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Center for Development and Cooperation

POLICY BRIEF

How can development organizations improve their use of evidence?

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Development organizations are under pressure to learn from and use the growing body of evidence in order to deliver aid that works. Many have started fostering an evidence-orientation in their strategies, policies and operational practices. However, these commendable efforts often underestimate the institutional challenges organizations face when trying to integrate evidence into their daily business. To address these challenges, organization leadership should take full responsibility for strengthening knowledge management. A set of institutional measures, including applying evidence principles during project selection and approval, hiring cross-culturally trained knowledge translators and setting up a management approach connecting evidence mobilizers and policy-makers, can facilitate evidence use in decision-making.

Evidence use is rising, but challenges remain

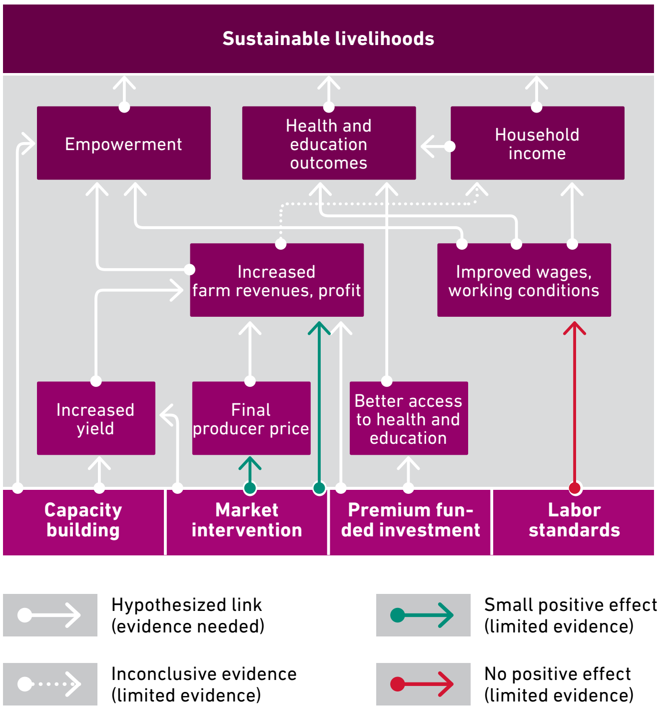
In the last 20 years, the quality and quantity of available evidence about "what works" in development cooperation has improved substantially. Management practices and procedures with an explicit focus on results-orientation have been launched, an evaluation culture has been established by increasing the number and quality of studies providing evidence and international networks now facilitate access to more and better evidence (OECD 2018). This is partly due to the growing availability and quality of research evidence. It is also due to the quest for an increasing number of development organizations to become 'learning organizations' by enhancing their knowledge management (Argyris and Schön 1978; Senge 1990) to ensure that their strategies and interventions are evidence-informed.

However, many development organizations still do not fully understand how to use evidence in policy-making and practice. The focus is mostly on technical and methodological aspects of evidence and channeling evidence into single projects, rather than informing multi-year programs and policy-making. More and better evidence does not guarantee use and impact at either the project or organizational level. Evidence transmission—getting evidence into the right format to the right people at the right time—makes evidence most impactful, rather than its speed, quality and availability. There are many barriers in transmitting evidence, including the complexity of tailoring knowledge to the needs of different decision-makers across the many layers and geographies of global organizations (Marschall 2018).

Evidence use at the project level

At the single-project level, the purpose of evidence transmission is to help project managers design an evidence-informed theory of change. This requires finding and preparing relevant evidence, sharing it with project decision-makers, explaining where and how to integrate it into the design process and dealing with inconclusive or absent evidence.

Evidence use at the project level (using the example of a fair trade certification project)



Source: Brugger, NADEL (2017)

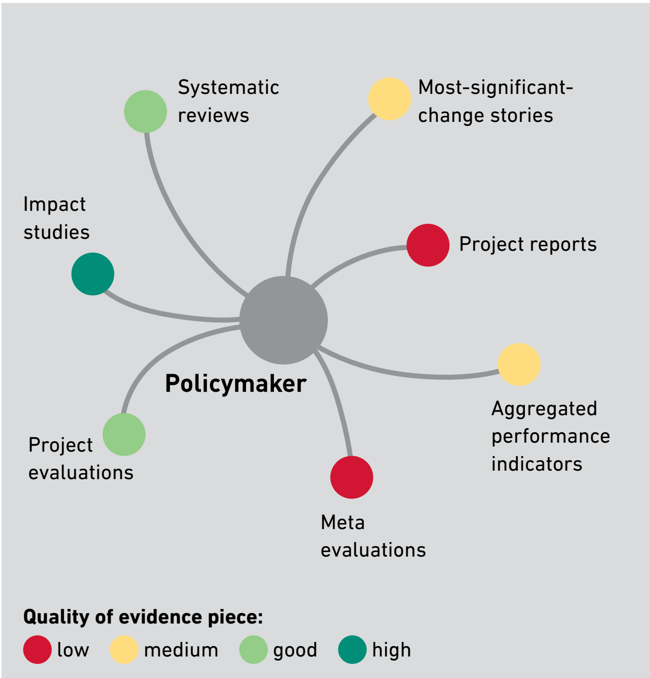
The figure depicts a fair trade certification project and shows how evidence should be used in its theory of change. It indicates where positive/negative and inconclusive/lacking evidence supports or relativizes causal links between various project activities, outputs and short- to long-term outcomes or effects. The limited yet robust research evidence indicates, for instance, positive causal links between market interventions and producer price and farm revenues, and an inconclusive connection between increased farm revenues and household income. On this basis, an evidence-informed project design would opt for scaling market interventions and keep corresponding M&E data collection at a minimum, and invest in M&E data collection regarding the link from increased farm revenues to higher household incomes in order to learn to what extent this assumed pathway holds.

Evidence use at the organizational level

The process of evidence transmission at the organizational level to inform policy-making is less straightforward, although there are similarities between the project and organizational levels. Organizations also use theories of change or results frameworks for strategic planning and results assessment. Moreover, relevant evidence has to be assembled across the organization, and prepared and translated to policy-makers for them to inform their strategic decision-making using various methods (Ward 2017). One key part of this process is evaluating the quality of evidence—as discussed in this policy brief.

Predefined evidence criteria like, for instance, the principles developed by Bond (2018), can be used by policy-makers to appraise the quality of each piece of evidence, as indicated in the figure. Evidence can range, for example, from findings of systematic reviews to findings of most-significant-change stories. Hence, the overall quality of an organization's global body of evidence can be established, and then used as the basis for making strategic decisions. To ensure that useful evidence is systematically fed into policy-making, decision-makers would have to

Evidence use at the organizational level



Source: Author

embed evidence principles into quality assurance frameworks (e.g. project selection and approval, project cycle management, job descriptions, and evaluation policy).

In a number of organizations, this has become standard to some extent. If evidence is absent, policy-makers may decide to no longer undertake such interventions in their organization and gradually phase out the remaining ongoing ones. Alternatively, they may decide to keep those interventions as innovations and invest in creating new evidence in order to learn. In case where evidence already exists, project designs are based on relatively slim and less costly M&E frameworks with data collection focusing on activities and outputs.

To mention two brief examples of evidence-informed organizations:

- The NGO **Terre des hommes Foundation** decided to strategically re-position itself by phasing out ongoing programs with little or no evidence on effectiveness, while at the same time expanding ongoing and forthcoming programs on mother and child health and nutrition, where evidence is available. The decision for this shift was based on several factors: increasing resource constraints, the organization's mission, values and core competence, and the World Health Organization's rich body of evidence.

- **Evidence Action** grew out of a need to manage two programs incubated by Innovations for Poverty Action. The larger goal of the organization is to bridge the gap between proven interventions and scaling them up to produce / replicate impact with larger outreach. This led to the further expansion of Evidence Action as an organization.

The push to use evidence can lead decision-makers to prioritize development issues or methods of interventions for which more evidence is available, which would be a misguided use of evidence. Truly evidence-oriented organizations are those that—given their vision, mission and values—stand up for topics on which evidence may hardly exist, but which strive to generate evidence in order to learn and share findings with others. Using evidence is not just about doing what works. The effective use of evidence in organizations is inextricably linked with their learning culture and the ability to transparently communicate and capitalize on mistakes. There is a growing number of such organizations. In Switzerland, for instance, this is indicated by the SDC-funded Impact Award, given to a steadily growing number of organizations submitting quality impact studies.

However, most organizations have put less focus on, and have been less successful at, institutionalizing evidence for purposes beyond individual project assessment (Marschall 2018). The current practice of many organizations is limited to facilitating access to existing evidence mainly for a few projects only. And organizations often outsource building the capacity needed for evidence use to external consultancy firms. Establishing an organization's 'culture of evidence-orientation', including a coherent evidence transmission concept, cannot be delegated—it has to be developed largely from within.

Challenges to building evidence-informed organizations

At the organizational level, evidence transmission is highly complex. The aim is to render an organization's whole portfolio evidence-informed—often comprising several hundred projects, instead of a few selected interventions. Two key challenges are the lack of an internal structure and processes that tailor evidence to the needs of different decision-makers in global organizations. Most efforts to promote greater evidence-orientation focus on strengthening **internal structure** and **processes**, for example by defining the internal structure through a more flexible, yet clear management approach across the organization. This enables knowledge mobilizers to feed their advice into managers' decision-making—from headquarters to field office—and contributes to an increase in evidence-informed interventions. In addition, embedding the definition and use of evidence in internal processes such as project selection and approval has in many instances fostered an 'evidence culture', where decision-makers are more open to using evidence and where discussions with partners shift from talking about money spent to results and impacts (Lewis 2014).

A third challenge is the **intercultural set-up** of development organizations and their portfolios. A focus on structure and processes can sometimes draw attention away from cultural issues relating to an organization's people and values. Formal strategies for organizational change need to be supported by a strong focus on attitudes, behaviors and values that underlie these strategies. The promotion of an 'evidence culture' must reflect on cross-cultural issues, taking greater account of how local staff perceive evidence and avoiding the trap of having international staff control and shape the process of evidence transmission based on their own cultural and knowledge biases (Baud et al. 2019).

Establishing a culture of evidence-orientation in development organizations

Promoting the greater use of evidence to inform the strategies, policies and interventions of development organizations is complex, but increasingly seen as essential. Development resources are scarce, and development organizations need to be able to justify that their interventions are achieving their goals. The following recommendations can help strengthen evidence use in development organizations:

- An **organization's board** should consider the use of evidence in decision-making as an institutional issue by explicitly including full responsibility for knowledge management in its CEO's job description.

- The CEO should provide knowledge management a place within **senior management** based on a separate budget, and

entrust knowledge management experts with designing and rolling out the organization's approach to evidence-informed policy-making and practice as one coherent framework.

- Leadership/management should link evidence transmission to the organization's **internal project selection and approval procedures.** Through approval committees, new incoming projects should be screened against evidence as an explicit criterion by using pre-defined evidence principles.

- **Approval committees** should be diverse and inclusive as they define their approach to synthesizing evidence and arriving at recommendations.

- Leadership should promote a **learning culture** by creating a 'safe' space in which failure is discussed and processed by all staff, especially including senior managers acting as role models. In addition, it should continuously push for learning what 'works' and what 'does not' by testing interventions with evidence gaps or replicated evidence.

- Recruit **knowledge mobilizers** who offer decision-makers a more **comprehensive evidence picture** than just one type of evidence, as managers tend to balance various interests, positions and perceptions rather than focus on details from a single disciplinary perspective.

- Evidence transmission responsibilities and competences have to be specified in knowledge mobilizers' **job descriptions,** including technical preparation of evidence tailored to the needs of decision-makers and a proven ability to encourage policy-makers and practitioners to use evidence.

- Decision-makers and knowledge mobilizers from the global North should integrate local staff and stakeholders in the **co-production of knowledge** to benefit from diverse views about the meaning and value of evidence.

- Equip knowledge mobilizers with responsibilities providing them with a degree of influence to motivate decision-makers to use evidence. The **matrix management approach** is a suitable entry point, as it promotes frequent collaboration and learning exchange between knowledge mobilizers and decision-makers—from field managers to top managers.

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Photos

P. 1: Terre des hommes Mother and Child Health program in Mali. © Tdh/Kany Sissoko

P. 4: Evidence Action's Dispenser for Safe Water program. © Evidence Action

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