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research

Building capacity for evidence-informed decision making: an example from South Africa

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To maximise the potential impact and acceptability of EIDM capacity building, there is a need for programmes to coordinate their remits within existing systems, playing both 'insider' and 'outsider' roles. Through a review of the South African evidence-policy landscape and analysis of a stakeholder event that brought together EIDM role players, this paper illustrates how one capacity-building programme navigated its position within the national evidence-policy interface. It identifies strategies for improving the acceptability and potential effectiveness of donor-funded EIDM capacity-building activities: understanding the evidence-policy interface, incorporating programmes into the decision-making infrastructure (being an 'insider'), whilst retaining an element of neutrality (being an 'outsider').

key words evidence-informed decision making • capacity building • South Africa • evidence use

key message
In order to maximise impact and acceptability, there is a need for EIDM capacity-building programmes to identify and coordinate their remit and position within the existing system, playing both 'insider' and 'outsider' roles.

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Background

EIDM and demand for evidence in South Africa

Evidence-informed decision making (EIDM) is a tool for public officials to design policies and programmes incorporating the best available evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of the intended initiatives. In 2015, the South African government spent R155 billion on social protection programmes to transform the country's high levels of poverty and inequality (RSA, 2015). With one in five South Africans living below the national poverty line[1] (StatsSA, 2015) this extensive funding for anti-poverty programmes faces a challenge. The government is therefore starting to carefully monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its programmes, having created the National Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in 2010 (Goldman et al, 2015). Part of the DPME's objective is to produce and commission high-quality evidence of which social programmes and polices work (for whom, under what circumstances, and at what cost). DPME has, for example, conducted a large-scale evaluation of the country's Early Childhood Development programme (Davids et al, 2015). There is also an increasing supply of evaluation evidence produced by consultancies and universities in the country (Abrahams, 2015).

While the supply of evaluation evidence has improved, the produced studies and their results often fail to feed back into policy and policy-implementation processes. Efforts to improve the South African evidence-policy interface seem to have placed less emphasis on the decision-making systems and use of evidence by public decision makers. A survey of senior decision makers across government departments showed that their main sources of evidence were of informal nature, drawing from personal experience as well as the opinions of individual experts and interest groups (Cronin and Sadan, 2015). Decision makers themselves were aware of the limitations of this evidence to inform the policy process and expressed an active demand to be able to use evidence from scientific primary research as well as syntheses of these primary studies (Cronin and Sadan, 2015; Goldman et al, 2015).

As a direct response to these findings, a number of initiatives have been implemented in order to support decision makers' capacity to use research evidence during the formulation and design of policies and programmes. Within government, these initiatives include demand-side components in DPME's national Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (Goldman et al, 2013), the Department of Public Service and Administration's National School of Government (NSG), and the European Union-funded Programme to Support Pro-poor Policy Development (PSPPD). These initiatives are complemented by a number of external capacity-building programmes[2] that aim to support policymakers' and researchers' EIDM skills.

EIDM capacity building

EIDM skills refer to decision makers' abilities to access and make sense of various forms of evidence and to integrate this evidence into the decision-making process. As Oliver and colleagues observe, there is a bias in this area towards improving the impact of research, as opposed to understanding the processes that underpin policy change (Oliver et al, 2014). There is nonetheless a body of existing research that has investigated the effectiveness of programmes aiming to support decision-makers'

EIDM skills, as well as contextual factors mitigating programme effectiveness (Lavis et al, 2003; Oliver et al, 2014; Clar et al, 2011; Siron et al, 2015). We know that a lack of technical skills is one of the main barriers to decision makers' effective use of evidence (for example, Clar et al, 2011; Siron et al, 2015). We also know that the most promising facilitators identified are collaboration between researchers and policymakers, as well as improved relationships and skills (Oliver et al, 2014). Capacity building, as an EIDM intervention approach, has the potential to improve relationships between decision makers and researchers and to enhance decision makers' ability to access and make sense of evidence. Capacity building can therefore be positioned on the nexus of building demand for evidence (Newman et al, 2012), as well as facilitating channels for its uptake through joint interaction. However, little is known about which approaches to capacity building are most effective. Evaluations of capacity-building programmes are often set in High-Income Country (HIC) contexts.

Capacity-building interventions vary by programme approach and objective (Newman et al, 2012). Existing systematic reviews of the effectiveness of different capacity-building approaches suggest that mentorship programmes are effective to improve decision makers' attitudes towards EIDM, and may also have an impact on organisational outcomes (Abdullah et al, 2014). Likewise, training in critical appraisal skills seems to be beneficial to decision makers' EIDM knowledge and related behaviour (Horsley et al, 2011). However, the existing research has exclusively been conducted in HIC settings with an explicit focus on healthcare. Evaluations of individual capacity-building programmes in Southern Africa highlight the importance of good facilitation, trusting relationships, clarity of purpose, and the use of a participatory, problem-based approach (Stewart et al, 2005; Stewart, 2007).

Barriers to effective capacity building

Capacity building to use evidence seeks to change the behaviour of decision makers. Behaviour change in turn is a function of capability, motivation, and opportunity to change (Michie et al, 2011). Individual capacity-building programmes in EIDM have mainly focused on one of these three functions. Two landscape reviews of the evidence-policy interface in South Africa and Malawi (Choge et al, 2014; Erasmus et al, 2014) find that none of the identified programmes addressed all three components of behaviour change. At the same time, both reviews identified a larger than expected number of ongoing initiatives and programmes. While this reflects the increasing breadths and depths of EIDM interventions, the narrow focus of these programmes raises the question of relevance and potential duplication of efforts.

These findings also question whether EIDM capacity-building programmes are targeting real capacity needs and the right audience, and whether the current multi-faceted and rather haphazard approach to capacity building is sustainable from a systems perspective (for example, Schneider et al, 2014; Champagne et al, 2014; NORAD, 2015; Kislov et al, 2014). NORAD's extensive literature review of capacity building in international development bemoans the fact that a vast majority of programmes cluster around the support of individual EIDM capacities, such as critical appraisal skills, and neglect the more complex and sustainable support to organisational and institutional capabilities (NORAD, 2015). Kislov and peers (2014) challenge the same phenomenon in health, and outline how these three levels of capacity (individual, organisational, institutional) interact and how better targeted programmes can set in

motion a virtuous circle of mutually reinforcing levels of capacities. NORAD (2015, 6) cites this mismatch of capacity needs to result from 'a failure to conduct appropriate assessments and analysis during the preparatory stages of capacity development interventions'.

In certain contexts, capacity building also seems to have reached a point of decreasing returns (Kislov et al, 2014; Hawkes et al, 2015; Christoplos et al, 2014). There is a risk of building the same individual EIDM skills among the same set of decision makers (easily accessible, national level of government, well-educated, and so on) (NORAD, 2015; Christoplos et al, 2014). The results of a survey of decision makers by Schneider and peers (2014, 5) highlight this risk of duplicating efforts: decision makers expressed the need for 'less training and more skills'.

In the light of the above, this paper argues that, in order to increase the potential for impact, we must focus on increasing acceptability, and in order to achieve the latter there is a need for EIDM capacity-building programmes to identify and coordinate their remit and position within the existing evidence-policy interface. Based on data from a national landscape review and qualitative analysis of feedback from our stakeholders, we present how a South African EIDM capacity-building programme navigated its position within the national evidence-policy interface. We outline how this careful identification and co-ordination of programme remit allowed the programme to assume both 'insider' (that is, incorporating programmes into the decision-making infrastructure) and 'outsider' (that is, retaining an element of neutrality from the decision-making infrastructure) roles in relation to its government partners. This ability directly supported programme acceptability and, we propose, increased potential impact.

We present both the applied methods, that is, our review of the EIDM landscape in South Africa and our qualitative analysis of feedback from our stakeholders. This is followed by a thematic synthesis of both empirical data sets, which informs our key message that EIDM capacity-building initiatives might benefit from a more careful identification and coordination of their role and contribution to the wider evidence-policy interface. Lastly, we use the identified themes to challenge ourselves as much as the reader to reflect on capacity-building initiatives.

Methods

We conducted a landscape review of the role players facilitating EIDM in South Africa, and a qualitative analysis of a one-day stakeholder feedback event, which, 18 months after the publication of the review, brought together these role players to reflect on progress made and lessons learned concerning how to build capacity for EIDM in South Africa.

The landscape review applied a rapid evidence assessment methodology. We rapidly screened key government and other public sector websites, as well as higher education and research consulting sources to identify relevant EIDM role players in South Africa. We also searched academic publications and Grey literature reports for potential references to initiatives. Searches were conducted between January and March in 2014 and used keywords related to evidence supply/use and policy/decision-making. The results of this rapid systematic search were initially visually mapped and shared with decision-makers in the EIDM sector. This process of extensive consultation served to refine the map of South Africa's research-policy landscape as well as to engage in

a snowballing search for additional role players, which we then individually followed up with to understand their space in the landscape. The final landscape review was published in July 2014 (Choge et al, 2014), but did not present a static document. Acknowledging that any such review effort is limited in scope, the published review served as a snapshot to guide understanding of the South African research-policy landscape at a particular point in time. The landscape review was updated in 2015, which highlighted the iterative process required to map the range of role players and vibrant nature of interaction and relations among them.

The landscape review highlighted the diversity of the evidence-policy interface in South Africa indicating organisational structures and gaps within this system. It emphasised a need for increased networking between actors within the system to identity relevant activities and projects proposed to support the functioning of the system. Following publication of the landscape review, we started to work together with many of the identified role players to design and support relevant EIDM capacity-building activities in South Africa (Stewart et al, 2015). After 18 months of designing, implementing, and iterating different EIDM capacity-building approaches and activities, we then brought together many of the EIDM role players for a one-day meeting to reflect on the progress of the research-policy landscape. The meeting focused on reviewing how to build capacity in evidence-informed decision making and was attended by 44 individuals, representing 21 recipients and 23 providers of capacity building. Agreed agenda items included: developing relevant theories of change for increasing the use of evidence in decision making in South Africa; finding approaches for individual capacity building, including formal and informal training as well as mentorships, coaching and secondments; how to facilitate institutional change; how to influence systemic change in the decision-making environment; and montoring and evaluation [M&E] of capacity building in EIDM.

The meeting followed an interactive format with short presentations followed by open discussion and small-group exercises to reflect on each agenda item, and map out experiences and reflections from amongst the group.

We used rapid consensus-building techniques during the meeting, including feedback to the participants of emerging findings in real time during the event to allow for further discussion and iteration.[3] Qualitative and quantitative data were collected by two researchers. This data collection included: visual recordings of the event; two sets of researcher transcriptions and notes; flipchart and poster records of the group activities and consensus-building exercises; social network activity, and an opportunity for attendees to share views by email after the event.

We analysed the collected data using thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Two researchers independently coded all data sources to derive two independent sets of descriptive themes. These descriptive themes were compared and in case of disagreement the opinion of a third team member was consulted. Descriptive themes were then synthesised into analytical themes and shared with the wider research group, as well as with the event participants.[4] A final event report was published only after all attendees had had an opportunity to verify information within the report. This article draws from both data sources (that is, landscape review and qualitative analysis of the stakeholder feedback event) to show how the programme benefited from acting in both insider and outsider roles in relation to its government partners; an ability that came as a result of an in-depth understanding of the national research-policy landscape, and that enhanced programme acceptance and potential impact.

Findings

As presented below, our research suggests that in order for capacity-building activities to be acceptable, integrated, and sustainable there is a need to: understand the evidence-policy interface and incorporate initiatives as closely as possible into the decision-making infrastructure (that is, assuming an insider role), whilst also retaining an element of neutrality (that is, assuming an outsider role).

Understanding the evidence-policy interface

Through our efforts to map out the research-policy landscape in South Africa, we learned that the mapping process in itself had value and that the findings of this process could help us shape our capacity-building programme. Specifically we found that: there is a readiness for evidence use in sections of the South African government; there is a need to avoid duplication of effort; there is value in building partnerships and identifying one another's niche contributions to the sector; it is important to understand institutional silos and the limitations of working within them; and sustainability of effort relies on the extent to which initiatives are integrated into the decision-making infrastructure.

Initially we identified a wider range of role players than we had anticipated, with many varied and interacting remits (Choge et al, 2014). Rather than finding a formal system, which we could then describe, we found several strands of different evidence-policy pathways and institutional linkages. These were often of informal nature and pathways overlapped between different organisations and institutions, as well as the departments within these. Indeed, we found the results of our review both controversial and stimulating. This was reflected in the debates the landscape review enticed when we presented it for feedback and refinement.

We learned that even a three-month landscape review exercise would only scratch the surface in understanding the national system, and that the learning process is a continuous one. However, we also found that presenting our initial understanding of the EIDM landscape to various audiences was a useful tool to highlight the vibrant nature of this system and to challenge role players to reflect and comment on their perceived position in the system. Insights from the landscape review directly assisted in the design of our capacity-building programme, demonstrating how exercises such as this can help to position capacity-building activities (especially time-bound, one-off programmes such as our own) within the national evidence-policy interface, and increase their acceptability and likely impact. Both the review and the responses to our findings suggested that capabilities, motivations, and opportunities all existed across the South African public service, albeit sometimes in pockets and without strong systems underlying them.

Institutionally speaking, we found that areas of government play a role in setting the research agenda within the research supply system, which hints at an appetite for evidence, and echoes Kislov and colleagues' (2014) call for focus on institutional change, and not only a focus on individual EIDM capacity. The DPME establishing a national evaluation system is one such example (Goldman et al, 2015). Incentives for motivation and opportunity were present. However, we did not find many instances where the government was utilising this role to its full potential. Instead, the use of *ad hoc* contracts with research consultants was, for many we spoke to, the

primary means by which they commissioned and accessed research evidence. This raises concerns as to whether a focus on individual researchers alone weakens the potential for organisational and institutional capacities in the production of policy-relevant research, as well as suggesting serious limitations in the potential use of their research within government.

We identified a large number of related initiatives and a high risk of duplication of effort. The need for us to engage with related programmes was clearly evident. Co-ordination of efforts was necessary to ensure we complemented existing initiatives, and prioritised where we could add value. We also found duplication already existed within some areas of the system, suggesting potential pockets of saturation.

While the findings of the landscape review highlighted how to avoid duplication of efforts, they also supported us to identity possible effective partnerships. As there were many different initiatives working in the same space of supporting the translation of research into use, it was important to aim for a greater integration of programmes. In our case, this was facilitated through relationship-building efforts with key partners, and more generally through our support to the Africa Evidence Network, a regional community of practice for people interested in EIDM. Through greater understanding of the role other initiatives fulfilled, we were also able to identify our own niches, for example in support for the use of systematic reviews.

Our landscape review suggested a prevalence of institutional and systemic silos. By mapping out the relationships between organisations and institutions, we got a picture of the flow of evidence and exchange of capacities. In some institutional and systemic silos supporting capacity seemed unlikely to allow a spread to the wider system, potentially limiting and not enabling opportunities for evidence use. This is not to suggest that close clusters of institutions are necessarily a barrier to evidence use. A close collaboration between a research centre and a government department can be a highly effective tool to support research use. Our findings suggest that supporting capacities in these silos may be limited in scope and might not reach other sectors of the evidence-policy interface. While silos arguably cannot be avoided altogether, it is important to understand their nature and to be aware of their implications for capacity-building programmes. There is a need to go beyond only organisational engagement with evidence, to consider institutions and systems.

We found that many research use programmes in South Africa remain donor-funded, suggesting limited sustainability of capacity, raising issues of mandate and motivations. The extent to which initiatives are integrated and embedded within larger structures, and have sufficient cross-linkages and clout, clearly shapes their ability to support the development of the overall system. As a result, different initiatives have had varied effects on the system.

In sum, our landscape review enabled us to identify and coordinate our remit and position within the existing vibrant evidence-policy interface in South Africa, highlighting the importance of understanding the landscape in which our capacity building programme sits.[5]

Incorporating programmes within the existing infrastructure: being an insider

Discussion of our programme after 18 months of implementation highlighted the importance of integrating capacity-building initiatives as closely as possible into the existing decision-making infrastructure: that is, being an insider. We were encouraged

to work hard to understand the difficulties of decision makers in government when working with outsiders, and to identify mechanisms to increase our acceptability[6] within the government decision-making structures.

This call to invest efforts into understanding government's difficulties in working with outsiders, and the subsequent advice to enhance our insider role, is based on three themes that arose during discussions with our stakeholders: (1) outside capacity-building efforts are too abstract in content; (2) outside efforts struggle to realise government structures, motivations and incentives; and (3) there is a risk of perpetuating an unhelpful dichotomy between researchers and decision makers which restricts rather than enables opportunities for evidence use.

These themes are dealt with in more detail below.

Government participants at our stakeholder feedback event expressed a concern that capacity-building initiatives that were not accustomed to working with South African government departments were often too abstract in content. They cited how, while important in their own right, university-led public governance and management courses often focused on theoretical models and did not communicate skills that were practical enough to fit within the work routines of civil servants. Even with explicit EIDM capacity-building programmes, decision makers questioned how they could apply these capacities in their work settings. As one government stakeholder expressed: 'Workshops can only help to a certain point. We also need to look at systems and opportunities for application of learning'. What decision makers perceived to be lacking from outside efforts was the provision of practical EIDM tools and context-specific skills tailored to decision makers' professional domains. Generic EIDM skills that had no direct link to an acute decision-making challenge and need were often regarded as still too abstract.

We were further advised that it is challenging for decision makers within government to work with partners who fail to realise how EIDM capacities will be embedded and mitigated by the organisational structures and incentives. Without an in-depth understanding of contextual factors and an insight into the working of bureaucracies, motivation cannot be 'created'. We learnt that decision makers sometimes experienced the strong promotion of the value of evidence to inform their work as a lack of appreciation and downplaying of their on-going decision-making efforts. Rather than proclaiming 'evidence to the rescue',[7] efforts to promote EIDM require mutual respect and recognition of the policy profession. These efforts, too, should realise that decision makers – as any employee – act on organisational incentives. Communicating EIDM skills, whose application is not incentivised by senior officials supportive of the capacity-building programme, might be sub-optimal. The value of evidence can thus not be communicated in isolation from the work structures and processes in government.

Linked to this call for an increased understanding and appreciation of the processes and structures in which decision makers in government work and strive to make the best possible policy decisions, the government stakeholders bemoaned the fact that outside capacity-building initiatives often drew an artificial division between research producers and users. Government stakeholders did not agree that EIDM capacity building should start from the assumption that decision makers always represent 'users' and thus the last link in the EIDM chain. They were not entirely comfortable with evidence and/or capacities being 'pushed' onto decision makers, and questioned the applicability of such a linear model in light of the complexities

of implementing evidence-informed decisions and their own ability to influence the research process too.

Having established some of the challenges decision makers face when partnering with outsiders to build EIDM capacity, and thus the rationale for assuming more of an insider role, we received advice, too, on a number of mechanisms that might support programmes to position themselves as more of an insider. We grouped these into four main themes: (1) public sector understanding and cross-linkages; (2) engagement; (3) applied learning; and (4) co-production.

The need for capacity-building programmes to deepen their knowledge of government structures and decision-making processes was a major theme in the collected data. It emerged as the strongest mechanism to improve programme acceptability and to integrate EIDM capacities into decision-making processes. We have, however, already established and discussed this mechanism, that is, understanding the public sector and public sector landscape, at length above (Understanding the evidence-policy interface). A related sub-theme concerned whether targeting EIDM capacities at national government departments is the most relevant approach to achieving developmental objectives. Both government and academic stakeholders argued that for EIDM to translate into tangible impacts on poverty reduction and social development, EIDM capacity building needs to be provided to sub-national levels of government,[8] as service delivery to beneficiaries is executed at this level. Targeting different levels of government also creates cross-linkages and increases the credibility and legitimacy of the programme across government. This directly influences programme acceptability and the potential for long-term sustainability. It does, however, also raise many questions as to the practicalities of implementing activities at sub-national levels not addressed in this paper. There is no one size fits all approach to supporting EIDM, and working at other levels of government would need tailored solutions. We also believe that it would require a significantly larger and longer programme to address such multiple levels of role players with a range of appropriate activities. More research is needed to provide greater understanding of the challenges and potential solutions for such work.

Stakeholder feedback indicated that early engagement with decision makers enhances the acceptance and relevance of capacity-building programmes. One government stakeholder, for example, expressed the view that 'relationship-building from the outset is key'. There was agreement that simple mechanisms such as co-facilitating workshops – both decision makers inputting into capacity-building exercises and, vice versa, researchers contributing to government workshops and round tables – improve trust and willingness to engage. Engagement with, and learning from one another, was seen as an effective mechanism to better align programmes with decision makers' capacity needs. This alignment could then allow EIDM capacity building to more closely target applied learning. Such integrated programmes might be more likely to identify decision makers' practical capacity needs and deliver a more applied learning approach, for example by providing practical tools and linking educational components to decision makers' *ad hoc* policy issues and challenges. The language of 'demand-driven' capacity building was often used by the government colleagues we spoke with to express the above sentiments.

To increase their acceptability and organisational embeddedness, capacity-building programmes might benefit from targeting decision makers' operational skills before turning to more explicit EIDM capacities. Operational skills were seen as an effective

entry point for capacity building, as public officials might initially be more susceptible to such professional development and could more swiftly transfer these skills into their work setting – building capabilities requires better prior understanding of existing capacity and capacity-development needs. The established relationship and familiarity with the capacity-building approach could then be used to target professional development related to EIDM. While this raises questions as to who has the remit to develop such operational skills, our stakeholders did not express any such concerns. Their overriding priority was that EIDM capacity building is too abstract if delivered in isolation from the practical operational skills they see as essential to decision making in government.

In the context of these demand-driven capacity-building approaches, we were also encouraged to consider 'co-production' as an effective mechanism to embed programmes within the existing organisational structures. Co-production refers to an enhanced form of engagement, and suggestions for its application ranged from co-producing systematic reviews to decision makers setting policy-relevant research questions. This raised the question as to where the boundary lies between working as an insider and being employed within government. While an integrated capacity-building programme is more acceptable, a capacity-building programme that actively engages in research production might neither be sustainable nor set effective incentives for evidence use; rather it risks creating a parallel research production structure within the decision-making sphere that undermines and competes with production structures in the research realm. Assuming the role of an insider is thus a delicate balance, and in some instances programmes might actively benefit from deciding to remain more independent, that is deliberately being an outsider. We have sought to maintain this balance by investing considerable time and effort in understanding the capacities and requirements of our government colleagues (giving us 'insider' knowledge), and yet remaining outside of government employment (giving us independence), being based within a university structure (which brings legitimacy), and remaining transparent as to our specific contributions to co-created evidence (Stewart, 2015).

Retaining neutrality: being an outsider

At the same time as encouraging greater integration into the decision-making system to enhance acceptability and effectiveness, stakeholders within the South African system encouraged us to retain our neutrality as outsiders. The virtue of being an outsider was expressed in three main themes by the stakeholders: (1) being able to build bridges; (2) co-ordinating space with other capacity-building efforts; and (3) avoiding the creation of new organisational silos.

Considering the entire evidence-policy interface, both government and academic stakeholders held that organisations trusted by both the government and the research sector are uniquely positioned to serve as some form of fuel in the system. Using terms such as 'knowledge broker', 'mediator', and 'building bridges', they ascribed these mutually-respected actors the ability to encourage cross-sector working as well as the creation of new organisational and institutional relationships. Such relationships could refer to research/government relations, but the benefits of being perceived as a neutral outsider could likewise allow programmes to build cross-government linkages. In the South African context, the latter seems particularly important as individual

departments have become increasingly receptive to EIDM, and effective processes and structures to apply and retain EIDM capacities are being developed.

Given this development, we identified a linked theme that reflected the sentiment that there is an increasingly mature demand for evidence by South African decision makers: coordinating space with endogenous EIDM capacity-building efforts. As an outsider, less integrated with the existing infrastructure, programmes might find it easier to recognise when the overall evidence-policy interface requires less external input. Being an outsider could thus mitigate the risk of crowding out nascent endogenous programmes and institutions. South Africa, for example, has institutionalised a new National School of Government in 2014, after previous consecutive attempts to build this institution were largely unsuccessful (RSA, 2014; NSG, 2014). The NSG is legally mandated to hold compulsory training courses for all prospective public servants (RSA, 2014) and could thus serve as an endogenous body for EIDM capacity building. There, too, is sufficient willingness among government departments to share EIDM practices and expertise, allowing for an increased process of cross-government learning. Our stakeholders therefore challenged us to use an outsider perspective to critically reflect on whether an external approach to EIDM capacity building adequately mirrors the current structures and institutions set up across South African government.

Lastly, remaining an outsider might also benefit programme acceptability and potential impact by interrogating whether individual capacity-building programmes – in particular if they are successful – run the risk of creating new organisational silos. Given that few external programmes will be able to work across all spheres and levels of government, most EIDM capacity building, by design, creates isolated pockets of expertise.[9] A capacity-building programme that is too embedded within a small number of governmental partners might unintentionally create a new organisational silo, clustering EIDM capacities in a close network and thereby inhibiting cross-government work by reinforcing the established close relationships and organisational structures. Our stakeholders therefore advised us to always carefully weigh whether to target breadth or depth in EIDM capacity building. We were advised to remain 'big on vision and weak on boundaries'. This decision, again, requires a detailed knowledge of the existing research-policy landscape to be able to assess the likely impact of supporting either breadth or depth on systemic change.

Discussion of our findings

Through applying two methodologies (a landscape review and a qualitative analysis of a stakeholder engagement event), we identified three strategies for improving the acceptability and potential impact of donor-funded EIDM capacity-building activities such as our own. These were: (1) making an effort to understand the evidence-policy interface at individual, organisational, and systems levels before designing the programme, (2) incorporating initiatives as closely as possible into the decision-making infrastructure (being an insider), while (3) also retaining an element of neutrality (being an outsider). We learned that in order to maximise potential impact and acceptability, there is a need for EIDM capacity-building programmes to identify and coordinate their remit and position within the existing community with careful consideration of existing capabilities, motivations, and opportunities. We have shown that reflection on position in general can help to reduce duplication and

saturation of efforts, build partnerships and find relevant niches, avoid institutional and systemic silos, and increase potential for sustainability. We have demonstrated the need for this reflection to consider not just individuals, but organisational and institutional positions. We have also shown how our programme was able to derive benefits (such as acceptability) from occupying different positions within the EIDM sector in South Africa.

These findings link to recent suggestions to approach EIDM from a systems perspective, and not merely at individual or organisational levels, applying tools such as systems thinking and network analysis to understand how actors in the decision-making infrastructure (for example, policymakers, government departments) manoeuvre their social and professional environment to interact with research and integrate it in decision-making processes and structures (for example, Best and Holmes, 2010; Cherney and Head, 2011; Shepherd, 2014; Peirson et al, 2012). In South Africa, we expected to find an existing evidence-policy interface within national governments that would help us frame the role of EIDM capacity building, but faced highly diverse and unequal systems characteristics. On the one side, we were surprised how piecemeal and informal much of the 'system' was. On the other side, some areas in the research-policy landscape showed dense clusters of activity and duplication of effort. There is a real danger that too many capacity-building programmes at once might challenge system sustainability, in particular as a majority of programmes remain donor-driven and initiatives are not owned by in-country decision makers (NORAD, 2015; Christoplos et al, 2014). In other cases, we see isomorphic mimicry, for example with M&E systems being copied across from other settings and never applied with appropriate consideration of the new context (for example, NORAD, 2015; Pritchett, 2013).

We would therefore counsel against jumping to conclusions about the broader context, and can vouch for the need to avoid assumptions as to the role or value of a particular programme's contribution to the capacity-building environment. Kislov and peers (2014) in this context argue for the understanding of EIDM capacity as an emergent property of the overall research-policy interface. Using the term 'dynamic capabilities', they explain how sustainable EIDM capacities are nested in organisational structures able to reproduce and adapt individual EIDM skills in varying contexts. The authors propose, therefore, to target EIDM capacity-building initiatives less at individual decision makers, and to reduce efforts to enhance 'ordinary capabilities' (for example, critical appraisal, knowledge management) in favour of systemic, dynamic capabilities.

In addition to using such a multilevel capabilities perspective, a number of scholars also suggest unpacking the social and organisational networks shaping the existing decision-making infrastructure, to avoid a saturation of EIDM capacity and organisational bottlenecks (Shearer et al, 2014; Palinkas et al, 2011; Bevc et al, 2015; Yousefi-Nooraie et al, 2012). Understanding the existing capabilities, motivations, and opportunities can be a useful framework to unpack these existing networks (Michie et al, 2011). Shearer and colleagues (2014) use statistical network analysis to show how the exchange and use of research evidence in policymaking can be partly explained by the structure of decision makers' networks of relationships. Introducing EIDM capacities to organisations and individuals that are disconnected from the wider evidence-policy network, or are already part of high-performing silos of expertise, contributes little to the overall system performance and sustainability. For instance,

in a network analysis study, by Palinkas and peers (2011), of health organisations in 12 Canadian counties, the total spread of EIDM capacities between these counties was fostered by a single network component, which contained 81% of the overall network activity.

Literature on the political economy of EIDM highlights that these initiatives are inherently political and embedded in contextual factors arising from the workings of bureaucracies (Hodgkinson, 2012; Crewe and Young, 2002; Shaxson et al, 2016), which is in keeping with our data relating to the importance of programmes gaining better understanding of government realities, and raises important questions about whether or not externally-funded programmes have a valid mandate to try to change government decision making. However, our work also illustrates that although EIDM capacity-building support programmes are donor-funded, different EIDM tools such as evidence maps are helpful in providing a more neutral adjudicating tool in a politically-contested policy space (DPME aand ACE, 2016). Furthermore, the question around the validity of the mandate of externally-funded programmes might also be offset by concerted efforts and discussions by government itself on how to embed evidence in decision making and capacity support within government structures, which was a discussion point at the stakeholder event that this paper draws on and subsequent meetings. Our work furthermore supports the notion that policymaking is an inherently political space in which evidence is only one element that is considered (Newman et al, 2013; Shaxson et al, 2016).

Each of these suggestions in the wider literature – that is, applying systems thinking, network analysis, focusing on organisational and more complex EIDM capacities, and the political economy of EIDM – appears complementary to our proposed three strategies to improve the acceptability and potential impact of EIDM capacity building. Future research might benefit from exploring the intersection and theoretical links between these different recent attempts to innovate capacity building to increase research use.

Specifically, there is a case to be made, from both our own data and the political economy literature, for more locally-driven initiatives to build EIDM. The support we have seen for 'made in Africa' initiatives such as the Africa Evidence Network suggests that activities that originate within the region, which are inclusive and responsive to local stakeholders, are more likely to be successful. We know from other work that relationships are central to the success of EIDM activities, both between researchers and decision makers, and between programmes seeking to support decision making, and the government departments with which they are working (Stewart, 2007). This suggests that future involvement of external funders may need to shift to fund more general, responsive and supportive activities to enable EIDM, without prescription of outcomes or predetermined activities. A recent contribution to this line of work is the Beyond Context Matters framework, a practical approach developed by Weyrauch and peers (2016) to systematically unpack contextual factors at different levels of decision making that might influence evidence use.

To increase acceptability of capacity-building programmes by actors in the decision-making infrastructure, it seems particularly worthwhile to further investigate whether it is appropriate to start from the assumption that decision makers always represent 'evidence users' and thus the last link in the EIDM chain. As indicated above, we encountered some concerns among decision makers that such a conception can be perceived as reducing decision makers to passive recipients of EIDM capacities. While

a linear research push model of EIDM, focused on passive research supply that is then taken up by decision makers, has been debunked and found ineffective (for example, Nutley et al, 2007; Stewart and Oliver, 2012; Newman et al, 2012), the danger that EIDM capacity building might subscribe to a similar line of thought – that is, pushing EIDM skills onto decision makers – is not discussed as prominently. If a linear model of research provision is merely substituted with a linear model of EIDM capacity provision, endogenous demand within the decision-making infrastructure to use evidence is still overlooked.

This raises important questions expressed by government decision makers at our stakeholder event: if EIDM capacities are promoted by organisations outside the decision-making infrastructure, is the inherent assumption that current decision making is evidence-*un*informed due to a lack of capacities? An active outside 'promotion' of EIDM and a language of building EIDM capacities might thus be counter-productive if it narrowly positions decision makers as passive users of evidence and does not acknowledge their prevailing efforts to arrive at the best possible policy decisions. Acceptability of capacity-building programmes thus seems to be linked to a conceptualisation of EIDM as an integral principle of decision making, in line with decision makers' professional identity and work ethos. Adopting a language of EIDM capacity development or sharing might be of benefit in this regard (for example, Kislov et al, 2014). Positioning EIDM capacities as an integral part of the decision-making infrastructure, beyond individual or even organisational capacity, might also allow capacity-building programmes to bridge organisational silos and gain an opportunity for targeted cross-government work. If EIDM capacities are perceived more as an endogenous skillset inherent to the work of public servants and practitioners, it might be easier to transfer and apply these capacities across the decision-making infrastructure – driven by either internal actors (for example, government departments) or external actors (for example, capacity-building programmes). Furthermore, if EIDM capacities are extended beyond collection, appraisal and integration of research, to include understanding of social policy contexts and rigorous programme planning, civil servants are more likely to accept the value of those capacities and the role that research use plays.

Conclusion

Whilst achieving the balance between insider and external roles is not simple, we propose that a constructive equilibrium can be achieved through investment in thoroughly understanding partners in government, through maintaining structural independence, and through transparency. Our overview of the literature suggests that our findings are consistent with wider research on applied systems thinking, on network analysis, on the need to focus on organisational and complex EIDM capacities, and on the political economy of EIDM.

We conclude that, as externally driven initiatives, donor-funded EIDM capacity-building programmes have an important role to play in supporting the use of research evidence. They are none-the-less 'visitors' in an existing landscape, which is neither naive nor necessarily seeking input. In order to be accepted in that landscape, and to make a lasting impact, it is paramount that EIDM capacity-building programmes approach the challenge of understanding the landscape and negotiating access to it with humility and sensitivity. Through balancing the strategies of taking time to understand

the environment, of making efforts to become an insider, and of maintaining some neutrality as an outsider, programmes can maximise their potential for success.

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Notes

[1] Defined as living below R355 ($22.15) per month. (Rand-Dollar exchange rate 6 February 2016)

[2] For example, the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence Programme, and Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa programme.

[3] Workshop participants were encouraged to share openly, were assured of their anonymity, and given opportunities to comment on drafts of our report the day before it was made public.

[4] Workshop participants received a full draft of the event report rather than just the list of analytical themes.

[5] For a full discussion of the programme design, please see Stewart, 2015.

[6] For example, being embedded within and accepted by government partners allowed us to extend our work from an initial three core departments to a total of ten partner departments within three years.

[7] See for example Newman (2012) expressing a similar concern.

[8] In South Africa, this refers to provincial, municipality, and ward level.

[9] Assuming the programme is effective.

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