department – was better suited to individual line departments in the first instance. DST gave its support to the project but helped identify a specific department with which the project could

⁵ Transversal departments are those with cross-cutting responsibilities such as science policy, monitoring and evaluation, human resources, or financial management.

work: the Department of Environmental Affairs. Further consultations with DEA during the inception phase highlighted the specific challenges the department faced around implementing an evidence-informed approach to policy, and how the organizations could support the department in improving its use of evidence.

Given that the transversal departments had an overview of the use of evidence across government, the organizations felt that it was still important to keep them closely involved in the project, albeit in a more 'oversight' role. A committee comprised of representatives from DPME, DST, and PSPPD (as well as DEA) was formed to provide overall strategic direction to the team's work. Consultations with this committee which included individuals with specific cross-cutting responsibilities meant that the work produced during the course of the project would not only respond to the specific policy requirements of DEA, but would also be in line with the broader work of the government.

Regular correspondence and productive dialogue with the institution(s) to keep them engaged

During periods where communication between consortium organizations and government institutions was not required, the latter still appreciated regular correspondence about the project. In Ghana, GINKS provided continuous updates to CSTC and OHCS through regular correspondence and by sharing annual and quarterly reports to keep them informed about wider project activities.

In South Africa, after the project concept was redesigned and the organizations increased their direct communications with DEA, the project progressed. The increase in constructive, regular discussions with DEA, productive country visits to South Africa, the development of a credible work-plan, and identification of suitable partners to work with all demonstrated a consistent and continuous progression of the project and the organizations' ability to deliver in material terms.

In Zimbabwe, representatives from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment, and the Parliament of Zimbabwe were invited to VakaYiko's first annual meeting in order to acquaint them with the consortium and familiarize VakaYiko with Zimbabwe's constitutional system and policy making processes. INASP observed that an MOU which was taking a relatively long time to conclude was signed shortly after the meeting.

Limits to participation

On participation, INASP stated *'we are finding that there are different levels or ways of doing it.'* This is a common theme throughout VakaYiko's experiences – when it came to meetings, feedback or content development, determining the 'right' level of participation or desired interaction was not always a straightforward process. One individual at INASP expressed a worry that the participatory approach could result in outputs that were of a lower quality. It's possible that such concerns were picked up on – individuals expressed that in some cases they limited their input as they felt that requests for feedback were not genuine, but simply for the sake of appearing 'participatory.'

In Ghana, feedback on the course modules at CSTC when they were first shared was limited which concerned INASP. GINKS suggested that a limited contribution was not necessarily due to a lack of interest, but a limited knowledge on the content matter – *'It's not that they didn't like the collaborative approach, it's just that EIPM is new to them,'* GINKS reasoned. More importantly, individuals working at institutions such as CSTC had to balance work outside of the project. Despite any interest they may have personally had in specific project areas, they did not always have time to take on additional activities that added to their existing workload.

Project challenges

Design constraints and implementation flexibility: Adapting when required

The perceived or real rigidity of the project design in contrast with the flexibility and agility that is often required to successfully carry out a project is frequently discussed. Logical frameworks, strict milestones, and Payment-by-Results mechanisms have all come under fire for their apparent inflexibility and failure to adequately reflect the complexity and uncertainty of capacity development processes (Bakewell and

Garbutt, 2005). The time constraints and/or inflexibility of project design were highlighted by all the organizations as limiting their approach. In many cases, these were the reasons provided for choosing what, in retrospect, appeared to be less-than-ideal approaches. The rigidity of the milestones in the inception phase meant that a significant amount of time and labour was put into securing MOUs in South Africa – almost a race against the clock – instead of attempting more qualitative and informative engagement with line ministries. The decision to hold sensitization workshops in Zimbabwe after securing MOUs instead of before was similarly a result of the rush to secure MOUs within a given timeframe.

Projects underwent changes both as a reaction to external political events, and as a result of internal evaluation and discontent. The death of Nelson Mandela in December 2013 meant that senior civil servants in South Africa were understandably unavailable to sign agreements, however elections whose dates and potential outcomes were theoretically easier to factor into project planning also had a significant impact, particularly in Zimbabwe. It was necessary for organizations not only to adjust projects accordingly following such events, but also to overhaul entire concepts if required. The project in South Africa was redesigned nine months in following a failure to deliver on milestones. Recognising and admitting nine months into a three-year project that the initial approach needed significant adaptation required flexibility from the organizations, and there is little doubt that the project is in a much better position as a result.

Overemphasising short-term 'checkbox milestones' at the expense of long-term commitment

A milestone for all three projects set by the organizations was the attainment of one or more MOUs with key stakeholders. During the consortium's first annual meeting, organizations expressed frustration with this milestone and stressed the difficulty of securing MOUs. In both South Africa and Zimbabwe, MOUs were considered very serious and politically sensitive agreements that underwent a rigorous process before signing and took a significantly long time to secure. In Zimbabwe, the MOU signed with Parliament took five months to conclude, a period considered relatively long by VakaYiko members (the inception phase is six months), however this turned out to be the fastest signed MOU in parliamentary history (Samu, 2014).

There was an acknowledgement that the purpose of MOUs was not to demonstrate commitment per se, but rather to demonstrate commitment to the donor; such evidence of commitment was seen as a checkbox to tick rather than an intrinsically worthwhile agreement. In this respect, some MOUs ended up being far more trouble than they were worth and a potential source of tension with government departments who were interested in working with the organizations, but wary of entering such high level agreements from the offset. Moreover, when written evidence of commitment was linked to payments as a milestone, there was a risk that organizations fixated on securing MOUs at the expense of building a gradual yet richer relationship.

On whether there were more suitable ways to demonstrate commitment, INASP expressed that the emphasis should be on the commitment itself rather than the physical evidence. ODI-RAPID similarly expressed that the evidence was in the actions; *'constructive dialogue, joint work, healthy, regular interactions, the generation of workplans, these demonstrate commitment,'* an individual explained, concluding that *'ultimately, its actions that demonstrate commitment, not a piece of paper.'*

For the purpose of satisfying donors, the organizations in South Africa and Zimbabwe started to ask for 'letters of support' which went through a less arduous signing process instead. On reflection, MOUs should have been a by-product of successful engagement, not a goal in and of themselves, and their inclusion into the logframe as a milestone against which payments would be released was seen as regrettable.

The implications of paying or refusing to pay sitting fees to civil servants

The question of whether or not to pay sitting fees often leads to heated debate in the development sector. This debate becomes even hotter in a consortium of organizations working in different countries where some have strict policies against paying such fees, and others are more flexible depending on the context. This was certainly the case with VakaYiko and the issue is one that has yet to be resolved, with

no consensus reached. Rehashing arguments about values, pragmatism, and the balance between adequately compensating people for their time and (as one VakaYiko member put it) 'paying someone to sit there for ten minutes' is not in the interest of this paper. Rather, this section will focus on the material implications for VakaYiko of paying or not paying such fees.

International development organizations commonly speak of a 'culture' in certain (often African) countries in which civil servants expect payments for attending meetings assumed to be part of their job. In VakaYiko's experiences however, such expectations were very much a result of the policies of previous or current foreign (often northern) donors and international organizations. One local organization highlighted how international organizations had traditionally paid individuals to attend meetings and then quickly reversed this policy following the rise of the 'Value for Money' approach. Another referenced a major foreign donor that had recently worked with an institution VakaYiko was working with, highlighting the generous financial and material incentives they provided which created an expectation that VakaYiko would operate in a similar manner. A local organization caught off-guard by requests for such payments explained their opposition for simple, practical, financial reasons – *'we don't have the money to make such payments.'*

Whilst refusing to pay sitting fees may not necessarily harm one's chances of securing commitment, it's unlikely to help. INASP previously planned to work with a Parliament in a middle income country, however as the latter's request for sitting fees was non-negotiable, the plan fell through. During the annual meeting, the potentially negative ramifications on an organization's reputation if it made such payments which were – despite their prevalence in certain areas – controversial were discussed. For most organizations, the reputational risks of being known as 'that organization that pays' was not worth any potential access they could gain.

One individual at INASP suggested that sitting fees were an indication that there was no demand for the project idea. On donor-led development in certain countries, some have argued that the unattractive salaries for civil servants and *'the resources and perks associated with foreign funded projects in the short term create the temptation for politicians and bureaucrats to accept any aid project'* (Whitfield, 2005). Reflecting on VakaYiko's experiences in three countries, payments were often pushed for in cases where interest in the project was questionable. As requests occurred after securing commitment, one organization came to a late realization that there was perhaps little demand for the specific project, raising questions about its value and sustainability.

Key approaches

Ghana

In Ghana, GINKS and INASP work with CSTC to develop and embed an EIPM course for civil servants.

- Engaging informally with the relevant institutions and using previously existing relationships (where possible) before seeking formal engagement.
- Appreciating the importance of timing – VakaYiko was formed shortly after CSTC had finished carrying out a similar project (developing a training course) and were looking to expand on their course offering.
- Understanding that there is not necessarily a positive correlation between interest and participation – individuals may not always have time to take on activities that add to their existing workload, regardless of interest.

South Africa

In South Africa, ODI-RAPID along with CSIR, HSRC and a local consultant work to support the DEA in operationalising the DEA's existing Research, Development and Evidence framework.

- Developing a steering committee of individuals with oversight across government in order to ensure that the work produced is in line with that of the wider government.
- Being flexible and adapting when the project required in spite of the rigidity of the project design – sometimes the pressure to meet 'checkbox milestones' (particularly as these were linked to payments) came at the expense of more gradual and high quality engagement.
- Carrying out continuous and regular correspondence with the institutions to jointly produce tangible outputs.

Zimbabwe

ZeipNET and INASP work with ministries and the Parliament of Zimbabwe to improve the use of research evidence in response to departmental priorities.

- Aligning the project with the institutions' existing priorities rather than proposing it as a separate strand of work.
- Understanding institutional hierarchies and the number of steps/hands that a proposal goes through before reaching the relevant individual, and planning accordingly (taking handouts to meetings, engaging with all interested individuals).
- Using sensitization workshops or meetings to familiarize the relevant institutions with the concept before formally proposing the project.
- Recognising the value of being a local organization – there was a greater interest in working with ZeipNET due to their familiarity with the local context and as a result of their permanent presence which enabled them to meet and adapt to unforeseen demand.

Engaging as a consortium

VakaYiko is both a project and a consortium; it is a sum of three projects operating in three countries and a collection of the five organizations implementing these projects. Individuals that approached government institutions did so not only as representatives of their own organization, but also as representatives of the wider consortium. This had both its benefits and drawbacks, as this section will detail.

Politics and credibility

As a relatively new organization, ZeipNET found that the support of international partners boosted their credibility. Government institutions were more confident entering agreements with them after finding out that ZeipNET had the support of reputable organizations with a track record of delivering. Backing from international organizations and a major donor such as DFID strongly suggested that ZeipNET had the capacity and resources to successfully execute the project.

Nonetheless, this international support had its drawbacks. Whilst the consortium was appreciated for technical reasons, it was occasionally viewed as circumspect for political reasons. The hostile relationship between the UK government and the government of Zimbabwe meant that the presence of UK partners (and perhaps funding from a UK government department) was met with apprehension in some government institutions. It's more than likely that VakaYiko being a consortium of mostly African organizations helped to offset some of this apprehension (ZeipNET, 2014).

Understanding context(s)

For the organizations based in London, having country partners was beneficial for many reasons. INASP found that these partners brought with them a greater understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics – working together to develop course content and ensure that it was relevant was of vital importance. However, local organizations cited the UK partners' limited understanding of local contexts and cultural norms as a drawback. An example given was the presumption that an international partner could go directly to an institution's head office (without the local organization) as a VakaYiko representative. Whilst the international partner would think nothing of it, the absence of the local organization in the meeting room would be conspicuous to the institution, and explaining these unwritten norms was not always easy.

Partners as an exit strategy

Perhaps the greatest advantage to working in a consortium like VakaYiko is that the consortium's exit strategy is its partners. VakaYiko works to develop the capacity of both government institutions and consortium members. The latter is through a 'learning by doing' approach wherein capacity gaps are

identified and addressed as they appear, with an emphasis on strengthening communications, monitoring and evaluation, and financial management skills. The MOU signed specifically with ZeipNET by the Parliament of Zimbabwe demonstrates the strong likelihood that after the VakaYiko project, organizations will be well-placed to continue their work with or without the backing of the consortium.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on VakaYiko's early experiences in attempting to engage with government institutions, documenting and analysing the key approaches adopted by the consortium. Although different approaches worked in different countries and with different institutions, there were common themes that were relevant to the success of most approaches in securing commitment. Broadly speaking and somewhat unsurprisingly, those that: (i) supported the development of existing systems and frameworks (ii) aligned with institutional priorities, and (iii) involved working in collaboration with the institution in question were more likely to secure buy-in.

Government institutions took a more dominant and leading role in project areas that contributed to achieving national strategies or institutional priorities such as Zim Asset in Zimbabwe and the R,D&E framework in South Africa than in those that did not clearly align with their existing priorities. An interest in certain project areas was not enough to warrant substantial participation – those which were viewed as creating additional work were less likely to have significant input from civil servants and trainers, regardless of interest.

One of the most important experiences to note was that securing engagement was a continuous process. The emphasis on entry points and establishing engagement during the inception phase sometimes neglected the importance of maintaining existing relationships. The need to continue engaging constructively with institutions was highlighted when a government department that had expressed an early interest in collaborating on the project eventually decided not to work with the consortium. In many cases, keeping one's foot in the door was as difficult as getting it in.

The benefits and drawbacks to engaging as part of an international consortium were inextricably linked; local organizations had a greater understanding of local contexts, international organizations did not always pay sufficient attention to these local contexts; some departments were more confident entering agreements with newer organizations due to the international support, others were more apprehensive of such support due to international relations. The principal and perhaps most crucial advantage to engaging as part of an international consortium was linked to sustainability; there was no need for a 'handover' mechanism as the organizations in Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe would be well-placed to continue and expand upon the work beyond the life of the project.

References

- Ademokun, A. (2014) *Vaka Yiko Inception Phase Report*, International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, Oxford
- Alexander, P. (2010) Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy*. 37(123) p.25-40
- Bakewell, O. and Garbutt, A. (2005) *The Use and Abuse of the Logical Framework Approach*. Stockholm: SIDA
- Coleman, N. (2013) *Presentation to FAWU NEC on aspects of the National Development Plan*. Available at: http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/misc/2013/coleman_ndp.pdf [Accessed 10 October 2014]
- Dengbol-Martinussen, J., and P. Engberg Pederson. (2003) *Aid: Understanding International Development Coordination*, London, Zed Books
- Funke, N., Shaxson, L. and Bielak, A.T. (2009) *Evidence-based policy for environmental sustainability: a path forward for South Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, 35pp.
- Harvey, D. (2006) *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, London, Verso Books
- INASP (2013) *BCURE bid: INASP tender Parts A and B*. Oxford
- IOM and ZIMSTAT (2010) *Migration in Zimbabwe: A country profile 2009*. International Organisation for Migration: Harare
- Marais, H. (2011) *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change*. London: Zed Books
- Michie, J. and Padayachee, V. (1998) Three years after apartheid: growth, employment and redistribution? *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. 22(5) p.623-636
- OECD (2014) *Aid statistics by donor, recipient and sector (database)* Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/statistics/datalab/oda-recipient-sector.htm> [Accessed 9 October 2014]
- Republic of South Africa (2012) *Environment Sector Research, Development and Evidence framework: An approach to enhance science-policy interface and evidence-based policy making*. Department of Environmental Affairs: Pretoria
- Republic of Zimbabwe (2013) *Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation*. Government of Zimbabwe: Harare
- Samu, N. (2014) 'How to engage with government effectively', *Vaka Yiko annual meeting June 2014*. Harare
- Segattia, A. and Pons-Vignob, N. (2013) Stuck in stabilization? South Africa's post-apartheid macro-economic policy between ideological conversion and technocratic capture. *Review of African Political Economy*. 40(138) p.537-555
- UNESCO (2014) *Mapping Research and Innovation in the Republic of Zimbabwe*. GO SPIN Country Profiles in Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, vol. 2: Paris
- University of Ghana, Office of Research, Innovation and Development. (2011) 'The DRUSSA Programme' orid.ug.edu.gh/drussa.php, [Accessed 14 October 2014]
- Whitfield, L. (2005) Trustees of Development from Conditionality to Governance: Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol 43, no.4
- World Bank (2014) *Ghana at a glance* [Online] Available from: http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/gha_aag.pdf [Accessed 9 October 2014]
- ZeipNET, 'ZeipNET Newsletter July 2014', www.zeipnet.org/index.php?option=com_jdownloads&Itemid=93&view=summary&cid=9&catid=4, 2014, [Accessed 10 October 2014]

ZeipNET (2013) www.zeipnet.org, [Accessed 2 October 2014]



GINKS is a network of individuals and organizations 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 organizations 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.

www.ginks.org

www.hsrc.ac.za

www.inasp.info

www.odi.org

www.zeipnet.org