



STORIES OF CHANGE

ENHANCING EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING IN AFRICA

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Introduction

Africa has made commendable strides in advancing evidence-based policymaking, commissioning various studies to address many needs. Initiatives such as establishing evidence committees and platforms to improve decision-making have been notable. However, despite these efforts, many remain reactive and are not fully institutionalized. Policymakers are often swayed by factors that may appear relevant but lack the rigor of evidence, creating a challenging environment for evidence producers and technocrats advocating for data-driven decision-making. For instance, health and clean energy development initiatives remain sub-optimal due to individual, systemic, and institutional bottlenecks.

There are numerous widely acknowledged barriers to evidence use, including a lack of or weak relationships between decision-makers and evidence producers, untimely and irrelevant evidence, inappropriately packaged evidence, political interference, weak capacity among decision-makers to find and use evidence, and a lack of widespread dissemination of evidence. These factors have significantly hindered the institutionalization of evidence-informed policymaking (EIP). Key impediments to EIP institutionalization include the limited availability of reliable evidence on what works in different sectors and populations. Additionally, mass capacity is needed to help convert high-quality information into practical interventions, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Africa Research and Impact Network (ARIN), in collaboration with the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) and the Makerere University School of Women and Gender Studies (SWGGS), organized a two-week virtual training program using a systematic approach from 8 to 19 April 2024.

The African Research and Impact Network (ARIN) is part of the Alliance for Evidence and Equity in Policy-making in Africa (AEEPA) established by the African Institute for Policy Development (AFIDEP).

Through ARIN, Africa LEEPS has access to over 200 researchers and policymakers with national focal points in 36 African countries.

The Alliance aims to accomplish the following objectives:

- Strengthen institutional and individual EIP technical capacity at local and national levels to enhance decision-making in policy and programs with initial priority to reproductive health and clean energy
- Integrate gender equity in EIP processes at program and institutional levels with initial priority given to reproductive health and clean energy
- Nurture EIP networking and learning within countries and across the region
- Stimulate improvements in reproductive health and clean energy programmatic interventions in Kenya and Nigeria

This training brought together early and mid-career researchers, representatives from government institutions, and even decision-makers. The primary objectives of the training were to: 1) understand the concept of evidence use and 2) gain a comprehensive understanding of the evidence-informed decision-making process, focusing on the key steps involved in planning and execution using a systematic review methodology. Through the training, participants were able to grasp the entire policymaking process, from agenda setting to policy evaluation. Additionally, key barriers to evidence adoption were highlighted during the sessions. These barriers included a lack of research, policymakers having limited skills in evidence use, and lastly, policymakers not seeing the relevance or the need for using evidence.

Assessing the Institutional Knowledge Translation and Evidence-Informed Policymaking Capacity

A series of two webinars were conducted on 3 and 23 May 2024 to assess the potential and capacity of various institutions in accessing, appraising, and synthesizing evidence. Led by the AFIDEP team, participants were guided through various techniques to determine how EIP can be institutionalized, considering factors such as resources, infrastructure, and gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) in their daily operations.

ARIN identified and trained a group of 15 champions, including representatives from research institutions, government organizations, academia, and NGOs. In terms of gender representation, there were 12 men and 3 women spread across East, West, and Southern Africa. These champions will be at the forefront of championing evidence production and use within their respective institutions. They will also collaborate with policymakers to translate high-quality research findings into practical and impactful outcomes. This involved training using a systematic approach, mentorship on systematic reviews, and technical support to assess the level of EIP institutionalization across Africa, using a representative sample of countries.

The conducted activities helped the participants gain a deeper understanding of EIP and the role of GESI in the evidence space. They gained a comprehensive understanding of Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM), including its processes and the role institutions play in promoting the use of evidence in daily activities. One of the key impacts of the training was participants learning how to effectively communicate findings to policymakers and ensure these findings are accessible to relevant decision-makers. Additionally, on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), participants recognized the vital role both genders play in addressing specific issues, both at the individual and institutional levels, and within decision-making spaces.

To bridge the gap between research and policy, it was noted that research and findings are essential for effective dissemination. During the training, participants were able to identify key issues of concern within their respective areas and, as a result, developed relevant solutions. One of the key outputs of these initiatives was a policy brief, which served as a method of communicating their findings.

Ensuring Equity and Equality in Future Training Programs

Despite the progress, the training faced challenges such as insufficient time to cover all modules and limited female participation in webinars. The representation of men was significantly greater compared to women. Gender and social inclusion are critical aspects of decision-making spaces, ensuring equality in representation when addressing issues that affect all groups. Gender disparity in evidence championing in Africa is of great concern. Achieving equal gender in evidence championing can enhance the quality of policies and decisions, particularly those aimed at addressing key concerns effectively. Moving forward, ARIN plans to refine its training approaches, by encouraging more women to apply, allocating more time, and being more intentional about gender representation to improve participation. These actions will help ensure that future efforts are more inclusive and impactful.