How to improve the culture of evidence use in the Brazilian public sector: a learning brief

Davi Romão

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Key Messages

Policy question

How can the culture of evidence-informed decision-making in the Brazilian public sector be improved?

Why does it matter?

- Evidence is crucial to characterize policy problems, identify effective solutions, implement, monitor and evaluate interventions, and for organizational learning.

- There are many barriers that prevent the application of evidence in policy making, such as the intricacy of technical knowledge, the different time frames of research and policy processes, a lack of public servant know-how to incorporate evidence into their work, and the complexity of policy-making processes.

- Organizational culture is a key factor that influences how an organization uses evidence.

- In Brazil, the overall public sector culture does not seem to value evidence as a critical resource and there are many gaps for the uptake of evidence in terms of institutional capacity.

- On the other hand, interest in using evidence is increasing within public institutions, and many efforts in that direction are arising.

Who is this report for?

This report is mainly written for public sector decision-makers. However, it can also provide relevant insights for politicians, policy implementers, researchers, and civil society.

How was this report done?

This report is based on a literature review and on interviews with six Brazilian experts. The interviews' protocol and analysis were based on the Context Matters Framework.

All interviewees are Brazilian public servants directly involved in the area of Evidence-Informed Public Policy, and are champions of the use of evidence in their context.

Recommendations

Organizational change in the Brazilian public sector is crucial for promoting a culture of evidence-informed decision-making. As such change is a complex task, above all it is important for any intervention to be contextually grounded. Thus, instead of bluntly importing a pre-formatted best-practice, it is recommended that a change plan adopts strategies of adaptive management, such as Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (Andrews *et al.,* 2017).

Additionally, if contextual conditions allow, seven paths for culture change can be considered. These should focus on simultaneously developing capability, motivation and opportunity to use evidence in decision-making processes.

1) Training for public servants

   Providing training in research methods, knowledge translation, application of knowledge into policy, and on the latest research debates in the relevant policy area.

2) Designing protocols for the use of evidence

   Establishing organizational standards for the application of evidence within the policy-making process.

3) Fostering partnerships with civil society and academic organizations

   Fostering partnerships with civil society and academic organizations increases social participation in the policy-making process. This is an essential source of evidence to make policies more representative and effective.

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4) Promoting exchanges between public servants and researchers

Promoting structured interaction, allowing staff members to learn from researchers, and researchers to better understand policy needs.

5) Promoting a learning culture

Creating relevant institutional data and fostering an environment that is supportive of change and innovation.

6) Investing in institutional champions of evidence-informed policy

Supporting staff members that can lead relevant initiatives, while inspiring and influencing colleagues.

7) Creating units specialized in "evidence-to-policy"

Establishing units responsible for performing an evidence needs assessment of the organization and implementing a change plan.

1   Introduction

Policy making is always a process full of uncertainty and risks. Managers and politicians do not have complete information on the problems they face, nor on the best options to tackle them, and even less on future issues that are bound to arise. Decision-makers must often take a gamble. They need to rapidly consider the demands of different stakeholders, government objectives and institutional limitations.

This is why using the best available evidence is critical in government. Evidence sheds light on a problem. It helps to better understand what is happening and to identify and implement potentially effective solutions. It can also allow for different ways of framing the same problem. Using adequate evidence does not eliminate the uncertainty in decision-making, but it does reduce it where possible, while making uncertainty explicit and transparent when no evidence is available. Drawing from the debate on evidence-based public health, this report relies on the following definition of evidence-informed policy making: the "conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions" in a policy context (Jenicek, 1997).

Nonetheless, it is common for public institutions to struggle to use evidence in their routines. Several factors lead to this, such as the intricacy and inscrutability of technical knowledge, the very different time-frames of research and policy, the lack of know-how by public servants to incorporate evidence into their work and the complexity of the policy-making process (Cairney, 2019; Oliver *et al*, 2014).

The Context Matters Framework (Weyrauch *et al*., 2016) is a diagnostic tool to assess factors affecting evidence use in an organization. The framework identifies six contextual dimensions that influence the use of evidence in an institution: Macro context, Intra- and inter-relationships, Culture, Organizational capacity, Organizational management and processes, and Core resources. Understanding how these dimensions affect the use of evidence is key to improving public organizations' capacity to use evidence and, in doing so, develop effective public policies.

Among these dimensions, the literature highlights the role of organizational culture (Oliver et al, 2014; Lorenc *et al*., 2014; Weyrauch *et al*., 2016; Punton *et al*. 2016). Organizational culture refers to the ideas, values and behaviours reinforced by a community, leading to common practices (Weyrauch *et al*., 2016). The culture of an organization will inevitably affect what type of evidence is used and in which ways. For instance, one organization might value research in general, and develop processes to use it, while another organization might largely dismiss research as irrelevant, emphasizing experiential knowledge. Organizational culture also has an important influence on institutional performance and capacity to innovate, as well as on employees' commitment, engagement, and the value they attribute to work (Makkar *et al*., 2015). To our knowledge, however, there have been no studies to date that have investigated the culture of evidence use in the Brazilian public sector.

Given the importance of organizational culture to the integration of evidence into public policies, and the absence of publications addressing this issue, this report attempts to answer the following policy question: *How can the culture of evidence-informed decision-making in the Brazilian public sector be improved?*

Within this report, evidence is understood as any kind of information produced through systematic processes. Examples of sources of evidence are: academic and scientific research, results of institutional protocols for data collection and data analysis, formal consultations with civil society and other stakeholders, results of policy monitoring and policy evaluation processes.

The report proceeds as follows. Section 2, describes the methods applied to answer the policy question. Section 3 provides a review of the literature on how to improve the culture of evidence-informed decision-making. Section 4 focuses specifically on the Brazilian context and its barriers and opportunities for the deployment of evidence-informed policy. Section 5 presents a framework to guide efforts to improve evidence-informed public policies in Brazil. Finally, Section 6 discusses additional insights that might be useful for researchers and practitioners who want to promote the culture of evidence use across the state.

2   Methods

The first step of this report is a literature review on how to improve the culture of evidence-informed decision-making. The review was conducted applying a "rapid literature review" methodology (Dobbins, 2017). Rapid literature review is a rigorous method of synthesis of literature for decision-making. It is the recommended method to find, assess, synthesize and present the best available evidence, in a time frame compatible with the policy-making process (World Health Organization, 2020). The step-by-step process of rapid reviews is important to assure that the evidence is collected in a rigorous, systematic and transparent way. Another strength of rapid reviews is its adaptability to different policy timings. In this rapid review, academic and institutional publications were selected through three complementary methods. First, an institutional database of publications on evidence-informed public policies was consulted[1]. Second, suggestions were directly collected from experts. Third, searches were performed, in July 2020, in two public databases specialized in systematic reviews[2] and two Brazilian databases of academic publications[3]. All results were single-screened based on titles, and subsequently based on abstracts and full-text. The search focused on systematic reviews.

The second part of the report focuses on the relationship between organizational culture and evidence use in the Brazilian public sector. It discusses how organizational culture affects the uptake of evidence, as well as barriers to the use of evidence and opportunities to strengthen this practice. For that purpose, interviews were conducted with six public servants who are experts in evidence-informed policy making. There are two reasons for basing this analysis on expert interviews. First, the literature review did not yield any publications directly addressing the culture of use of evidence in Brazil. Second, operating change in organizational cultures is a complex systemic problem, which requires locally grounded solutions (Andrews *et al.,* 2017). Any intervention that aims to improve the culture of evidence use in an institution must take into account the specific barriers, enablers, and opportunities of the local context. Therefore, it was crucial to focus this analysis on the perspectives of those who are immersed in the Brazilian public sector's organizational culture.

Drawing on the Context Matters Framework (Weyrauch et al., 2016), five organizational culture aspects were investigated in the interviews:

1. ***Use of evidence, trends and barriers***: description of the ecosystem of the Brazilian public sector regarding the use of evidence;

2. ***Beliefs, values and openness to change***: whether evidence is regarded as a valuable resource for decision-making and to what extent the organization supports critical inquiry and innovation;

3. ***Incentives and motivation***: whether there are institutional incentives to use evidence and if people are intrinsically motivated to use evidence;

4. ***Institutional agenda***: what are informal institutional priorities and how does that affect the use of evidence;

5. ***Entry points for change***: what can be done to improve the use of evidence.

All interviewees are Brazilian public servants directly involved in the area of Evidence-Informed Public Policy, and are champions of the use of evidence in their context. The interviewees come from both the executive and the legislative branches, from all levels of government (federal, state and municipal), different regions of the country, and work on different policy areas. Three interviewees are women and three are men. Regardless of the interviewees being a diverse group, this was not a representative sample of the Brazilian public sector as a whole. Therefore, the findings presented here should not be immediately generalized to other agencies.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted around one hour each. All interviews occurred in August 2020. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, the responses will be presented in an aggregated form or identifiable details were omitted.

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[1] An internal database of publications from the Veredas Institute.

[2] "Social Systems Evidence" and "Health Systems Evidence". Keywords: evidence-informed, evidence-based, policymaker, policymaking, policy.

[3] "Scielo" and "BVS Brasil". Keywords: "uso de evidências", brasil, "políticas públicas".

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3   Evidence to policy: a divide and some bridges

This section presents the main insights found in the scientific literature on how to promote a culture of evidence use in public institutions. First, it discusses the most critical barriers to the use of evidence that have been mapped and then it describes the types of interventions that are suggested.

Several barriers affect to what extent and how an organization uses evidence to inform its decisions. This often creates a divide between the production of knowledge and decision-makings processes. These barriers relate to how research is produced and supplied, how organizations make decisions and consume evidence, and how the dialogue between public and research institutions occurs, among others. Below the barriers most often emphasized by the literature are discussed.

Regarding the way evidence is supplied, a first challenge is the complexity and variety of types of information (Andermann *et al.*, 2016). As research and knowledge production get more specialized, the background knowledge required to understand and apply its insights grows significantly. Communicating these findings in a clear and rigorous way, therefore, represents a considerable hurdle. The quantity of studies and sources is another hindrance. Consumers of evidence need to filter out an uncountable number of diverse, and sometimes contradictory, pieces of information.

Although information is abundant, there is a relative scarcity of evidence focusing on the policy-making process. Practitioners complain, for instance, that researchers give more attention to theoretical and academic debates, instead of providing useful insights for practice (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014). The format used to publish evidence is also identified as an important barrier (Tricco *et al.*, 2016). Long and overly-detailed documents, loaded with technical jargon, become an unwieldy resource for non-experts with limited time available (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014).

On the demand side for evidence, the main barriers relate to the specificities of decision-making processes and to the organizational capacity to use evidence. The rhythm of policy making is hectic, and as a rule not compatible with the slow process of gathering or producing high-quality evidence (Andermann *et al.*, 2016). Political, institutional and social pressures are also identified as factors that can negatively affect the use of evidence (Andermann *et al.*, 2016), as they can lead policymakers in an opposite direction from what is suggested by the evidence.

Regarding organizational capacity, barriers range from the value accorded to evidence to the technical skills required to use it (Tricco *et al.*, 2016). How individuals use evidence depends on their previous beliefs, attitudes and motivations, as well as social norms and values (Punton *et al*, 2016). Likewise, organizations vary on the extent to which they consider evidence an essential resource for policy. Some have systematic processes to incorporate research findings, others rarely use research evidence at all (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, public servants often do not have the necessary skills to produce, find, appraise, synthesize and apply evidence transparently and systematically. That leads, for instance, to the *a posteriori* cherry-picking of studies to justify institutional decisions that were not research-based (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014).

Turning to organizational culture specifically, Weyrauch et al. (Weyrauch *et al.*, 2016) identify three other aspects that affect the use of evidence: openness to change, incentives, and motivations. Openness to change refers to the extent to which the organization promotes and welcomes innovation. Incentives concern extrinsic rewards that encourage the use of evidence, such as performance management. Motivation is the intrinsic drive employees might have to use evidence to support their decisions. Organizations that support innovation, give incentives for the use of evidence, and rely on intrinsically motivated personnel will have a fertile environment for the use of evidence.

To improve the use of evidence in public organizations, the literature suggests a wide range of options. Brownson *et al.* (2018) point that capacity building for evidence use needs to take into consideration the "push-pull process". While providing relevant, high-quality evidence (push) is imperative, the potential adopters need to be open, interested and ready to consume this evidence (pull).

The literature describes six key mechanisms underlying the interventions that promote evidence-informed policy making. Goldman & Pabari (2020), drawing on the typology proposed by Langer et al. (2016), identify the following mechanisms:

1) Awareness of the potential of evidence and positive attitude towards evidence-informed policy making;

2) Agreement and shared understanding on policy problems and the appropriate evidence, and commitment to the agreed pathways;

3) Effective communication and facilitated access to evidence;

5) Promoting interaction and trust between decision-makers and researchers;

6) Developing ability to use evidence and confidence to apply these skills;

7) Changing institutional structures and processes to encourage the use of evidence.

According to Langer *et al.* (2016), through these mechanisms, the interventions to improve the use of evidence aim to affect three main intermediary behavioural outcomes: capability, motivation and opportunity to use evidence in decision-making processes. The authors also find that, as a rule, it is important to take into consideration these three behavioural changes simultaneously for interventions to be effective.

Turning to the interventions *per se*, a first group focuses on the provision of evidence, or how evidence is produced and presented (Dias *et al.,* 2015). They include funding a research agenda that focuses on policy-relevant questions or the development of syntheses of high-quality evidence. How to communicate evidence is also relevant (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Petkovic, 2018). Messages must be presented in a simple and clear way, taking into consideration specificities both of the policy process and of the cognitive biases of consumers. The credibility of the evidence source, for instance, seems to be a decisive factor for its uptake (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014). The same is true for presenting the evidence in a way that takes into account contextual factors and that supports its applicability. The uptake of evidence can be further improved by building relationships of trust between the suppliers and consumers of evidence (Oliver & Cairney, 2019).

Strengthening organizational capacity to use evidence is needed as well (Oliver *et al*, 2014). Offering training to public servants on evidence-informed public policy or recruiting professionals with this expertise are possible strategies. It is important for the classroom training to be combined with on-site projects, so that participants can both learn the new skills and gain the necessary confidence to incorporate them into their routines (Punton *et al*, 2016). Organizations can create specialized positions (knowledge brokers) or units, focused on understanding the institutional needs and supporting the application of evidence throughout all stages of the policy cycle.

Organizational tools and systems can also be helpful (Punton *et al.*, 2016). Protocols, guidelines, toolkits and tailored information can make access to evidence easier. At the same time, rewards, audits and feedback can be used to reinforce the use of evidence.

Another strategy is to increase the exchange between researchers and policymakers. This can encourage that research efforts take into consideration the specificities of the local practice while practitioners gradually learn from researchers' expertise. However, these interventions need to have a clear theory of change and support a structured exchange between the two groups (Langer *et al.*, 2016).

To improve organizational cultures of evidence use, Brownson *et al.* (2018) highlight the importance of leadership, communication and collaboration. Supporting organizational leaders to become champions of evidence use allows them to influence the institution as a whole. Punton *et al.* (2016) indicate that institutional champions usually have high levels of social skills, vision and commitment, while also occupying relatively senior positions. The mechanism through which they affect organizational culture is "social processing", consisting of the process of changing groups' beliefs towards a new consensus. In addition, fostering communication and cooperation between employees is associated with increased openness to innovation and increased intrinsic motivation. This creates an environment that is more open to learning and applying new knowledge. Therefore, an organization that supports the strengthening of key change agents and networks will be more capable of incorporating new evidence into its practices (Makkar *et al.*, 2015).

In conclusion, the literature also provides insight on which interventions tend to not work. The review conducted by Langer *et al.* (2016) finds that simply providing access to evidence and tools to decision-makers is not effective. The same is true for passive or diluted educational strategies, such as passive presentation of skills or training that is provided with low intensity. Finally, unstructured interactions and collaborations between decision-makers and researchers also seem to be ineffective, such as joint educational meetings.

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4 Evidence to policy in Brazil: challenges and opportunities

This section presents the main insights provided by the experts regarding the culture of evidence use in the Brazilian public sector[4]. First, it provides some elements to characterize the Brazilian context. Second, it discusses some key aspects of organizational culture, namely beliefs, values and openness to change, incentives and motivations, and organizational agenda. Finally, it reports the recommendations suggested by the experts. The experts were asked to refer to their current units[5] during the interviews, but considerations about their organizations as a whole were also discussed when relevant.

4.1 Use of evidence, trends and barriers in Brazilian public policy

First, it was investigated what types of evidence are most commonly used in each unit and to what extent decisions are informed by evidence. It was also asked if the interviewees perceive a trend in the use of evidence in their context, and what barriers they identify.

The six units investigated showed a great diversity regarding what types of evidence are used and to what extent. One unit, specialized in evidence to policy, listed various kinds of evidence it produces, while noting minimal use by the government. On the other hand, a similar unit has a much narrower scope, working mostly with institutional databases, but government decisions overall rely on these data as a support. As the interviewee put it:

> "Inwards we use more institutional bases. For the outside community, these are political decisions, we go and fill them up with references from academic publications. But not as much as a way of learning, and more as a support to decisions that had already been made."

There are two sectors that rely heavily on civil society participation. In one of them, civil society is used both as a source of evidence about local stakeholders and as a source of academic and technical knowledge. Its inputs are a key factor in informing the sector's policies.

In another case, a theoretical divide is present in the policy area and in the conceptual literature. That lead to the alignment of the unit to one specific perspective on the topic, while other studies and perspectives were totally dismissed.

Most interviewees perceive a positive, although limited, trend when it comes to the use of evidence to inform policy. Four interviewees said they had seen slow growth in the area in the last years. The recent creation of many units specialized in evidence-to-policy was identified as an important indicator of progress, although this process is still seen as embryonic. One interviewee said:

"From 2016 onwards, there is a dissemination of the paradigm. People have been talking more about evidence-based policy. However, in terms of organizational change, it is still very limited."

The interviewees also mentioned several barriers to the uptake of evidence in their organizations. These relate to how organizations manage their processes and projects, the availability of resources, and staff skills. Units varied significantly on all these aspects. The most common barriers were:

- Electoral, political and personal interests;
- Lack of organizational and political incentives for the use of evidence;
- Limited use of monitoring and evaluation;
- Absence of qualified and sufficient staff;
- Limited governance, including proper application of managerial tools;
- Lack of institutional records;
- No standardized procedures for evidence use.

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[4] For a complete report of these interviews, access Romão, Davi. "Organizational culture and use of evidence in the Brazilian public sector: a case study" (2020) at www.veredas.org/publicacoes

[5] This report refers to "unit" as a small sector that deals with a specific policy problem within a public organization. For instance, the coordination responsible for contracts would be a unit in the Ministry of Economics.

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Against this backdrop of changing Brazilian governance context, strong political interests, and limited human and financial resources, in the next three sections the report focuses on the cultural aspects that affect evidence use in Brazilian public organizations.

4.2   Beliefs, values and openness to change within public policy organizations

Beliefs and values refer to how an organization values evidence as a relevant resource for decision-making. Openness to change describes to what extent "organizational culture may enable critical inquiry, curiosity and support risk-taking and innovation" (Weyrauch *et al.*, 2016).

Most units seem to value evidence, each of them giving priority to different types, such as institutional data or expert opinions. On the other hand, most of the interviewees reported that their organizations, as a whole, do not value evidence. Decisions are often made based on the views and values of the decision-makers, and staff has little training on how to find, produce or apply evidence. This difference between the interviewees' specialized units and their larger agencies can likely be explained by the fact that they are all interested in this debate, so that they will be both drawn towards units that use evidence, and they will also promote the use of evidence internally, changing the unit's culture.

Regarding openness to change, most interviewees reported a partial disposition. Their units seem to be especially open when compared to the rest of their institutions, but they are still limited by political and institutional priorities. Interviewees suggested that their institutions are not especially interested in evidence-informed changes, and many changes described were due to other factors, such as political interests or change in management. On the other hand, aside from the main political objectives, coordinators, directors and other leadership have a fair amount of autonomy. That leads to a situation where the characteristics of the leaders heavily influence how each unit will behave:

"It is very open to change. But this has a lot to do with the leadership that is here. And since it has a lot of turnover, it changes frequently. But nowadays, the sector is open, because of the leadership profile."

4.3   Incentives for civil servants and civil servant's motivations

Incentives are institutional rewards or enablers that encourage employees to act in certain ways. These can be monetary or moral rewards, or processes that facilitate and support certain tasks. Motivations refer to the intrinsic drivers for action. Here, it is investigated what factors lead employees to search out evidence autonomously.

The presence of offices specializing in research and knowledge translation within the institutions was identified as an important enabler of the use of evidence. Training and research communication were also mentioned as a positive way institutions encourage the use of evidence. At some departments, performance management is applied, but apparently it never achieves its purpose, for instance, because volatile institutional agendas make performance appraisal impossible, or because it has become a mere formality and no real evaluation is done:

> *"In terms of institutional policy, performance evaluation is terrible. All team members always receive the highest score".*

Most interviewees said people in their units feel motivated to use evidence:

> *"The people who are here do it because they like it. I see very motivated people here, who push themselves a lot to develop a good job."*

Despite the absence of institutional performance management, interviewees mainly indicated that their units do value individual performance, which can often facilitate the use of evidence. This seems to be heavily influenced by the individual profile of the leader. If the leader values performance, the team adapts to that. Public servants with an academic background were also reported to be more likely to seek out evidence.

4.4   Institutional agenda in public organizations

Apart from the formal, explicit objectives every public organization has, there are also tacit organizational goals that shape institutional processes and choices. The interviewees pointed to many factors that informally influence the institutional agenda. Lobbying, electoral interests, career goals and private interests were reported as leading to selective use of evidence: giving priority to information that could help institutional processes of interest and dismissing other information.

One interviewee reported that it is easier to use evidence in a balanced way in areas that are not in the political spotlight, where the technical staff has more room of manoeuvre. This relates to another force that influences institutional agendas, namely personal political views and preferences. Staff members can often become internal activists for specific policy objectives:

> "My boss is not a politician, neither is very career-oriented. But he is very vain. Extremely vain. [...] So he bought this fight [for a specific policy agenda] as a personal goal. [...] For the younger employees, on the other hand, this situation created a window of opportunity to do interesting work, something more impactful and professional."

Institutional inertia was also presented as a factor that influences the institutional agenda. Organizational change was reported as hard to achieve. Thus, often processes were perpetuated regardless of their misalignment with the current goals and contextual changes. Pressures from other institutions, including auditing organizations, other branches of government, and the media similarly influenced policy plans.

4.5   Entry points for change

Finally, the experts provided their perspectives on how to improve the use of evidence in their institutions and in the Brazilian public sector as a whole. Below, it is presented the most recurrent ones:

- Increasing social participation, accountability and transparency;
- Requiring legislation and policy projects to be supported by evidence;
- Fostering an organizational culture that is more open to innovation and creativity;
- Creating "evidence to policy" offices and centres;
- Hiring evidence advisors – researchers that work closely with policymakers;
- Hiring scholar-practitioners – people with academic training to support policy processes.
- Investing in the creation of organizational registries and data, while making it useful for decision-makers;

Another set of recommendations addressed initiatives specifically for "evidence-to-policy" units:

- Working closely with the final consumers of evidence, so as to best understand their needs and to be able to show them how evidence can be of help;
- Helping policymakers to weigh evidence against other factors when making a decision;
- Giving special attention to the area of knowledge translation – it is not enough to deliver a report, it is necessary to customize findings so that they meet decision-makers' needs.

4.6   Conclusion

The expert interviews allow us to better understand the Brazilian context. Fortunately, it seems the public sector in Brazil is increasingly interested in using evidence, and many new efforts in that direction are arising. However, the overall public sector culture does not seem to value evidence as a critical resource and there are many gaps for the uptake of evidence in terms of institutional capacity. There seems to be a clash between a growing but still limited trend of using evidence to support innovation and effective policies on one hand, and the disregard of evidence in favour of other interests on the other hand. As institutions have sought to enhance the use of evidence, they have faced limitations such as conflicting interests, lack of protocols, organizational inertia, lack of incentives and untrained staff. One strength that stands out is the intrinsic motivation of employees. The staff members in the units of the interviewees were reported to be overall engaged with work and motivated to use evidence.

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5   Recommendations for public sector decision-makers

This section presents an implementation framework to improve the culture of evidence use in Brazilian public institutions. This framework is based on the insights provided by the literature review and expert interviews, as well as on my own experience as a practitioner in this area[6]. As seen above, public organizations in Brazil vary significantly in the ways they use evidence. Additionally, changing organizational culture is not a simple task (Makkar, 2015). On the contrary, organizational culture is the result of multiple, complex and often tacit processes.

This complexity inherent to the challenge means that there are no "one size fits all" solutions. Therefore, instead of bluntly importing a preformatted best-practice, it is recommended that a plan to change organizational culture be grounded on the principles of adaptive management, using tools such as Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (Andrews *et al.*, 2017). Adaptive management starts from a deep, contextual and collective understanding of the problem, and promotes gradual change by making use of available resources and opportunities. As strategies are deployed, data is collected to monitor progress and promote collective learning from mistakes, leading to adaptations and new ideas. Given that promoting organizational change is a complex task, it is natural that after overcoming one challenge, another barrier will surface. For that reason, change efforts must be supported by a consistent process of monitoring, learning and adaptation, always focused on the critical contextual elements.

To assess the culture of evidence use, be it for diagnostics, monitoring or evaluation, two tools might be of help. These can be customized to meet institutional needs or applied thoroughly if appropriate:

1) Context Matters Framework – The Context Matters Framework is a tool for the identification of opportunities to promote "better interaction between knowledge and policy. The framework aims to help users better assess the contexts in which they operate and, based on careful assessment, detect where the potential for change may be greater (and barriers more significant). By applying this lens to a particular government setting, users can identify what to do, with who and how more effectively. The framework identifies six dimensions, spanning the external context, relationships between agencies, and organisational capacity, culture, processes and resources." (INASP, 2020).

2) ORACLe - a "system to measure and score organisations' capacity to engage with and use research in policymaking" (Makkar *et al.*, 2015). ORACLe includes a series of interview questions and a scoring system that assess seven dimensions: "(1) documented processes for policymaking; (2) leadership training; (3) staff training; (4) research resources (e.g. database access); and systems to (5) generate new research, (6) undertake evaluations, and (7) strengthen relationships with researchers" (Makkar *et al.*, 2015).

Despite the need for any intervention to be contextually grounded, there are some potentially promising paths that Brazilian decision-makers should keep in mind. Below, it is presented seven lines of action that could be considered by decision-makers within the public administration as well as relevant implementation considerations. Their implementation should take into account how to simultaneously promote changes in the organizational and individual capability, motivation and opportunity to use evidence.

5.1   Training for public servants

The organization's staff must be equipped to find, analyse, interpret, synthesize and apply evidence. For that, it is necessary to offer training in research methods, knowledge translation, application of knowledge into policy and on the latest academic discussion in the public servants' specific policy area. This effort needs to be adjusted to the tasks each employee will perform and to the existing competence gap. Thus, some people might require more familiarity with qualitative than quantitative research methods, while others may need training for digital literacy. It is critical that any training include on-site practice, so that participants can learn how to apply the new skills to their context and build the necessary confidence to keep doing it in the future.

This option has the strength of developing long-term human capital within the organization. However, it is unlikely that by itself it will lead to organizational change. If there is no demand for evidence in the

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organization, it is expected that other tasks will absorb the trained staff and, with time, the gain in competences will fade away.

5.2   Designing protocols for the use of evidence

The interviewees pointed to a lack of guidance for the policy-making process in their organizations. This might be the case in many public institutions in Brazil. Developing such protocols and guidelines can be an opportunity to embed the use of evidence in all stages of the policy process, as they establish organizational standards of how evidence must be considered within the policy-making process. Once published, such documents become a reference for employees, as well as a tool for management, transparency, accountability and participatory processes.

However, this must be done while making sure the organization is capable of living up to the new standards. Otherwise, it can lead to frustration, disengagement and to norms becoming mere formalities with no practical implications.

5.3   Fostering partnerships with civil society and academic organizations

Partnerships with civil society and academic organizations are essential to the policy-making process. One interviewee emphasized how collaboration with civil society is a key source of both evidence and political legitimacy for their unit. Non-governmental institutions and actors can provide decision-makers with a wide array of relevant evidence. This includes high-quality abstract evidence, such as theoretical frameworks, data analysis or systematic reviews, and also specific evidence on local needs and values, applicability of policy options and implementation challenges.

Involving key stakeholders in the process of policy formulation and implementation is also a powerful strategy to achieve social validation and increase the buy-in of local actors. These stakeholders might include representatives of the policy's target population, private sector, political authorities, NGOs, labour organizations, and other relevant groups. Interventions that are collectively built will naturally be more representative of the stakeholders' values. Additionally, as members of the community become part of the policy process, they will improve their understanding of the trade-offs inherent in policy making and help tailor decisions to align with their needs and priorities.

5.4   Promoting exchanges between public servants and researchers

Structured interactions between public servants and researchers can lead to several benefits. Staff members can learn from researchers, both about methodology and relevant research findings. Researchers, on the other hand, have an opportunity to understand policy needs, and thus frame their research efforts accordingly.

Cooperation with researchers can take many forms. One example is the development of a shared research agenda with universities, so that postgraduate students have access to funding and institutional data in exchange for supporting policymakers. Public organizations can also develop repositories of research questions relevant to their institutional needs. These repositories can be shared with researchers, and become the basis for partnerships. Public debates or consultations to discuss policy problems, options, and implementation can also provide a rich source of information.

Regardless of how the cooperation is shaped, it is important that it includes continual exchanges and an active effort to apply the knowledge. Otherwise, it risks been swallowed by the research-policy divide, having no practical consequences.

5.5   Promoting a learning culture

Before confronting the task of learning from evidence produced by others, many organizations have yet to promote a culture of learning from their own activities and history. This requires both the registration of internal processes and an environment that is supportive of change and innovation. Promoting dialogue, exchange and collaboration between staff members is crucial for this. Investing in institutional records is also a powerful tool to increase internal transparency. This is vital for monitoring and evaluation, because in the absence of such data, it is impossible to know the rationale behind each policy, or whether they are effective or efficient. These data can be transformed into indicators that will point to the need for adaptations or innovation. They can also be used to share the history of the policy and how it has been evolving with key stakeholders.

One relevant risk of this type of effort is that transparency means that hidden problems will become visible. It is therefore common for organizations to resist transparency for fear of negative repercussions. To avoid this, new information must be presented as a chance for change and growth. If a topic is politically sensitive, contingency plans may be appropriate, anticipating the problems that might arise due to the new information. Thinking ahead can allow the organization to frame such developments not as a flaw, but as a new achievement or opportunity.

5.6   Investing in institutional champions of evidence-informed policy

The literature on organizational culture change highlights the importance of leaders. Leaders can be catalysts of transformation, pushing forward their network within the institution. They inspire and teach colleagues, and create new processes that promote institutional change. This is the only recommendation that has not been explicitly mentioned by the experts interviewed. However, the interviews show how the interviewees themselves have been the drivers of several changes in their organizations. By combining their expertise in evidence-to-policy, their engagement with this agenda, and rich contextual knowledge, they have championed examples of all the strategies mentioned above to advance the culture of evidence use.

One limitation of this strategy is that if progress is not achieved, this task can become highly frustrating. Champions, as a rule, are deeply engaged with the agenda they put forward, and so it is wearing to see their efforts not paying off. They alone cannot move a whole institution, and if the organization does not support them, they may lose momentum or even give up.

5.7   Creating units specialized in "evidence-to-policy"

The final suggestion is to create specialized units to promote the uptake of evidence in the organization. Many public organizations in Brazil do not have a specialized sector in this area, and for those that already have them, it could be the case of expanding and giving them more institutional support. This is a good strategy to consolidate institutional know-how in the area. If efforts are led by non-specialized sectors, it is highly likely that at some point they will be overshadowed by other activities and priorities. Also, they may lack the expertise to optimize the endeavour. A specialized unit, on the other hand, assures stability and continuous growth. It also provides infrastructure for organizations champions to promote the use of evidence. The team can be responsible for performing the institutional diagnostic and implementing a change plan. They can support the definition of sectorial research agendas and an overarching evidence strategy for the organization. A combination of the before-mentioned strategies can be applied, according to the organization's needs and capabilities.

Such a unit must be cautious about two critical risks. First, it must not reproduce the same limitations of academic institutions, falling on the research side of the research-policy divide. The focus must be on producing, finding and offering policy-relevant evidence that decision-makers can apply. Second, it must not assume that a simple report with policy-relevant information is enough to bridge the knowledge-to-practice gap. The process of knowledge translation goes beyond that, and must incorporate the insights on how to communicate evidence tailored to institutional processes. This entails understanding the consumers' views and needs, and framing the evidence in a way that is aligned with them. It also entails being aware of political processes and building a relationship of trust and partnership with other organizational actors. An effective way of communicating evidence includes pragmatic considerations on how it can be applied in each situation.

6 Recommendations for researchers and practitioners

Researchers and practitioners, both from public and third sector organizations, might also want to promote the culture of evidence use across the state. Although investigating how to do this was not the focus of this brief, there are a few insights that might be worth sharing:

6.1 Building relationships of trust

The development of bonds of trust, respect and credibility is critical to support decision-makers. Simply speaking "truth to power" is not effective. Relationships of trust allow for people to be open to listening, exchange information, and build shared consensus. This is also necessary for a better understanding of the policy process.

6.2 Understanding the complexity of the policy process and acting upon it strategically

Public policies are not developed according to an ideal policy cycle, neither by perfectly rational decision-makers. The process of policy making is affected by uncountable factors and often planning, implementation and evaluation are undertaken simultaneously, To effectively support policymakers, it is important to be aware of these processes, so to tailor the evidence provided to the real-world circumstances at play. Therefore, the provision of tools, evidence, or training must be deeply grounded in the decision-makers contextual circumstances, their needs, values, objectives, capabilities and opportunities.

6.3 Presenting evidence in a clear and simple way.

How evidence is presented greatly affects its potential to be applied. The content, language and format used must facilitate its uptake. Clear and straightforward messages, aligned with the institutional capacities, objectives and priorities are more likely to have practical consequences.

6.4 Providing actionable next steps

One important aspect of the "know-do gap" is that often the available evidence does not provide clear paths for action. Given the fuzziness of the policy process and the challenges of institutional change, it is more likely that evidence will be used if it is presented in a way that points to actionable options. Options that take into consideration the local barriers and facilitators, as well as the decision-makers' objectives, have a higher probability of being implemented. An example of this would be to provide members of parliament not only with evidence on a specific topic, but also with a draft bill of law.

6.5 Identifying institutional champions to partner up with

Institutional change requires the orchestration of multiple stakeholders. The more people are "on board" of a specific new trajectory, the easier it is for it to be followed through. Therefore, it can be strategic to map potential allies and coordinate efforts. This can be done through the sharing of information, symbols, authority, social capital etc. It can also allow for complementary actions that reinforce each other. Researchers, for instance, can find collaborators around public servants that have academic training and might be interested and using evidence, but do not have the time to do it properly.

Additional Resources

For additional details on the interventions mentioned above, the following resources might be of help.

On how to promote evidence-informed decision-making in general:

- *The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making*, by Langer et al. (2016)

On how to develop institutional capacity for evidence-informed policy making:

- *BCURE Literature Review – How can capacity development promote evidence-informed policy making?*, by Punton et al. (2016)

On how to establish evidence centres:

- A Practical Guide for Establishing an Evidence Centre, by Bazalgette (2020).

On how to communicate evidence to policymakers:

- *How to communicate effectively with policymakers: combine insights from psychology and policy studies*, by Cairney & Kwiatkowski, (2017)

- *The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics*, by Oliver & Cairney (2019)

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