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How evidence, implementation, policy, and politics come together within evidence systems: Lessons from South Africa

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Summary

Motivation: Although the field of evidence-informed policy-making has grown significantly in the last 20 years, little is written about how it manifests within government policy, and whether it makes a meaningful difference to development outcomes. This article seeks to fill that gap.

Purpose: Through reflection and analysis of shifts in the wider evidence ecosystem, and developments in South Africa specifically, the article describes how in South Africa the political and policy spheres come together with changes in production and use of evidence to increase the potential to improve the lives of millions of people.

Methods and approach: This article is based on structured reflection and analysis of 20 years of contributions to the evidence ecosystem in low-, lower-middle, and upper-middle income countries (L&MICs), in particular in Africa. It includes analysis of documentation of initiatives, policies, and practices relating to the production and use of evidence, with a focus on South Africa.

Findings: There are clear shifts within evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) systems over time in the production of evidence and in the implementation of evidence approaches. The varied experiences documented in South Africa and across L&MICs highlight valuable lessons for others. In South Africa the policies underpinning evidence use, and the political context in which evidence-informed decision-making takes place, combine to contribute to increasing use of evidence in the country. Reflecting on the system developments across Africa and further afield reveals how one country's system is both influenced by these wider contexts and has potential to influence the wider system with clear policy implications.

Policy implications: Routine use of evidence in decision-making requires new practices to become standard across not only policy systems, but also evidence systems. Changes are needed across a range of actors, organizations, and institutions. There are lessons to be learnt from varied experiences including those in L&MICs, to inform advances towards the institutionalization of evidence use in policy. This case study highlights the importance of synergistic developments in both evidence

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production and use, of genuine partnerships at all levels, and of the policies and frameworks that underpin change.

KEYWORDS

development impact, institutionalization, science-policy interface, South Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

Evidence-informed policy aims to improve development and societal outcomes (Stewart, 2019). In theory it has the potential to reduce harm and improve benefits, increase transparency and, therefore, also governance (Davies et al., 1999; Langer & Nduku, 2019). In part because of this considerable potential, there has been a notable increase in investment in activities to increase the use of evidence in policy in low-, lower-middle, and upper-middle income countries (L&MICs) in the last 10 years.

Despite these investments in, and the growth of, the evidence field in L&MICs, the approach is still most often described as having its history in evidence-based medicine in high-income countries. Little attention is given to the expertise or innovation within evidence-based policy systems in L&MICs, particularly in Africa (Langer et al., 2019). I have been working with a wide network of people over the last 20 years to gain increased recognition for and document the origins, expertise, and innovation within the evidence ecosystem in Africa, and South Africa in particular (Stewart, 2018). This is my prime motivation behind this research.

During the last 20 years, I have observed an increasing emphasis in the field on the “institutionalization” of evidence use in the field as a whole, and in South Africa in particular. Institutionalization has been described as “the process by which a set of activities becomes an integral and sustainable part of a formal system. It can be seen as a sequence of events leading to ‘new practices becoming standard practice’” (Yin, 1978, p. 5). It refers to the stability and continuation of particular practices (Koon et al., 2020), and to increasingly integrated processes that eventually reach consolidation and maturity (Renzi, 1996). Although the “formal system” most routinely refers to the system within government, the activities required for evidence-informed policy span both evidence production and use. This article focuses on unpacking shifts towards institutionalization in the evidence ecosystem across spheres of evidence production and use. It reflects on how, in the context of political and policy shifts in South Africa, these have become increasingly integrated over time, and in doing so, has led to greater synergies in the country's evidence ecosystem.

In addition, I have been concerned to observe a lack of focus in the wider discourse on “the why” of evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) that motivates me to work to support an increase in the use of evidence—the desire to tackle poverty and inequality in the region, which is worsening in light of the current pandemic, and is the reason I became involved in this field in the first instance. This has been coupled with a longstanding observation that isolation and duplication of effort within the field does nothing to enable change and that we need to work together in order to be effective (Farley-Ripple et al., 2020; Stewart, 2018).

Last but not least, despite the relationship between the evidence-synthesis community and the evidence-policy interface, the drive to encourage the use of evidence in decision-making sometimes omits consideration of what evidence is being promoted, and therefore leads to the promotion, communication, and consideration of individual pieces of evidence rather than the full evidence base. The potential for over-reliance on an individual study (Gough et al., 2020) leads me to reflect on the extent to which the evidence ecosystem in South Africa is shifting from consideration of individual pieces of research or sources of evidence to comprehensive collation and integration of complete evidence bases.

This article draws on structured reflections and analysis in order, first, to document developments in the evidence production and evidence implementation across L&MICs, and Africa in particular; and, second, to consider how

evidence policy and evidence politics spheres in South Africa specifically combine with developments in evidence production and evidence implementation to advance the institutionalization of evidence use, with the potential to improve the lives of millions of people. It builds on a keynote paper presented at the Evidence and Implementation Summit, 2020. Following a description of methods in Section 2, the findings are presented in Section 3 in relation to the four areas: evidence, implementation, policy, and politics *and* on how they combine to contribute to the institutionalization of evidence. This is followed by a discussion in Section 4; Section 5 concludes.

2 | METHODS

This article uses a case-study approach focusing on the evidence system in South Africa, including analysis of the broader contexts of both Africa, and L&MICs more generally. As a new democracy with a challenging history, South Africa has a dedicated commitment to tackling poverty and inequality through the development of a capable state. As one of the BRICS countries (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, it is committed to sharing and learning from others, particularly other L&MICs, and plays a pivotal role within the African continent (National Planning Commission, 2012). Its leaders have been recognized for their use of evidence in policy (Sense about Science, 2020), and the central role that decision-makers have played in developing the evidence system are well recognized (Goldman et al., 2015; Langer & Stewart, 2016). This makes it an ideal focus for how an evidence system can shift through a sequence of events towards “institutionalization.” Having worked in the evidence field in South Africa for so long, I am able to take an insider approach, with opportunities to reflect on what has shifted over this time.

My research into the system in South Africa is based on an assessment of the shifts in evidence production and use, and in policy and practice, over the last decade through analysis of publicly available documentation. Documents were sought from government websites, and via Google Scholar, as well as through the institutional archive at the Africa Centre for Evidence at the University of Johannesburg, where the team has been working to support the use of evidence in South Africa for 20 years. Preliminary findings were shared with an international audience via the 2021 Evidence and Implementation Summit, and feedback used to refine the findings presented below.

3 | FINDINGS

Using findings from my analysis of the evidence system across L&MICs, particularly Africa, I demonstrate shifts in the technical approaches used to prepare evidence for decision-making that increasingly combine rigour, relevance, legitimacy, and accessibility through an embedded co-production approach. Further, I demonstrate the implementation of EIDM as a deliberative intervention embedded within government through relationships, and capacity development of individuals, teams, organizations, and systems. In South Africa, these shifts have been underpinned and supported by policies that have driven the increasing shift towards institutionalization of EIDM at national and local policy level. Finally, I identify the politics, and the underlying principles, which facilitated these developments. These developments are increasingly integrated into one national evidence system, which while still evolving, has the potential to shape the lives of millions of South Africans.

There have been a number of significant shifts in how evidence is produced over the last 10 years. I traced these shifts across L&MICs, and both across Africa and within South Africa specifically (see Box 1 for examples). Four changes are clearly identifiable: (1) a greater focus on efforts to ensure research reporting is more policy- and policy-maker oriented; (2) changes in how research impact is measured, with moves towards a greater focus on the societal relevance of research; (3) changes in how research is funded, with moves towards more policy-relevant outputs that meet policy timeframes; and (4) changes to ensure that research is synthesized for decision-makers across a wider range of sectors and settings.

BOX 1 Developments in evidence production with examples

Developments in evidence production	Example from L&MICs	Pan-African example	South African example
1.1 Efforts to ensure that research reporting is more policy- and policy-maker oriented	3ie's drive to improve dissemination of research by supporting or producing high quality policy briefs (see https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/publications/briefs).	The Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA) programme designed to improve writing of research across Africa's Commonwealth Universities (DRUSSA, 2017).	The SDG Hub at the University of Pretoria which curates South African research papers under SDG categories (Fourie et al., 2019).
1.2 Shifts in how research impact is measured, moving towards greater societal relevance	The UK's former Department for International Development (DFID) detailed how research impact and capacity to use research should be measured in its 2016 guidance (DFID, 2016).	The African Union's Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024 specifies the need to "properly utilise scientific and technological knowledge to address societal challenges through innovative products, services, processes, business models and policies" (African Union, 2020, p. 46), and details the monitoring, evaluation and learning system for tracking such utilization.	The National Research Foundation (NRF) formed a task force on research impact in 2021 with a new policy and a number of public events including drives to demonstrate the relevance of research to societal priorities in South Africa (NRF, 2021a).
1.3 Shifts in research funding and commissioning towards policy-relevant outputs that meet policy timeframes	USAID, one of the largest development research funders, specifies in its scientific research policy that "will produce useful knowledge or understanding, feasible interventions or approaches, or innovative technology(ies) amenable to adoption and scale up within a reasonable time" (USAID, 2014, p. 8).	The African Technology Policy Studies Network highlights "the mismatch between research priorities and developmental challenges" (p. 26) and draws out lessons from new and innovative funding approaches globally for application across Africa (Mugwagwa et al., 2019).	Research commissioning under the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development focused on policy-relevant research designed in close consultation with government decision-makers (PSPPD, 2017).
1.4 Shifts in the evidence synthesis field to provide best evidence for decisions of relevance to a wider range of settings and sectors	A number of international development organizations have increasingly become involved in funding, supported, and produced evidence syntheses for decision-making, and evidence synthesis organizations have increasingly focused on the priorities of the global south (Stewart, 2019).	Capacity for producing systematic reviews has expanded across the continent with growing numbers of people and pockets of expertise (Stewart et al., 2017b).	The South Africa Cochrane Centre was founded in 1996, and the Cochrane HIV/AIDS Review Group's editorial base has been co-hosted in South Africa (and in the US) since 1998 (Cochrane, n.d.). Other evidence synthesis organizations, including the JBI and the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, have active centres in the country linked to the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg respectively.

Drilling down to the developments within South Africa further reveal the depth of these changes and how they are integrated to ensure that policy-makers' needs for evidence are being met with the best available systematically synthesized evidence. The evidence synthesis field explicitly states that its goal is to provide better evidence to inform decisions, particularly policy decisions (Bunn et al., 2015; Gough et al., 2020). Observing more closely those working to produce synthesized evidence in South Africa, there is a record of a history in the production of systematic reviews to shape policy particularly relevant to the region. These efforts span the work of Cochrane, the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, JBI (formerly the Joanna Briggs Institute), and the Campbell Collaboration. 3ie and the EPPI-Centre have also played roles in capacity support (Modise & Tannous, 2021a, 2021c). While most efforts have been in the health field, the Africa Centre for Evidence at the University of Johannesburg has become an established unit for evidence synthesis beyond health, working across broad areas of social policy (Modise & Tannous, 2021a).

As well as the increase in systematic review and evidence synthesis capacity noted above, there have been clear shifts beyond a standardized systematic review methodology to include new products that are tailored more closely to the evidence needs of decision-makers (Modise & Tannous, 2021c; Naude et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2011). These shifts have retained the principles of traditional systematic review approaches (for completeness, transparency, etc.), but altered both the outputs and the partnerships involved. We note an emergence of responsive evidence services (Tricco et al., 2017). Developed in Canada's McMaster Health Forum, rapid evidence responses were adopted and adapted by teams across Africa, funded in part through the World Health Organization (WHO) Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research programme (Langlois et al., 2019). Specialists in Uganda were particularly involved in adapting the approach and providing training for teams across the continent, including two teams in South Africa at the Africa Centre for Evidence and the Medical Research Council (Mijumbi et al., 2014). The other significant shift has come through closer partnerships between research teams in government and in academia to produce evidence maps and reviews (DPME, 2016a, 2016b). These have led to changes in what evidence is considered and in how it is visualized and shared with decision-makers. These have been largely adaptations to the technical processes for producing evidence driven by shared learning across the production–use divide. The eventual co-production model developed in South Africa has been tested across sectors over the last five years and is now increasingly integrated into decision-making processes (DPME, 2021).

Last but not least, we are now seeing these two developments (for demand-driven evidence services, and for co-produced evidence products) coming together as explained in more detail below.

3.1 | Developments in evidence implantation

Evidence production, even when in response to demand, and even when co-produced with users, remains about the generation of useful evidence. When we consider EIDM as a whole, we cannot focus merely on the generation of evidence, but also on how it gets used. This section reports key observations regarding this implementation of evidence, including examples from the wider evidence ecosystem, across Africa and in South Africa (see Box 2). It then delves deeper into developments in the country and discusses their contribution to the wider system.

Three significant shifts were identified advancing the use of evidence: (1) a growth in initiatives that focused on supporting evidence use; (2) an increasing emphasis on relationships and partnerships across traditional evidence production and use boundaries; and (3) a growth in capacities for EIDM that increasingly emphasizes capacities for using evidence and not just producing it.

Closer examination of documents in South Africa highlights the manifestation of these shifts in the country in more detail. Tracking national and provincial activities for supporting EIDM over time, we see a growing number of activities that focus on using evidence and that are increasingly moving into government. There were changes within the Department of Science and Technology's mandate, with the 2019 White Paper emphasizing the impact of science (Department of Science and Technology, 2019), and a marked change in the mandate of the National Research Foundation to ensuring the impact of research, and on measuring research impact (NRF, 2021b).

BOX 2 Developments in evidence implementation with examples

Developments in evidence implementation	Example from L&MICs	Pan-African example	South African example
2.1 Initiatives for supporting the use of evidence	3ie has demonstrated a marked shift from early work in 2010 when research teams were encouraged to engage with Southern researchers to increase the relevance of their work, towards a much greater focus on evidence use, and recent discussions about how development organizations can ensure that good research is integrated into policy (Thissen, 2022).	The African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) worked with Fellows and Associates of the African Academy of Science to be proactive in their engagement with decision-makers and encourage their governments' use of science and innovation (AFIDEP, n.d.).	Although always part of the President's Office, the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) moved physical location following its first phase of work, from the Human Sciences Research Council offices into the Union Buildings, a symbolic but significant shift (PSPPD, 2017).
2.2 Relationships and partnerships that have been documented across the traditional evidence production and use boundaries	The COVID-END partnership of over 50 organizations that convened to support the generation and use of evidence syntheses to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic deliberately incorporated decision-makers and research producers across L&MICs, as evidenced in the work of the Global Evidence Commission that they convened (Global Evidence Commission, 2022).	Perhaps the biggest example on the continent is in the growing membership and activities of the Africa Evidence Network, which now has over 3,500 members and facilitates numerous engagements every year that bring together researchers, policy-makers, knowledge brokers, and funders (Africa Centre for Evidence, 2020).	A new research network was launched in 2021 within government, led from the President's Office, with an associated drive from the new head of the National School of Government for a more effective public service (Siluma, 2021).
2.3 Growth in capacities for EIDM and a shift in emphasis within these capacities from production of useful evidence to its use	The capacity for both evidence production and use across L&MICs was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stewart et al., 2020).	We see an increase in capacities for collation of bodies of evidence for policy, with marked increases in capacities from those documented by Oliver et al. (2015) to those identified by Stewart and colleagues three years later (Stewart et al., 2017b). We also know that this has been accompanied by increases in the production of impact evaluations in Africa (Erasmus et al., 2020).	The production of evidence maps, often co-produced between those internal and external to government (DPME, 2016a, 2016b).

There are notable developments in working relationships that spanned not only research and policy divides, but also crossed government departments and sectors. From 2015 to 2017 the UJ-BCURE team also facilitated an informal community of practice on evidence for senior officials at the centre of government (Stewart et al., 2017a).

There has been an accumulation of efforts to support the use of evidence by colleagues in government. This spans the UJ-BCURE Programme and the Vaka Yiko Programme, both of which were externally funded initiatives from 2014 to 2016, and combined capacity support with embedded mentoring of both individuals and teams within government (Stewart et al., 2017a; Vogel & Punton, 2018). Another example was the BUDDIES programme that focused on health decision-makers at a provincial level (Young et al., 2018). There were also offerings shared via the European Commission through its Master Class programme in Pretoria in 2019 (European Commission et al., 2018). The PSPPD programme instigated training on evidence-based policy-making and implementation for senior government officials and, when it closed, the course was moved to the University of Cape Town (UCT) (PSPPD, 2017). Most recently the University of Johannesburg launched a new Short Learning Programme on the Practices of EIDM.

This combination of EIDM activities, strengthened networks, and relevant capacities appears to reflect an increasingly supportive environment within South Africa for the implementation of EIDM, which has taken place in a wider context of developments across the continent, and indeed across L&MICs. Below, these shifts in evidence production and use are further contextualized in light of evidence policy and wider politics in South Africa.

3.2 | Developments in evidence policy and politics in South Africa

The use of evidence in policy development is itself underpinned by both policies and systems for policy development. Tracing these developments in South Africa, we see shifts within national policy frameworks as well as increasingly mandated systems. How South Africa's evidence ecosystem is underpinned by a strong foundation of legislation and reform, including the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and the National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019) has been documented elsewhere. In specific sectors such as environmental management (Rossouw & Wiseman, 2004), policies have underwritten drives towards evidence implementation planning. The Socio-Economic Impact Assessment System was introduced centrally in 2015 and has become the cornerstone of evidence policy in the country (Magoro, 2021). Policy options are weighed according to the relative impacts, particularly for the most vulnerable populations, and cost-benefit analysis is undertaken. Policy implementation is planned and risks assessed, and a baseline is established to enable future monitoring of change. This all happens before a new policy is submitted to the cabinet (DPME, 2021). A specialist SEIAS Unit, which sits within the President's Office, must sign off on the SEIAS assessments before draft policies, bills, or regulations are included in Cabinet Memoranda, a summary of the main findings of that assessment must be included in the Memo, and the full report included in the annexes. This also applies to policies and regulations that are internally signed by ministers. Furthermore, this policy-review instrument is "geared" to ensuring national priorities of social cohesion and security, and economic inclusion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability are considered in the evidence assessment irrespective of the topic of the policy under review.

Reviewing the documentation related to SEIAS shows how marked the integration of evidence is within these policies. In early 2021, the Evidence Management Guide for SEIAS was produced by the research unit within DPME that supports the SEIAS team in the President's Office (DPME, 2021). It provides detailed guidance on the use of evidence within the SEIAS process and has been welcomed by government colleagues (DPME & ACE, 2021).

The policy drive for evidence use embedded within SEIAS was further strengthened in December 2020 with the publication of the new National Framework for Policy Development (The Presidency Republic of South Africa, 2020). As with the SEIAS documentation, this new framework contains multiple references to the EIDM approach—it contains the word "evidence" 120 times and has a detailed annex to guide the use of evidence in policy formulation (The Presidency Republic of South Africa, 2020).

We observe a political landscape in South Africa that has been conducive to the emergence of a national evidence ecosystem. The country's ruling party has had a somewhat turbulent relationship with evidence. In the 1990s, President Mbeki famously questioned the link between HIV and AIDS, resulting in a powerful and eventually successful evidence-informed legal and social campaign for the right to access antiretrovirals (Heywood, 2009; Suthar & Bärnighausen, 2017). In contrast, President Ramaphosa has been lauded for his evidence-informed response to COVID-19, and one of his chief scientific advisors, Professor Salim Abdul Karim, was awarded the John Maddox Prize for standing up for evidence in 2020, alongside President Trump's Chief Medical Advisor, Dr Anthony Fauci (CAPRISA, 2020). We have seen the introduction of key policies under the leadership of the ruling party, including those already mentioned. We have also seen colleagues within government increasingly using evidence for their own work, irrespective of the external donor-driven evidence agenda (for example see Dayal, 2016, for an overview of the use of evidence in South Africa's 20-year review). We know that policy-makers seek out and use evidence in their work (Paine-Cronin & Sadan, 2015).

If we look to the structures of government, the creation of DPME in 2010 marks an important recognition of the importance of central co-ordination of government outcomes. While DPME is not alone in driving for stronger state capacity informed by greater knowledge (Goldman et al., 2015), it has played a major role in the "pull" of evidence into policy. DPME has had close relationships with the National Planning Commission, the PSPPD programme, and the SEIAS Unit, all of which have contributed significantly to systems for evidence use in government. It is from within DPME that the national evaluation system was set up (Goldman et al., 2018). DPME's research unit has played an important role in piloting, testing, and expanding the use of policy-relevant evidence maps in government, as well as facilitating relationships between producers and users of research more generally (DPME, 2016b).

Another level of politics (politics with a small 'p') is evident in the documented work of the Africa Centre for Evidence over the last decade, one that shows the importance of how those outside government engage with those inside government. There is a clear shift from a programme designed to "build capacity" of government officials (the UJ-BCURE programme—Stewart et al., 2017a), to the language of "capacity sharing" that recognizes how little is known by the team, and by knowledge brokers more generally, about policy generation (Modise & Tannous, 2021b). The Centre's work has over time adopted a more sensitive approach in which this university-based team has acknowledged that it is neither the leaders within nor the owners of the evidence system in government that it seeks to support (Stewart, 2021).

4 | WHAT THESE DOCUMENTED SHIFTS MEAN FOR INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF EVIDENCE USE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ELSEWHERE

In combining the shifts in evidence production and implementation with the changes in the political and policy landscape in South Africa we can see how this combination shapes (or does not shape) the routine use of evidence through "new practices becoming standard practices" (Yin, 1978; Zida et al., 2018, p. 16) in decision-making in South Africa. First it is worth noting that there is a "coinciding" of shifts in the evidence systems, for production and for use, and in both the pro-poor and increasingly transparent policy context and in the longstanding drive towards improving the lives of South Africans through the provision of a strong state at the heart of government. The drives for good governance and a capable state are conducive to, and increasingly integrated with, drives for better use of better evidence in government.

There is a clear shift away from externally funded and externally driven activities to internal initiatives and investment as well as a traceable shift from individual relationships towards institutional ones (PSPPD, 2017). This is not to say that international donors do not still play a role, nor that the institutional-level relationships necessary for a formal system to operate routinely are all in place. In the area of evidence capacities, there are also shifts from individual capacity strengthening towards delivery beyond individuals to teams and their institutions, and towards delivery of

capacity development via institutions rather than externally funded time-bound initiatives. This is consistent with a growing capacity across the continent (Stewart et al., 2020).

There have also been technical innovations towards (co-)production of better evidence that have been dominated by, and largely driven by, government colleagues, rather than external academics or “knowledge brokers.” The focus has shifted over time from developing research practices and tools to developing decision practices and tools that are informed by research. There are signs that the development of a co-production model driven from within government is part of a bigger move towards stronger, sustainable, and more equitable state–research partnerships. This technical and systems-level shift is reflected not only in decisions about individual policies (for example the human settlements policy), but also in systems for decisions across policies—as highlighted by how evidence is integrated within the national policy framework and the SEIAS system (DPME, 2016a, 2016b, 2021; Department of Science and Technology, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019; The Presidency Republic of South Africa, 2020).

The drive for delivery of better outcomes for South Africans has provided a common ground for the values of EIDM: transparency, accountability, and careful curation of resources to achieve the best possible outcomes. This is coupled with an increasing regulation and incentivization for the use of evidence in policy formulation. The policy developments in South Africa are key in driving the use of evidence in national policy. They have the potential to ensure evidence is considered in all changes to existing policy, and proposals for new policy. Perhaps most significant is that these policies lay the groundwork for structural incentives within decision-makers’ routine work for the routine consideration of the evidence base when making choices.

This analysis suggests that when these four important elements combine, we observe significant shifts towards the systematic use of evidence in decision-making. There is an increasing number of well documented policies that have been made on the basis of the best available evidence. These include policies on early-grade reading (Sie, 2019), the testing and expansion of social grants (Satumba et al., 2017), the introduction of a wage-labour subsidy (Levinsohn et al., 2014), the development of human settlements policy (DPME, 2016a), and a number of COVID-19 responses.

Despite the incentives, structures, and capacities for evidence use in the country, it is also clear that evidence in policy-making is not yet widespread, and is largely still occurring at a national rather than a sub-national level, although examples of the latter do exist (Magoro, 2021; Western Cape Government, 2020). Nevertheless, these examples, and the findings above of developments in four significant areas, suggest that South Africa’s institutionalization of evidence use is well underway, and has the potential to improve lives for millions of people.

If we consider developments in South Africa’s evidence ecosystem in the wider context of the continent and of other L&MICs, we see that wider shifts around the world towards greater capacities for generating and using evidence, and recognition of those capacities, have provided a broader conceptual drive towards both better outcomes and greater agency in achieving them (Africa Evidence Network, 2020; Stewart, 2021; Stewart et al., 2020). There is evidence that wider changes have benefited the South African context, for example shifts in funding towards Southern-led organizations by funders, including the European Union (EU), the UK’s former Department for International Development (DFID) (now incorporated into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)), and foundations such as the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, have resulted in better-resourced African evidence centres, from ACRES in Uganda, to AFIDEP in Kenya, and SACE and CEBHC in South Africa. Further, there is evidence that developments in South Africa have had knock-on effects on both capacities and practices across the continent. Examples of South African influence on the continent have been documented by the Africa Evidence Network (see their gallery of Stories of Change). These also extend beyond Africa to Latin America (Boeira, 2020, 2021). We also have a range of examples of peer-learning evidence collaborations in which African teams play an active role. Over the last 20 years, these have included the World Health Organization’s Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) and the Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Evidence Systems (PEERSS, n.d.; WHO, n.d.), with increasing involvement from a growing number of African teams including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda, and, perhaps not surprisingly, South Africa. These teams are increasingly active in supporting both the production and use of evidence for EIDM. Their role in spanning these divides is particularly important, as is the political and policy landscapes in which they work (for more on the South African system, see Stewart et al., 2019).

These learning and influence roles are consistent both outside and within government: the National Development Plan 2030 explicitly sets out the role of South Africa in supporting the continent's development (National Planning Commission, 2012). With almost all global development priorities spanning national borders, from migration to COVID-19, from economic development to food security, the importance of sharing and learning developments from and within countries and continents is clearly evident. Opportunities for sharing and learning from the developments in South Africa are reflected in a number of capacity "hubs" led from within the country with an African focus. I identified regional hubs led from South Africa that span support to national vaccine technical groups: the NITAG Support Hub (NiSH) (VACFA, n.d.); support for relationship-based learning on EIDM (AEN, 2019); and support that focuses on systems-level change in EIDM (the ACE-led Community of Practice within the PEERSS programme). Several of these hubs are still in their infancy; tracking their development will be essential to understand the potential for others to benefit from learning within South Africa. We also see the influence of South Africa's developments further afield. For example, the Africa Evidence Network is now mentoring an emerging regional network in Latin America (Boeira, 2021), and the Africa Centre for Evidence is facilitating a Community of Practice on Systems-Level change in Evidence Use that spans 10 countries across L&MICs.

This research has focused on South Africa in the wider African and L&MIC context. Our understanding of how evidence systems are strengthened, both through evidence production and implementation, and through the policy and politics that shape evidence use, will benefit from further research to document the ways in which other regions have informed developments in Africa, and how Africa has shaped developments elsewhere.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This article has documented how policy, implementation, evidence, and politics come together to increase the use of evidence in decision-making that has the potential to change lives. It does not contain a complete political analysis of South Africa's evidence ecosystem, and there may be a case for conducting one in the future, although this should arguably be done from within government, and not externally. The time constraints of the research, and limited access to government documents, and internal documents of other evidence centres, means that it is not a complete picture of South Africa's evidence ecosystem, nor of the wider African or L&MIC context. It does, however, along with earlier analysis conducted with my colleagues (Stewart et al., 2019) represent the most complete analysis of the country's shifts towards the routine use of evidence in policy-making to date, contextualized within wider regional developments.

While there are documented country-level case studies of evidence use in Canada, the US, New Zealand, and the UK, and across the Scandinavian region (Boaz et al., 2019), this is the first country-level policy-oriented analysis from a L&MIC. The growing body of evidence from the ecosystems in a growing number of countries, including Uganda (Mijumbi et al., 2014; Mijumbi-Deve et al., 2017; Mijumbi-Deve & Sewankambo, 2017; Ongolo-Zogo et al. 2014, 2015), Cameroon (Ongolo-Zogo et al. 2014, 2015), Nigeria (Uneke et al., 2012; Uneke et al., 2016, 2017), Brazil (Dias et al., 2014) and Chile (Pantoja et al., 2018; Rodríguez Osíac et al., 2017), are all limited to the health sector, and have a strong emphasis on the production of useful evidence and its consideration by decision-makers, rather than the government policy-making system. What we have not explored in this case study, and should perhaps be a subject for another analysis, is the extent to which evidence-informed policy is implemented in South Africa. This is something that has been considered elsewhere, including in Cameroon (Okwen, 2017), and in the UK (Breckon & Gough, 2019), and there is a growing body of relevant literature within South Africa from specific sectors, including health care (McCaul et al., 2020) and policing (Newham & Rappert, 2018), as well as in government performance (Tirivanhu et al., 2017).

By focusing across the evidence ecosystem in one country, South Africa—contextualized within developments across the continent and L&MICs as a whole—it has been possible to see the parallel and synergistic developments in different areas, including production and use, across sectors, and within both policies and the policy-making system. This allows the identification of lessons from South Africa regarding what is important in advancing routine evidence-use in decision-making, particularly within policy systems. Shared values and a desire and commitment to tackling poverty and inequality are at the heart of the work in South Africa and this "common agenda" may be the

secret to advancing evidence use elsewhere. A desire to understand one another, and to invest in relationships at individual, organizational, and institutional levels has been identified as key to shared goals, and synergistic developments in the evidence system. A recognition has emerged that decision-makers and decision-making have to be at the centre of efforts to increase the use of evidence in policy. This case study of South Africa has made it clear that decision-makers are not passive recipients of knowledge and have significant and leading roles to play. Lastly, there is growing clarity that supporting routine use of evidence, sometimes referred to as "institutionalization," requires change throughout EIDM processes, among all actors, and across the ecosystem, not merely within the institutions of government.

South Africa has positioned itself not only to learn from others but also to share its own experiences and expertise via a number of international relationships and regional hubs. Still in their infancy, further analysis of these learning relationships in the future will no doubt reveal more about both the scope for others to benefit from developments in South Africa, and for the South African ecosystem to learn from others. Other countries may benefit from mapping out their own evidence journeys alongside policy and political developments, as well as tracing their learning relationships with others. As this analysis has illustrated, the continental and L&MIC contexts can provide useful framing for the developments of evidence systems within individual countries. Over time, such research can enable greater comparisons, learning, and system strengthening across the global evidence ecosystem.

In conclusion, there is great potential and momentum in South Africa, and lessons for other countries, about how to enable meaningful change and to ensure that EIDM fulfils its potential to change lives for the better.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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