

Demand-responsive research support to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office during the 2023 Nigerian elections: an evaluation using outcome harvesting

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Abstract

Background: Various parts of the public sector in the UK and elsewhere benefit from access to demand-responsive research services designed to aid decision-making. Before and during the Nigerian elections in 2023, staff at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) received such support. This was designed to help staff navigate a wide range of fast-moving issues and unprecedented events surrounding the election, such as disruption of traditional election dynamics.

Objectives: This evaluation aims to identify the outcomes of demand-responsive research support prior to and during the 2023 elections. It explores the sustainability of identified outcomes as well as the factors that enabled or constrained effectiveness.

Methods: This evaluation uses an adapted outcome harvesting approach. Key project documents are reviewed, and semi-structured interviews are conducted with nine project stakeholders. Interviewed stakeholders include both users of the research and stakeholders who contributed to the design or delivery of the intervention. An analytical framework grounded in behavioural science is used to organise findings.

Results: The study identifies several instances in which the research informed FCDO thinking and decision-making around the elections, including in areas such as communications and security planning. The research team's responsiveness, their expertise and perceived independence enabled positive outcomes. Regular engagement between research producers and research users was another important enabler. Outcomes were largely short-term, however, and effects may have been greater had support been provided earlier in FCDO's planning processes.

Conclusions: The evaluation suggests that demand-responsive research can inform public sector decision-making even in fast-moving contexts. Sustained changes in research use are only likely to occur when explicitly targeted by the intervention. The depth and diversity of research teams' expertise, their willingness to engage in genuine co-design and discussion with research users and the timeliness of outputs are important moderators of effectiveness.

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Introduction

Background

Demand-responsive research services are an increasingly popular approach to fostering evidence-informed decision-making in government (Breckon et al., [2023](#)). These services aim to provide evidence on topics of specific interest to decision-makers, often producing evidence syntheses or conducting policy-relevant research in response to direct requests, within timeframes that facilitate use in decision-making processes.

Staff at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) currently benefit from several demand-responsive services providing research, analysis and expert advice to support organisational delivery. These range from rapid response services, such as the Knowledge for Development and Diplomacy programme, which, within a broader offer, delivers literature reviews via a helpdesk in a matter of weeks, to services offering a wider range of more comprehensive and robust research, supporting longer-term priorities (FCDO, [2024a](#)).

The Evidence Fund sits at the more resource-intensive end of this spectrum, providing, via external commissioning, high-quality, policy-focused research to timescales of generally between six and twelve months. The Evidence Fund is managed by a group of experienced evidence brokers who support FCDO staff to identify evidence needs, to commission and quality-assure new research, and to apply evidence in decision-making (FCDO, [2024b](#)).

Demand-responsive research services in government remain a promising rather than proven intervention. Langer and colleagues' umbrella review of interventions designed to increase evidence use in policy and practice concludes that there is "tentative evidence" for on-demand evidence services (Langer et al., [2016](#)). Systematic reviews, such as Gray et al. ([2013](#)) and Chambers et al. ([2011](#)), reveal inconsistent performance of a range of demand-led services, suggesting that outcomes are highly dependent on the specific design and implementation of the intervention, as well as the context in which it's implemented.

Existing evidence of the effects of the Evidence Fund show the programme to be a promising approach to facilitating evidence use in FCDO. The vast majority of users report being better informed after engaging with the Evidence Fund, and monitoring data identifies more than forty instances of Evidence Fund activity or outputs informing FCDO decisions on policy, programmes and approaches to influencing. To date, however, no formal evaluation of the programme has been conducted and outcomes identified through monitoring have not been explored in depth.

Evaluation objectives

This evaluation seeks to explore the effects of a discrete period of Evidence Fund support to FCDO decision-makers in the run-up to, and during, the Nigerian elections in early 2023.

This is the first of a planned set of evaluations of Evidence Fund support. Collectively, the set of evaluations will strengthen our understanding of the extent to which, when and for whom the Evidence Fund and similar approaches in FCDO foster greater evidence use - contributing to the wider literature on demand-led research services. This first evaluation is designed as an initial building block, adding nuance to our understanding of how this type of intervention might work. It is also intended to serve as a more discrete piece of evidence on the specific form of intervention evaluated – analytical support during an election period.

In light of these objectives, the evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

- What outcomes did the period of Evidence Fund support contribute to before, during and after the Nigerian elections in 2023?
- How likely are outcomes to be sustained?

- What factors enabled or constrained the intervention's contribution to outcomes?

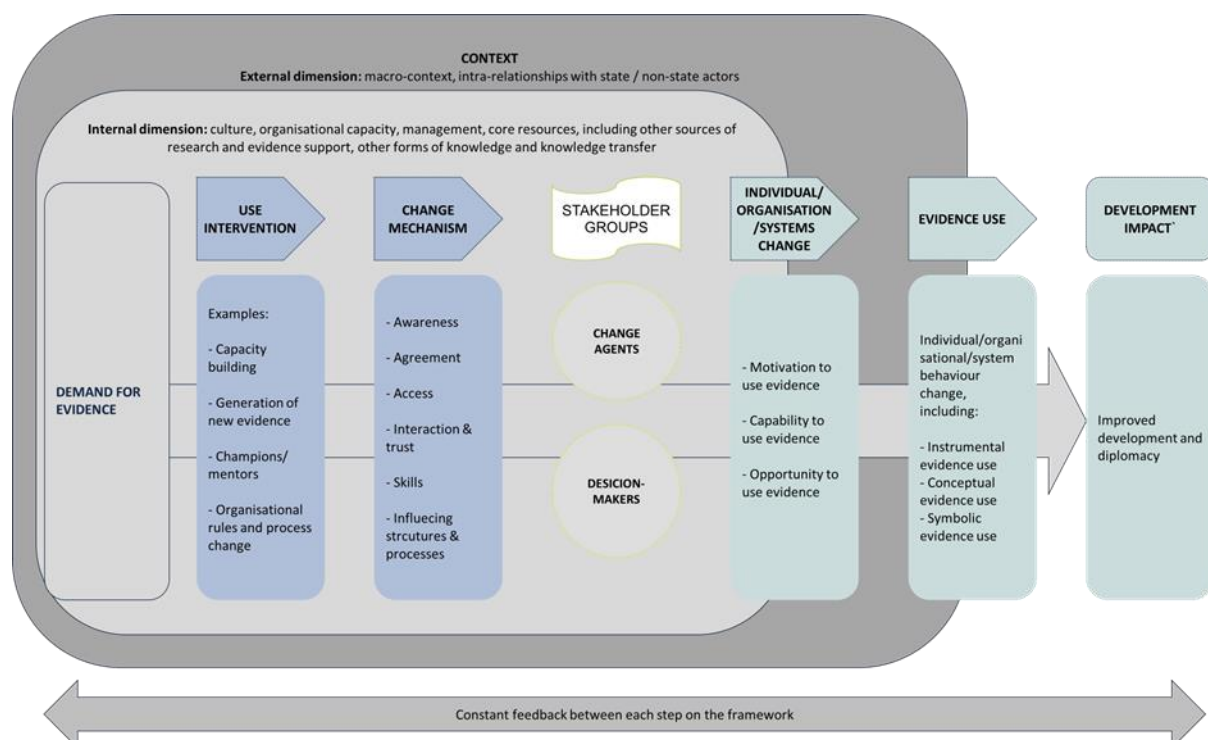
Analytical framework

To explore these questions, the evaluation uses an adapted version of the analytical framework developed by Langer and Weyrauch (2020). This framework brings together a conceptual model for understanding evidence use as a behaviour, developed by Langer et al. (2016), based on the *COM-B* system developed by Michie et al (2011), and the *Context Matters* framework developed by INASP and Purpose & Ideas (2021).

The framework, shown below in Figure 1, attempts to describe how an evidence-use intervention, in this case Evidence Fund support, seeks to influence the three conditions of evidence use – capability, opportunity and motivation to use evidence – and subsequently evidence use itself, via one or more “mechanisms”. The mechanisms are:

- Building awareness of and positive attitudes towards evidence use.
- Generating agreement on policy-critical research questions and the evidence needed to answer them.
- Communicating and providing access to evidence.
- Interaction and relationship-building between researchers and decision-makers.
- Developing skills among decision-makers in identifying and using evidence.
- Influencing decision-making structures and processes.

Figure 1. Analytical framework used in the evaluation



Adapted from Langer and Weyrauch (2020)

The framework highlights two forms or conceptions of evidence use important to the Evidence Fund. Conceptual use whereby evidence informs the user's understanding or perception of an issue; and instrumental use, which involves a user directly applying a specific piece of evidence to a decision.

This framework is useful in several ways:

- It supports the evaluators to characterise the intervention and identify relevant contextual factors.
- It facilitates thinking about the relationships between intervention elements and the mechanism they trigger in contributing to outcomes, supporting consideration of the relative importance of different elements.
- It helps to answer questions about sustainability by bringing a focus on the conditions required for evidence use as a sustainable behaviour change.
- It helps to focus attention on different forms of evidence use as critical outcomes central the Evidence Fund's theory of change.

Research methods and design

Study design and case selection

The evaluation employs an adapted outcome harvesting approach to explore the effects of Evidence Fund support. Outcome harvesting is an evaluation approach whereby evaluators identify, verify and interpret outcomes of interventions in contexts where cause and effect were not fully understood when the intervention was implemented. Using outcome harvesting, evaluators collect evidence of what has changed, rather than simply measuring progress towards predefined outcomes (Wilson-Grau, [2018](#)).

Outcome harvesting is well suited to this evaluation. It allows the evaluators to take outcomes identified via regular monitoring and generate greater depth of understanding on these outcomes. It also allows the evaluators to explore further outcomes not previously identified, particularly those beyond the narrow focus of evidence use in decision-making, which is a feature of Evidence Fund monitoring. By supporting exploration of outcomes outside the Evidence Fund's theory of change, outcome harvesting also supports challenge and updating of the theory of change. As this is the first evaluation of Evidence Fund activity, the Fund's theory of change has, to date, only been reviewed as part of light-touch programme annual reviews.

The evaluation focuses on a specific case of Evidence Fund support to FCDO staff. The Evidence Fund has, to date, delivered more than 80 instances of support – or projects – to different FCDO users. Support to FCDO before and during the Nigerian elections in early 2023 was selected as monitoring data suggested the project had been at least somewhat successful in informing FCDO's work during this period. As this evaluation is designed to build theory as well as test it, a successful case was considered most useful. Moreover, the activity was considered sufficiently recent to mitigate potential recall bias. Further evaluations will include focus on less successful cases, and cross-case review, which benefits from a diversity of cases and outcomes.

Intervention and context

The Nigeria Early Warning and Long-term Monitoring project aimed to ensure that FCDO had regular access to high-quality research that would identify pressing challenges and ways in which they could be most effectively mitigated (Cheesman et al., n.d.-a). This support was provided by a group of researchers led by Professor Nic Cheesman at the University of Birmingham and Idayat Hassan, Director of the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development. Support was provided across two phases between September 2022 and May 2023, and facilitated by an evidence broker based in the UK. Expected users of the research included FCDO staff based in Nigeria in range of roles, including in security, communications, governance and political functions, and staff based in the UK with an interest in the Nigerian elections.

Support in this instance can be considered a multi-component intervention, potentially activating multiple evidence-use mechanisms (see Table 1 below). The principal component of the intervention was the production and communication of research and analysis relevant to the decisions being made within FCDO in the run-up to and during the elections. This included longform, secondary

research, such as reports on the political risks facing Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which was primarily concentrated in the project's first phase (Cheeseman et al., n.d.-a). It also included iterative and rapid-response evidence support to address short-term challenges, such as developing and updating a dashboard tracking the risk of electoral manipulation and conflict, which was a more prominent feature of the project's second phase. This highly responsive work produced a large number of outputs and drew on a range of inputs, including nationally representative opinion surveys, expert interviews and media tracking (Cheeseman et al., n.d.-b).

Elements aiming to activate two other mechanisms – agreement on evidence needs and researcher-decision-maker interaction – were central components of the intervention. Co-production was one of the five principles guiding the researchers' approach (Cheeseman et al., n.d.-a). In the first phase of the project, the researchers conducted interviews with ten FCDO staff, identifying a set of topics and questions that were of particular interest. The findings of this process constituted the project's first deliverable and were set out in a standalone report. Later in the project, agreement occurred in different ways, including requests for specific analytical support received via the evidence broker or directly by the researchers.

Interaction and relationship building – “accessibility and dialogue” in the words of the researchers – were also key project principles (Cheeseman et al., n.d.-a). There was regular engagement between FCDO and the researchers, including very frequent meetings in phase two. The researchers aimed to play a constructive role as a challenge function to FCDO as well as a facilitation or a convening role, including with UK donor partners. Initially, interaction focused on presenting and discussing certain outputs, such as the dashboard, but this widened out as the research team responded to the demands from the FCDO for rapid analysis and insights on specific issues. There were also additional internal elections meetings at FCDO which were attended by research leads.

Two other mechanisms – awareness and influencing structures and processes - were activated although these were less of a focus. Staff in FCDO's West Africa Research and Innovation Hub and Professor Nic Cheeseman separately offered research support to different parts of FCDO Nigeria, which built awareness of the potential for independent evidence to support FCDO decision-making. The project also helped to provide shape to decision-making processes in FCDO. This is discussed in more detail later in the report.

Table 1. Change mechanisms

Mechanism	Relevant components of the intervention
Building awareness of and positive attitudes towards evidence use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCDO's West Africa Research and Innovation Hub awareness raising and offer • Research team's offer to the British High Commissioner
Generating agreement on policy-critical research questions and the evidence needed to answer them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of terms of reference by West Africa Research and Innovation Hub, drawing on documents for similar support in Kenya, and revision of the terms of reference by the governance team in British High Commission Abuja • Initial analysis (during phase one) of issues related to the Nigerian elections on which FCDO would most benefit from support and agreement on analysis that would supplement existing understanding • Other means, e.g., during discussions in phase two's weekly meetings

Communicating and providing access to evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phase one research outputs included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pathways to conflict and prosperity in Nigeria ○ The political risks facing the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) ○ Nigerian political parties and coalitions – and their consequences • Phase two research outputs (41 in total) included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Electoral manipulation and conflict risk dashboard ○ Conflict hotspots analysis ○ Research on the spread of harmful and misleading information via WhatsApp in the context of the elections ○ Ad-hoc, responsive analysis and briefings (17 in total)
Interaction and relationship-building between researchers and decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five briefings to present and discuss findings from each of the reports conducted in the first phase • 15 meetings held in the second phase, including regular weekly meetings
Developing skills among decision-makers in identifying and using evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No components targeting this mechanism
Influencing decision-making structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular weekly briefings helped to shape the discussion on key issues related to the elections

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis were informed by the established steps of outcome harvesting (for these, see Wilson-Grau, [2018](#)). They were, however, adapted and streamlined to fit with the analytical framework and take account of the context of the evaluation. These steps were:

- *Design the outcome harvest.* This involved a number of elements. First, a conceptual framework was chosen and adapted – the Langer and Weyrauch ([2020](#)) framework described above – to guide the evaluation, including development of research questions. An initial discussion with the evidence broker involved in the project was conducted to better understand the nature of the project. After this discussion, the broker highlighted a number of stakeholders who would be knowledgeable about the outcomes of the project. A set of key stakeholders were identified as higher priority as they would likely have greater knowledge of outcomes. The broker also shared a range of useful documents, including documents summarising activity conducted in each phase of the project, as well as project outputs.
- *Review documentation.* The documents provided were reviewed and used to develop early versions of Table 1 included above. Outcomes from the project identified by Evidence Fund monitoring were reviewed. Both the change mechanism table and the outcomes statements developed through monitoring processes were used to establish priority questions to be answered through interviews.
- *Engage with human sources.* A set of semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine stakeholders. Four FCDO “users” (sometimes called “decision-makers” or “societal actors” in the language of outcome harvesting) – individuals that may have experienced change as a result of the intervention – were interviewed. Five stakeholders who contributed to the design or delivery of the intervention (sometimes known as “change agents”) – actors who influenced the outcomes – were also interviewed. Decision-makers were selected by

prioritising individuals who were most likely to have experienced change as indicated by Evidence Fund monitoring and worked across political, security and governance functions in FCDO Nigeria at the time of the project. Change agents included the project's two principal researchers and FCDO staff in research commissioning and evidence brokering roles. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes.

- *Analyse and interpret.*³ Interviews were recorded and transcripts coded using a coding framework based on the analytical framework. Coded transcripts were used initially in two ways: (i) to fill out a blank version of the analytical framework with project specific detail, and (ii) to create short, focused notes with key information from each interview. In between each interview, the two evaluators conducted sensemaking sessions at which key insights from the interviews, and the evolving framework, were discussed, interpretations challenged, the evaluation approach refined, and interview questions for the subsequent interview agreed. After all interviews were completed, and documents had been reviewed, an outline of the key insights to be presented in this report was developed, discussed by the two evaluators and refined.
- *Substantiate with external sources.* After a draft of this report was developed, FCDO change agents and users were given the opportunity to review, challenge and provide feedback on the findings presented. Minor revisions were made.

Potential bias arising from this approach and how bias has been mitigated is set out Appendix 1.

Results

What outcomes did the period of Evidence Fund support contribute to before, during and after the Nigerian elections in 2023?

Conceptual use of evidence

Interviews highlighted a number of instances where the research had enhanced understanding of key issues. For example, analysis of support for the Labour Party presidential candidate, Peter Obi, whose candidacy was seen to be disrupting traditional dynamics in Nigeria's presidential race, prompted reassessment of his chances (Okiche, W., & Egbejule, E., [2023](#)). In the words of one stakeholder: *"he had more support than we would have thought otherwise"*. Another stakeholder commented that the research had changed his mind on how well Peter Obi would do in the elections.

Work on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also changed minds. The research highlighted the political challenges faced by INEC. The research also examined the challenges presented by the introduction of new voting technology. Analysis suggesting new technology rarely works well during its first period of use challenged those in FCDO who thought the new technology would be less problematic than it ultimately proved to be.

Several stakeholders well versed in Nigerian politics suggested the research did more to validate their existing knowledge than it did to change understanding. One stakeholder in a senior role in the British High Commission's governance team stated that *"some of the findings"* were new to them, while much of evidence provided was *"familiar"*. Another stakeholder in a senior political role found the project helped inform understanding *"in some areas"*. These stakeholders did however value the validating function of the research as it increased confidence in their understanding of and positions on key issues. To have independent analysis to strengthen their own understanding and positions

³ Analyse and interpret is often presented as the final step in outcome harvesting. However, given document review, interviews and analysis was conducted iteratively during the project with feedback loops, this is presented as the penultimate step here.

was seen as useful. They also considered the project to have “*brought everyone up to a similar baseline understanding*”, suggesting that the project may have had greater impact on others with less knowledge of the context.

Instrumental use of evidence

Stakeholders shared several examples of the project directly informing decision-making in key areas of FCDO’s work. In particular, multiple stakeholders suggested that the project informed FCDO’s election-related external communications. It was reported that “*a communications and media-focused briefing [at which CDD gave their take on the media landscape in the run-up to the elections, and critiqued FCDO Nigeria’s media strategy] was used by FCDO Nigeria’s head of communications to improve the media strategy*”. Language used in some external communications “*aligned with*” what the researchers had proposed. Analysis of INEC also influenced FCDO’s offer to support the election commission in its communications, which, due to timing, was not taken up.

Several stakeholders suggested the project informed security and travel decisions made during the elections. In particular, the risk dashboard and the hot spot analysis were “*used by security and conflict-focused colleagues to inform their planning*.” Specific instances included analysis informing the decision to send a team to Plateau State, and analysis contributing to FCDO “*re-calibrating*” its approach to the potential for election violence in Lagos State. The role of the project in security planning was, however, contested. A senior member of the security team suggested the project “*reinforced*” existing decisions as “*part of the evidence base*”. Decisions about where to deploy teams were based on “*other information*”.

The project was far from the only source of evidence informing decisions. A range of other evidence influenced decision-making during this period. This included analysis produced by other parts of FCDO, such as the Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation, as well as analysis produced externally, such as opinion polling conducted by other groups. It also included the practice-informed knowledge of FCDO staff and those of FCDO’s partners in Nigeria. One stakeholder noted that “*judgements*” were often influenced by multiple sources of evidence.

Conditions for evidence use

The project contributed to evidence use by enhancing the opportunity to use research evidence before and during the election period. The primary and secondary research conducted by the research team was a key part enhancing opportunity by providing access to relevant and timely knowledge. A number of stakeholders reported finding the discussions with the researchers the “*most useful*” element of the project. These discussions often started with and went beyond a specific piece of analysis to discuss “*stuff between the lines*”, which drew on other forms of evidence, such as the researchers’ “*sense of dynamics*”. Ultimately the project provided a more “*holistic*” opportunity to raise, discuss and use evidence than a traditional research project.

Increasing capability and motivation to use evidence in FCDO was not an explicit objective or focus of the project. A range of evidence suggests that capability and motivation to use evidence was high at the outset of the project. Stakeholders were aware of and had engaged with a range of sources of evidence, including analysis produced by other parts of FCDO. Multiple stakeholders put significant effort into designing – for example, through feeding into the terms of reference – and engaging with the research led by the two lead researchers. What they lacked, according to stakeholders, was the time and resources to do research themselves, and to bring together the large volume of analysis that had been conducted around the elections. The project was seen as helping FCDO achieve its objective “*to get ahead of issues*”.

Other outcomes

Tactical use – whereby evidence is used to justify or build support for existing decisions – was mentioned by one stakeholder. In the case described, FCDO staff used the project to *“manage and reassure seniors”* that issues were being identified and handled. Stakeholders were able to do this by making clear that an *“independent”* research team, which was able to access information FCDO would otherwise find difficult to access, was providing regular analysis. The research itself was also used to support *“postures”* that FCDO has decided to take.

The project also seems to have played some form of coordinating function, shaping FCDO discussion on key topics. One stakeholder noted that project *“became a means to coordinate across a very large embassy around particular themes”*. In its second phase, the project had a regular rhythm of briefing, which took place every Monday to *“discuss the dashboard and other important developments”*. Within these briefings, research became a *“spur for debates”*, which were useful for avoiding *“groupthink”*. This outcome was anticipated by the research team, which sought to *“generate the greater cohesion among policy makers that is necessary for efficient and concerted action”* through their research.

How likely are outcomes to be sustained?

The project targeted short-term outcomes and sustainability was not factored into the design. The project was designed to provide research before and during the elections primarily to support election-related decisions. Perhaps as a result of this, there is no evidence that the research has been used to inform decisions beyond the election period, such as FCDO governance programming. There is also some evidence that certain knowledge built during the elections period has diminished.

Despite little focus on sustainability, there is some evidence of longer lasting changes in motivation to use evidence. One stakeholder described seeing opportunities to apply the approach used by the researchers in other areas of their work. This includes actively exploring using external resource to *“focus on being able to speak to stakeholders in the way that I wouldn't, in a bit more dispassionate way, in a bit of an objective way, and draw out insight”*. This suggests a longer-term change in the respondent's view of the value of independent research in supporting FCDO's work.

What factors enabled or constrained the intervention's contribution to outcomes?

Three mechanisms set out in the analytical framework above seem to have played particularly important roles in delivering desirable evidence use outcomes:

1. Generating agreement on policy-critical research questions and the evidence needed to answer them.
2. Communicating and providing access to evidence.
3. Interaction and relationship-building between researchers and decision-makers.

Stakeholders mentioned a number of factors that helped to activate these mechanisms.

The research team was perceived as being very accessible, flexible and responsive. Not only did the researchers build in a consultation element to the first phase of the project, they actively sought requests for specific analysis from FCDO staff. The research team was not only responsive to needs for analysis on certain topics but adapted their approach to communication to suit FCDO. This happened over time as the research team learned to get *“better at providing what was needed”*. Outputs became more *“practical”*, shorter and more *“journalistic”* in style over time – which helped the project become *“useable in the moment”* close to the elections.

The researchers were seen as experts. One stakeholder noted that their *“level of expertise and understanding was very good”*. The combination of different types of expertise seemed to be particularly valuable. Nic Cheeseman's ability to bring *“learning from other contexts”* and Idayat

Hassan's connections and "*sense of dynamics*" in Nigeria were highlighted by different stakeholders. Having independent experts "*who know what they're talking about*" was seen as important to avoiding "*blind spots*" and "*groupthink*" in FCDO, and the researchers were able to "*comprehensively rebut*" senior FCDO staff on occasions.

The researchers were perceived to be independent and objective. Perceived independence was important for the researchers' ability to provide the desired "*challenge function*". It was also helpful important in reassuring seniors that FCDO was "*on top of*" the issues, as mentioned above.

One factor was mentioned by multiple stakeholders as a constraint to use of the research was timeliness. One stakeholder suggested that FCDO could have "*made more use of the research*" if it has been provided earlier. Another went as far as suggesting the research did more to "*reinforce thinking rather than changing thinking*" because it came later than desired. They suggested that the project "*could have informed more*" of FCDO's security preparations had it been delivered earlier. Given that the research team produced outputs to the agreed timelines, this points to a later than optimal start to project. The researchers noted their "*general concern*" with election programmes starting a year before elections at the earlier, suggesting interventions need to begin 1.5-2 years before elections to feed into key decisions.

Discussion

Discussion of key findings

The project was successful in that it achieved several objectives of the research team and those commissioning the research. The project changed minds, reinforced understanding and supported decision-making in a number of instances. The project aimed to fill a gap in users' opportunity to use evidence during the election period, and the evaluation points to the importance of strong existing capability and motivation within FCDO to use evidence where creating opportunity is the objective of the intervention. The evaluation also identifies several features of the design of the intervention, and the characteristics of the research team, that are important in supporting evidence use. The use of evidence in briefings and facilitating constructive debate seem to have been at least as important as the research outputs themselves in affecting understanding and informing decisions. The responsiveness, expertise and objectivity of the researchers ensured that the research and discussions were relevant and credible.

The project may have achieved more had it provided evidence earlier in election planning and if sustainability had been considered. In a fast-moving context where timeliness was critical to informing decisions, the project likely missed opportunities to influence FCDO's work beyond validating existing knowledge or decisions. Sustained evidence use as a behaviour change does not seem to have been considered in the design of the project and it is not surprising that the project's impact is largely isolated to specific moments before and during the elections.

In addition, the evaluation adds to the growing body of literature highlighting research evidence – and specific pieces of research evidence – as only one of a number of factors influencing decision-making among actors motivated to use evidence (see, for example, Bynner and Terje, [2021](#)). Project inputs beyond the research influenced thinking, particularly deep practical knowledge of the context. Moreover, many other sources of evidence outside the project influenced decisions from the existing practical or research-informed understanding of FCDO staff, to other research outputs produced elsewhere.

Strengths and limitations

The use of outcome harvesting and a limited set of interviews with key decision-makers supported the evaluators to generate greater confidence in and explore in more depth instances of evidence

use highlighted by monitoring. It also facilitated exploration of the longer-term effects of the period of support as well as the characteristics of the context, intervention and its delivery that facilitated and constrained use. This was achieved with limited resource and provides transferable knowledge of how and in what circumstances Evidence Fund support can facilitate research use.

The use of outcome harvesting brings limitations. As an approach that “traces forwards” from intervention to outcomes, it potentially overfocuses both evaluator and respondent attention to the intervention and away from other factors which may have influenced outcomes, possibly to a greater degree. While this has the potential to create bias, the formative, learning-focused nature of the evaluation, and evaluators’ attention to other influences is likely to have significantly mitigated this bias.

The limited number of stakeholders interviewed may have also contributed to bias. Four decision-makers who were heavily engaged in the project and employed in a range of roles were interviewed as part of an effort to deliver a low-resource evaluation that could be easily replicated across the Evidence Fund. Interviews with additional stakeholders may have added to or challenged findings reported here.

Recommendations

Recommendations, particularly for others working within the Evidence Fund, include:

- Building in time for discussion and debate with experts can be an important complement to research. Commissioners and brokers of research should consider whether and how to facilitate researcher-decisionmaker interaction.
- Timeliness is important for evidence use, particularly in fast-moving contexts with limited windows for influencing. Commissioners and brokers should consider how flexible decision-making timelines are likely to be, and, where flexibility is low, and meeting decision-making timelines is potentially unlikely, whether commissioning extensive research is the right approach. Support around elections should generally begin earlier than is common.
- Commissioners and brokers should have an understanding of the capability and motivation to use evidence in those they seek to provide access to evidence. Where capability or motivation is limited, the intervention should consider how it can enhance capability and motivation, including through giving more of their time to support users digest and apply findings.
- When commissioners and brokers target sustained changes in the use of evidence, this should be considered carefully in the design of the intervention, and additional elements, such as capacity strengthening or stock takes, should be considered.
- Future evaluations of Evidence Fund activity may wish to explore other evaluation approaches, particularly those Newson et al. (2021) term “backward tracing” approaches that better capture other influences on evidence use, potentially reducing bias and supporting estimation of the significance of the Evidence Fund’s contribution.
- More robust exploration of changes to capability and motivation to use evidence – and evidence use practices themselves – would be aided by assessment pre-intervention to form a baseline as well as after the intervention has concluded.
- The resulting impact when research informs decisions is difficult to trace. Where understanding impact is an evaluation objective – as it is likely to be in future Evidence Fund evaluations – data collection methods complementing those applied here, such as observation and more extensive document review, should be considered.

Conclusion

Demand-responsive research support to FCDO before and during the 2023 Nigerian elections contributed to instrumental, conceptual and tactical use of evidence during the elections. In

particular, the research and analysis challenged, and often reinforced, existing understanding of key issues. The project helped to shape the discussion on key topics through a regular rhythm of evidence-based briefings. The evaluation suggests that demand-responsive research can inform public sector decision-making even in fast-moving circumstances, particularly when support is effectively co-designed with users.

The evaluation highlights a number of key factors that moderate the impact of demand-responsive research. Timeliness, of course, is essential where research intends to inform a specific set of time-bound decisions. The nature of the research team – including their perceived expertise and independence – as well as their ways of working affect impact. The evaluation suggests that discussion and debate between research producers and research users can be an important complement to formal research where users value this interaction.

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Competing interests

Harry Achillini is an FCDO member of staff who commissions research through the Evidence Fund. Harry also leads monitoring, evaluation and learning for the Evidence Fund. Harry was not involved in the commissioning or delivery of Evidence Fund support in Nigeria before and during the 2023 elections.

Richard Burge is an independent evaluation consultant and an Associate for IOD PARC, which manages the FCDO-funded Evaluation Quality Assurance and Learning Service and declares no competing interests.

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Appendix 1. Bias mitigation

Risk	Mitigation
Potential conflict of interest given one evaluator's involvement in Evidence Fund delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation team includes an external, independent evaluator.• External evaluator was specifically invited to challenge FCDO.• The external evaluator participated in all interviews.• Key findings from the evaluation were agreed between the FCDO and external evaluators.
The evaluation focuses on effects of the intervention, creating potential to exclude alternative explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decision-makers were asked about other pieces of evidence influencing their thinking and decision-making
Selection bias (selection of cases for inclusion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation is explicit in that the case was selected because it was likely to have been successful• The evaluation does not attempt to portray the effects of the project as representative of those of the wider Evidence Fund• Over time evaluative activity will aim to foster heterogeneity of outcomes to facilitate cross-case learning
Recall bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The project was relatively recent, and interviews were conducted about six month's after the project's conclusion• There is however likely to be recall bias as multiple stakeholders explicitly mentioned having difficulty recalling some aspects of the project
Evaluator bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews were recorded and transcripts were created• Insights from interviews and their implications were discussed by the two evaluators after each interview
Response bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluators mentioned to interviewees that the objective of the evaluation is learning, and it is not an accountability exercise• Open evaluation questions used and shared with interviewees prior to interview