# What is the empirical evidence linking M&E systems strengthening to improved evaluative evidence demand, supply, and/or use? Which real-world examples best exemplify this evidence?

## Executive Summary

This literature review investigates the empirical relationship between efforts to strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems and the resulting demand for, supply of, and use of evaluative evidence in policymaking. It aims to guide practitioners and policymakers seeking to enhance the quality and utilization of evidence to inform decision‐making.

Key findings suggest that demand for evaluation is typically low where M&E systems are fragmented or donor-driven. However, sustained political leadership, deliberate stakeholder coordination, and active civil-society engagement can stimulate domestic demand. On the supply side, national capacity remains uneven; while some countries rely heavily on external actors, others – such as South Africa and Uganda – have institutionalized M&E frameworks and invested in local capacity. The use of evaluation findings is most likely when embedded within government planning and budgeting processes, particularly when champions help align evidence with policy priorities and timing.

Case examples from Ghana, Zambia, Malawi, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and the Caribbean illustrate both progress and persistent challenges. These cases show that while external support can catalyze reforms, sustainable systems require political will, ownership, and institutional integration. Sri Lanka’s Managing for Development Results (MfDR) framework and South Africa’s Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME) stand out as models for embedding evaluation in national governance, though challenges in follow-through and uptake persist across contexts.

The review concludes that strengthening M&E systems can improve evidence-informed policymaking but must be coupled with long-term investments in institutional infrastructure and political engagement to realize full impact. Further research is needed to assess causal pathways and long-term outcomes.

## Introduction

This review addresses two core research questions: (1) What is the empirical evidence linking M&E systems strengthening to improved evaluative evidence demand, supply, and/or use? and (2) Which case examples best exemplify this evidence? Understanding these questions is critical for practitioners and policymakers who seek to enhance the relevance, quality, and utilization of evaluation findings in shaping policies and programs. If M&E systems are weak, evaluative evidence may remain underused, resulting in missed opportunities for data-driven decisions. Conversely, effective M&E structures can deepen government accountability, stimulate learning, and improve development outcomes.

In what follows, the literature review is organized into four sections. First, it examines the empirical evidence on how M&E system reforms shape the demand, supply, and use of evaluative evidence, citing illustrative studies from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. Next, it presents case examples in which M&E strengthening initiatives have been implemented, illustrating both successes and challenges. The review concludes by integrating key empirical insights that answer the first research question with standout case illustrations that address the second, thereby clarifying broader implications and gaps in current research.

## Empirical Evidence on Demand, Supply, and Use

### Empirical Evidence on Demand

Demand for evaluative evidence refers to the degree to which government officials, development partners, and civil-society actors actively seek out and value evaluation findings as inputs to decision-making. Rather than arising solely from individual requests for data, demand is heavily shaped by institutional incentives, organizational mandates, and broader political economy factors that determine whether actors perceive evaluation evidence as useful and legitimate (Chirau et al., 2022; Kanyamuna, 2021). Many studies emphasize that this demand tends to be low or sporadic in countries where M&E systems are fragmented, underfunded, or driven predominantly by donor requirements (Adams et al., 2013; Mulenga & Porter, 2013). In Ghana, for instance, Adams et al. (2013) report that policymakers in their sample were “not well aware of the purpose and utility of evaluation,” a perception reflected in the finding that only 1 %–3 % of M&E expenditures in 2009–2010 went toward evaluation activities.

Nevertheless, several authors argue that political will and top-down endorsement of M&E can generate robust domestic demand. In some African countries, high-level offices within the executive branch have championed evaluations to track development outcomes or budget performance (Chirau et al., 2022; Niringiye, 2018). Uganda’s Ministry of Finance and Office of the Prime Minister, for example, increasingly view evaluation as integral to results-based management, though monitoring still overshadows formal evaluation (Niringiye, 2018). Civil-society engagement can also boost demand by insisting on greater transparency around public expenditures and by conducting independent budget tracking (Kanyamuna, 2021). Even so, fragmented stakeholder coordination remains a barrier; Kanyamuna (2021) documents how Zambian government agencies and civil-society organizations “remained fragmented and uncoordinated in the manner they demanded M&E information,” limiting collective pressure for evaluation.

Beyond sub-Saharan Africa, a comparable theme emerges in other regions. In Sri Lanka, donor funding from the Asian Development Bank and UNDP initially drove improvements, but domestic demand rose substantially once the government adopted an MfDR framework that required ministries to present results to the President’s Office (Sivagnanasothy, 2009). In the Caribbean, the Evidence Informed Decision Making Network (EvIDeNCe) combined evidence briefs, stakeholder dialogues, and trainings to raise average self-reported “intention-to-use” scores to 6.4 out of 7 (Yearwood, 2018). While these self-reported intentions do not guarantee behavioral change, they signal a shift in attitudes and should be interpreted alongside objective uptake measures when available.

### Empirical Evidence on Supply

If demand reflects whether actors *want* evaluative evidence, supply concerns who *produces* that evidence, how it is generated, and whether it meets quality standards. Organizational resources, technical expertise, and the presence of standardized procedures all shape supply at systemic – rather than merely individual – levels (Chirau et al., 2020). A recurring concern is that in many low- and middle-income settings, national or local systems lack the resources to conduct robust evaluations, leading donors or international consultants to fill the gap (Adams et al., 2013; Mulenga & Porter, 2013). In Malawi, for instance, Kumwenda and Latib (2013, p. ii) observe that evaluation studies are “seen as a tool applied to support accountability,” often carried out by external experts with limited local involvement. Zambia shows a similar pattern: donor-led frameworks dominate data collection and analysis, which can reduce incentives for local actors to invest in their own capacity (Kanyamuna et al., 2020).

Yet a lack of local expertise is only part of the story; where evaluations are commissioned primarily for donor accountability, even available national expertise may be sidelined. South Africa’s DPME offers a contrasting model by commissioning large-scale evaluations, such as on early childhood development, and encouraging local research institutions to participate (Stewart et al., 2018). Uganda has likewise adopted a national evaluation policy that signals evaluation is not solely a donor activity (Chirau et al., 2022).  
Targeted professional-development initiatives can complement, but not substitute for, system-level reforms. Short-course trainings in Kenya, for example, produced significant knowledge gains (Wao et al., 2017). Because these interventions operate primarily at the individual level, they are most effective when paired with institutional incentives that enable newly trained staff to apply their skills within government structures.

Despite progress, challenges persist where donor standards impose rigid methodologies that may not align with local policy timelines (Witter et al., 2017). Fragmented data-management systems, limited sharing of evaluation reports, and underutilized local knowledge further restrict supply. Ethiopia’s Compassionate, Respectful, and Caring (CRC) program illustrates how supply falters when inconsistent indicator frameworks and limited resources undercut coordination between government and donors (Minyihun et al., 2022). These inconsistencies stemmed in part from separate planning structures that prevented the CRC’s M&E functions from integrating with the broader institutional system, highlighting coordination – not merely resourcing – as a critical bottleneck.

### Empirical Evidence on Use

Use of evaluative evidence concerns the extent to which findings influence policies, budgets, and ongoing programmatic decisions. Multiple sources indicate that even when there is modest demand and an emerging local evaluation supply, applying the results in practice is far from guaranteed (Mulenga & Porter, 2013; Adams et al., 2013). Political incentives, patronage networks, and vested interests often shape which recommendations are adopted and which are ignored. In Zambia, for example, an evaluation of the Farmer Input Subsidies Programme (FISP) highlighted inefficiencies but led to “minimal policy shifts” because those measures conflicted with entrenched political interests (Mulenga & Porter, 2013). Likewise, Adams et al. (2013) found that Ghana’s Guinea Worm Eradication Program evaluation had little impact on national health policy due to limited dissemination and a lack of formal integration channels.

Nonetheless, there are documented successes. Chirau et al. (2022) note that in Uganda and South Africa, systematic M&E frameworks linked to national planning helped elevate evaluation results to decision-making platforms. In Uganda, certain evaluations commissioned by the Government Evaluation Facility (GEF) influenced managerial decisions, if not always leading to broad policy reforms (Niringiye, 2018). South Africa’s DPME has, on occasion, integrated findings on service delivery interventions into policy discussions at cabinet or ministerial levels (Stewart et al., 2018). Even partial successes, such as adjusting the design of a health intervention or informing a minister’s budget speech, signal that evaluation findings can shape government priorities when the process includes high-level review and when the evidence aligns with immediate policy concerns (Witter et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2019).

A final critical element enabling use is the presence of “champions” or embedded researchers who translate findings into accessible policy briefs or presentations timed to legislative or budget cycles (Williamson et al., 2019). In many settings, the structural integration of evaluations into existing systems, such as budgeting or strategic planning, remains weak (Kanyamuna, 2021). Yet, cases from Sri Lanka, where the Ministry of Plan Implementation holds regular progress review meetings chaired by top political leaders, highlight that consistent high-level engagement can elevate the status of M&E evidence (Sivagnanasothy, 2009).

## Case Examples of M&E Systems Strengthening Impact

The following country illustrations translate the empirical patterns above into concrete experiences, clarifying how reforms unfold in practice and under what conditions they influence demand, supply, and use.

In **Ghana**, the Joint Assessment for Strengthening M&E and Statistics (JASMES) attempted to integrate evaluation into policy cycles by involving the Ministry of Finance in commissioning studies and disseminating results. However, low domestic funding for M&E (1%–3% of overall M&E budgets in 2009–2010) limited broader institutionalization (Adams et al., 2013). The Guinea Worm Eradication Program evaluation was technically sound but faced poor dissemination, revealing how insufficient follow-up mechanisms undercut the practical impact of evaluation findings.

**Zambia** offers multiple examples of the complexities of M&E reform. Efforts to establish a Whole-of-Government M&E System (WoGM&ES) reflect a push for unified standards and better coordination among ministries (Kanyamuna, 2021). While some evaluations from the Sixth National Development Plan informed the subsequent Seventh Plan (Chirau et al., 2022), many studies remain donor-driven, limiting government ownership and use. The Zambian health sector’s reliance on external funding for Annual Progress Reports illustrates the conflict between donor accountability needs and local priority setting (Kanyamuna et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the Farmer Input Subsidies Programme evaluation is a cautionary tale of how political interference can derail potential evidence-based reforms (Mulenga & Porter, 2013).

In **Malawi**, the National Cash Transfer Programme underscores the role of external evaluations funded by international donors. Findings were partially adopted, leading to some programmatic adjustments (Kumwenda & Latib, 2013). Yet, the relative absence of a strong, government-led M&E policy structure meant that the impetus for evaluation remained externally motivated, and local capacity to conduct or utilize studies remained underdeveloped.

Moving beyond Africa, **Sri Lanka**’s experience with the MfDR approach and a web-based electronic M&E system (ePMS) shows that embedding evaluation in high-level political review can raise demand and expedite use. Ministries were required to present results regularly to the President’s Office, illustrating “the importance of top-level political engagement in driving M&E integration” (Sivagnanasothy, 2009). Yet, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depended greatly on ongoing technical support from donors and a local culture of accountability.

In the **Caribbean**, the EvIDeNCe Network’s approach to co-producing policy briefs with stakeholders and hosting dialogues exemplifies how to align supply with immediate policymaker needs (Yearwood, 2018). The emphasis on “intention-to-use” metrics, while not a direct measure of actual policy shifts, signals that such structured interventions can at least generate a stronger climate of openness to research findings.

Finally, **South Africa**’s Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation stands out as a model for institutionalizing evaluations at scale. The DPME, working with national departments, commissions evaluations on priority topics and fosters local capacity through the National School of Government and partnerships like the Africa Evidence Network (Stewart et al., 2018). Some findings have informed policy, although the reliance on informal communication channels and the sporadic adoption of recommendations in certain sectors demonstrate that systemic challenges remain.

## Conclusion

A coherent narrative emerges across both empirical studies and case examples. Demand for evaluative evidence rises when political champions embed M&E requirements into budgeting and planning processes and when civil-society and legislative actors insist on transparency. Supply improves when governments formalize evaluation policies, invest in local expertise, and create repositories that facilitate access to high-quality studies. Evidence use, in turn, depends on aligning evaluation timelines with policy cycles, employing knowledge brokers to translate findings, and ensuring that incentive structures, both political and bureaucratic, reward uptake.

Case examples reinforce these points: Ghana and Malawi show how donor dependence limits ownership; Zambia highlights the decisive role of political economy barriers; Sri Lanka and South Africa demonstrate that routine integration and high-level oversight can translate evaluations into action. Moving forward, researchers should prioritize comparative, longitudinal designs that can test causal pathways and unpack how contextual factors, such as regime type, fiscal space, and civil-society density, mediate the impact of M&E reforms on development outcomes. Only through such rigorous inquiry can policymakers tailor institutional architectures that reliably turn data into decisions.

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