# What are the key factors influencing the success (or not) of evidence-generating activities (e.g., an evaluation) in influencing specific policy and/or programmatic decisions?

## Executive Summary

This literature review explores the critical factors that influence whether evidence-generating activities – such as evaluations – successfully inform policy and programmatic decisions. Drawing on 32 scholarly sources, it identifies the interplay between evidence quality, stakeholder dynamics, institutional environments, and broader political and cultural factors. The review addresses a central concern: how to enhance the effectiveness of evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) across diverse contexts.

Key findings underscore that high-quality, credible, and contextually relevant evidence is foundational, particularly when communicated in accessible formats. However, even strong evidence gains influence only when decision-makers are engaged early and trust is cultivated through sustained relationships, co-production, and knowledge brokering. Institutional structures – such as South Africa’s SEIAS or Denmark’s knowledge systems – can further embed evidence use, particularly when supported by incentives and leadership.

Barriers remain significant. Evidence is often misused for symbolic purposes, capacity constraints undermine uptake, and ideological resistance or policy complexity can blunt even robust findings. Cultural resistance, information overload, and the political economy of knowledge production also impede meaningful integration of evidence into decision-making.

The review underscores that successful evidence use is rarely the result of technical quality alone. Rather, it depends on aligning credible research with stakeholder priorities, institutional incentives, and political realities. To improve impact, policymakers and practitioners must foster co-creation, invest in capacity-building, and address systemic disincentives and distortions. Further comparative research is recommended to explore evidence systems across nations and the long-term effects of evidence-driven reforms, providing deeper insights into how different contexts shape EIDM efficacy.

## Introduction

This literature review addresses the research question: “What are the key factors influencing the success (or not) of evidence-generating activities (e.g., an evaluation) in influencing specific policy and/or programmatic decisions?” Synthesizing findings from a refined compilation of 32 scholarly articles and reports, the review identifies the critical drivers and barriers shaping the effectiveness of evidence-generating activities in policy and programmatic contexts. Its purpose is to illuminate how evaluations and other evidence forms can inform decision-making across diverse settings, including public health in South Africa (Edwards et al., 2019), employment policy in Denmark (Kelstrup & Jørgensen, 2024), and municipal governance in Poland (Kupiec & Wrońska, 2024). Understanding these factors is vital for enhancing evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM), a process increasingly central to tackling complex societal challenges amid growing demands for accountability and efficacy.

The review is organized to construct a logical narrative, progressing from foundational elements to enabling processes, contextual influences, and obstacles. It includes the following sections: "Evidence Quality and Relevance," examining evidence characteristics; "Stakeholder Engagement and Relationships," exploring relational dynamics; "Contextual and Structural Influences," assessing institutional and political environments; "Additional Influences on Evidence Uptake," detailing secondary factors like incentives; and "Barriers and Challenges to Evidence Use," analyzing key impediments. This structure collectively addresses the research question by tracing the interplay of evidence attributes, human interactions, and systemic conditions.

## Evidence Quality and Relevance

The quality, credibility, relevance, and presentation of evidence are pivotal in determining its influence on policy and programmatic decisions. High-quality evidence, grounded in methodologies perceived as (sufficiently) rigorous by the evidence users, fosters credibility and trust. Stewart et al. (2019) advocate for systematic evidence synthesis over single studies, noting its robustness in supporting Southern African policymakers. Kelstrup and Jørgensen (2024) highlight the Danish Ministry of Employment’s reliance on randomized controlled trials (RCTs), which enhanced uptake by providing high-certainty causal insights. However, Alkin and King (2017) warn that poor technical quality – termed misevaluation – erodes credibility, leading to misuse when decision-makers exploit flawed findings.

Relevance to policy needs and local contexts is equally essential. In a study of knowledge translation in African health systems, Edwards et al. (2019) found that policymakers prioritized research addressing specific health challenges, like disease burden, over generic studies. Lorenc et al. (2014) noted that transport practitioners rejected abstract academic research, favoring data illuminating local realities. Tailored communication bolsters relevance; Poot et al. (2018) recommend concise, audience-specific formats – e.g., infographics – that align with decision-makers’ needs, a tactic Aiyede (2023) applies via message boxes for Nigerian policymakers. Stewart (2022) exemplifies this in South Africa, where policy-oriented reporting and co-produced syntheses, timed with SEIAS requirements, increased influence.

Examples illustrate these dynamics. Ghana’s sanitation data, presented via SMS and infographics (Amisi et al., 2021), drove policy action by aligning with community needs. Conversely, abstract transport research (Lorenc et al., 2014) or misevaluated studies (Alkin & King, 2017) faltered due to irrelevance or distrust. Yarber et al. (2015) show that practical, accessible tools from train-the-trainer programs enhanced public health decisions. Thus, evidence must be credible, contextually resonant, and effectively communicated to bridge research and practice.

## Stakeholder Engagement and Relationships

Stakeholder dynamics – engagement, trust, and collaboration – also critically shape evidence use. Early and sustained involvement of decision-makers enhances ownership and relevance. Edwards et al. (2019) found that co-production in African health systems, with policymakers shaping research from the outset, boosted uptake. Goldman and Pabari (2020) report similar success across African cases, where steering committees and joint problem framing built trust. Amisi et al. (2021) highlight Ghana’s sanitation initiative, where dialogue platforms enabled collective sense-making, amplifying evidence influence.

Trust-based relationships are foundational. Oliver and Cairney (2019) argue that long-term connections position researchers as “trusted voices,” a view Clark et al. (2024) support with leadership and knowledge broker roles fostering organizational trust. MacKillop et al. (2020) define knowledge brokering as a relational process requiring empathy and negotiation, enhancing credibility when brokers are embedded in policy teams. Jordaan et al. (2018) demonstrate this through mentorship in South Africa and Malawi, where deepening trust enabled evidence application. Bundi (2016) notes Swiss parliamentarians’ reliance on evaluations grew with oversight committee trust.

Case examples underscore these mechanisms. Parliamentary oversight in South Africa leveraged evaluations for accountability (Bundi, 2016), while Benin’s co-production shifted power dynamics, enhancing evidence use (Goldman & Pabari, 2020). Duiveman’s (2020) Dutch urban planning workshops reframed cost-benefit debates, aligning interests. These relational strategies – dialogue, co-creation, and trust – embed evidence within decision-making networks, ensuring it resonates with stakeholders’ priorities.

## Contextual and Structural Influences

Political, institutional, and organizational contexts play a pivotal role in enabling or constraining evidence uptake, shaping how evidence is prioritized, interpreted, and applied in decision-making processes. Parkhurst (2017) emphasizes the importance of transparent and accountable evidence governance systems, arguing that institutional arrangements must balance scientific rigor with democratic legitimacy to enhance evidence use. This is vividly illustrated in South Africa’s Socio-Economic Impact Assessment System (SEIAS), which mandates evidence-based assessments for draft policies before Cabinet submission (Stewart, 2022). SEIAS requires departments to weigh policy options against evidence of their socioeconomic impacts, supported by a specialist unit that ensures compliance, thereby embedding evidence into formal policymaking structures. Similarly, Kelstrup and Jørgensen (2024) contrast Denmark’s Ministry of Employment, where a knowledge bank ("Jobeffekter.dk") and budget integration with the Ministry of Finance institutionalized evidence use, with the Ministry of Children and Education’s limited uptake amid politicized 2014 school reforms. The employment ministry’s knowledge bank systematically accumulates high-certainty studies of effect sizes – such as RCTs – offering civil servants a reservoir of "what works" data that directly informs ministerial advice, while its integration into budgeting creates economic incentives for evidence-based interventions. In contrast, the education ministry’s reliance on diverse knowledge types, shaped by competing stakeholder views on what constitutes valid evidence, reduced consistency and limited evidence influence (Kelstrup & Jørgensen, 2024). Lorenc et al. (2014) further highlight sector-specific evidence cultures, noting that transport policymakers often prioritize political feasibility over research rigor, favoring data that aligns with practical or electoral realities over abstract academic findings. These examples illustrate that institutional frameworks aligned with clear evidence processes, coupled with shared stakeholder understanding of credible evidence, significantly enhance integration, whereas misalignment – due to competing priorities, contested evidence definitions, or entrenched norms – creates substantial barriers.

Institutional capacity is a key enabler, extending beyond mere access to evidence to encompass the systems and skills needed to make it actionable. OECD (2020) stresses systemic capacity-building – encompassing data management systems, leadership commitment, and knowledge brokers – as critical for sustaining evidence-informed policy-making (EIPM). This is exemplified in Lithuania’s EU-driven evaluation system, where the Ministry of Finance coordinates evaluations with steering groups of civil servants managing European Structural and Investment Funds (Martinaitis et al., 2018). These evaluations focus on standard questions (e.g., effectiveness, efficiency), producing structured, policy-relevant data that supports instrumental improvements in program implementation – demonstrating how capacity can translate evidence into practical outcomes. Head (2015) notes that policy areas with established approaches, such as Washington State’s criminal justice system, facilitate evidence use through specialized institutes like the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP). WSIPP conducts meta-analyses of high-quality evaluations to rank program effectiveness, providing legislators with clear, comparative cost-benefit insights that guide funding decisions – a model of how institutional infrastructure can bridge research and policy. Informal networks also play a vital role; Punton (2016) describes how evidence champions and feedback loops in Southern African organizations reinforce norms of evidence use, creating a culture where staff routinely seek and apply research findings. For instance, in Malawi, mentorship programs linked to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems fostered iterative learning, amplifying evidence influence over time (Stewart et al., 2019). Capacity-building efforts must extend beyond individual skills to include robust organizational infrastructure – such as data repositories, trained personnel, and formalized processes – ensuring evidence is not only available but actionable within decision-making frameworks across diverse contexts.

Political windows and crises further shape opportunities for evidence uptake, often acting as catalysts or constraints depending on timing and context. Head (2015) and Goldman and Pabari (2020) highlight how elections, crises, or high-stakes policy moments – such as South Africa’s evidence-driven COVID-19 response under President Ramaphosa (Stewart, 2022) – create leverage points for evidence to gain traction. During the pandemic, Ramaphosa’s administration relied on scientific advisors like Professor Salim Abdul Karim, whose evidence-informed recommendations shaped lockdown policies, illustrating how crises can elevate evidence when aligned with political leadership. Rigid bureaucratic structures with entrenched epistemological orientations often suppress knowledge that threatens their authority or challenges established problem frames. Daviter (2015) argues that political and administrative organizations process information through “organizational epistemologies” – internalized conventions of knowing that act as perceptual filters – leading to the rejection of conflicting evidence even when it is policy-relevant. He illustrates this with cases where agencies ignored research reframing homelessness as a mental health issue because it clashed with their existing jurisdictional mandates (Daviter, 2015, pp. 497–500)**.** Raymaekers et al. (2025) find that Flanders’ rational organizational culture, emphasizing efficiency and results, supported EIDM only when paired with sufficient resources like accessible evidence and staff time; without these, cultural openness alone was insufficient. Bundi (2016) adds that parliamentary oversight in Switzerland leverages evaluations to address bureaucratic drift – where agencies deviate from legislative intent – but its effectiveness wanes under information overload, as committees struggle to process dense reports. The interplay of political timing, institutional design, and cultural openness underscores the need for adaptive strategies that account for these contextual nuances. Daviter (2015) contends that the extent to which conflicting evidence can enter and influence the policy process hinges on the contestability of organizational knowledge structures. In decentralized or fragmented systems, overlapping mandates and inter-organizational competition create access points for alternative knowledge to gain traction. By contrast, in tightly integrated or vertically specialized systems – such as central banks – knowledge that contradicts dominant paradigms is often excluded from consideration (Daviter, 2015, pp. 498–500). Thus, supportive contexts – whether through formal systems like SEIAS or informal networks – enhance integration, while misalignment due to politics, capacity gaps, or rigidity limits its transformative potential.

## Incentives and Motivational Drivers

Incentives shape engagement and adoption of evidence-generating activities, influencing whether evidence is used substantively or superficially. Kupiec and Wrońska (2024) found that voluntary evaluation adoption in Polish municipalities, driven by a desire to assess program effectiveness and improve implementation, consistently led to instrumental use – such as fine-tuning interventions based on recipient feedback. For instance, municipal officials who initiated evaluations to understand aid recipients’ experiences used findings to adjust program delivery, enhancing outcomes like service accessibility – a clear example of intrinsic motivation driving practical application. In contrast, coercive motives, such as legal mandates or funder requirements, often led to symbolic use, where evaluations were conducted to meet external expectations without altering practices, as when Polish departments produced reports to comply with city council demands. This suggests mandates can drive compliance but may not foster meaningful change unless paired with internal commitment (Kupiec & Wrońska, 2024). Punton (2016) extends this insight in Southern Africa, where organizational rewards – such as recognition for evidence use – and self-efficacy built through training fostered a “virtuous circle” of demand and application. In one case, staff trained in evidence appraisal gained confidence to address workplace challenges, like optimizing resource allocation, leading to increased demand for research and routine integration into decision-making over time. These incentives interact with context; in South Africa, funding incentives tied to SEIAS compliance (Stewart, 2022) compelled departments to align research with policy timelines, embedding evidence structurally by linking it to budgetary approval – a tangible reward reinforcing use. This interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators highlights that both can drive evidence use when aligned with organizational goals, rather than one being inherently superior (Punton, 2016; Stewart, 2022). Fostering motivation alongside tangible rewards can create a self-reinforcing cycle of evidence use, particularly when aligned with local needs, amplifying its influence across diverse settings. The interplay between incentives and motivation is further illuminated by the mechanisms through which they operate. Jakobsen et al. (2019) emphasize that organizational systems – such as performance audits or feedback loops – reinforce evidence use by making it a rewarded behavior, aligning individual actions with institutional priorities. In public health settings, managers who tied evidence application to staff evaluations saw sustained uptake, as employees perceived direct benefits to their roles. Similarly, Goldman and Pabari (2020) note that in Benin, voluntary participation in evidence forums was incentivized by the opportunity to influence national policy, motivating non-state actors to unify their evidence presentation and sway government decisions. This contrasts with coercive contexts, where compliance-driven evaluations, as Martinaitis et al. (2018) observe in Lithuania, often served symbolic accountability to EU funders rather than substantive reform – 17% of respondents reported evaluations were conducted primarily to meet reporting mandates. The political economy also shapes incentives; Oliver (2022) critiques how funding biases toward RCTs can skew research agendas, yet when funders like South Africa’s PSPPD align studies with decision timelines (Stewart, 2022), they create positive incentives for timely, relevant evidence production. These findings underscore that incentives are most effective when they align individual agency with systemic goals, leveraging both intrinsic drivers (e.g., desire for improvement) and extrinsic rewards (e.g., recognition, funding) to bridge evidence and action. For example, Clark et al. (2024) found that organizations embedding EIDM expectations into performance reviews saw staff motivation rise, as recognition reinforced a culture of evidence use, while Edwards et al. (2019) highlight how resource constraints in African health systems diminished motivation absent financial incentives – illustrating the delicate balance required to sustain engagement in resource-scarce environments.

## Individual Motivations and Skills

Individual factors drive evidence engagement, serving as critical linchpins in translating research into policy and practice. Jakobsen et al. (2019) identify motivation, perceived research usefulness, and skills as key enablers in public health policy-making, supported by extensive empirical evidence. Motivation stems from personal beliefs about evidence’s value – policymakers who see research as trustworthy and timely are more likely to seek it out, as seen in seven studies where positive attitudes correlated with uptake. Perceived usefulness amplifies this; when officials viewed evidence as directly applicable to their work – such as adapting interventions to local disease burdens – they prioritized its use over intuition (Edwards et al., 2019). Skills, including the ability to access, appraise, and adapt research, are equally vital. Champions and knowledge brokers, like those in South Africa’s UJ-BCURE program (Jordaan et al., 2018), bridged gaps by mentoring officials to apply evidence practically – e.g., co-producing evidence maps that synthesized data into actionable policy insights. In Malawi, mentees used these skills to refine M&E systems, demonstrating how tailored training enhances capacity and confidence. Oliver and Cairney (2019) highlight researcher advocacy roles – e.g., “honest brokers” who expand options neutrally versus “issue advocates” who push specific solutions – enhancing influence when aligned with policy narratives, though risking bias if overly partisan. In Benin, motivated non-state actors unified evidence presentation through dialogue platforms, swaying policymakers by leveraging collective credibility (Goldman & Pabari, 2020), showing how individual agency can amplify broader dynamics.

The depth of these factors is evident in their interplay and contextual dependencies. Punton (2016) underscores self-efficacy as a motivational driver – training that boosts confidence, as in Southern African staff applying evidence to workplace challenges, fosters a proactive stance toward research use. This aligns with Yarber et al.’s (2015) findings, where 88% of train-the-trainer participants reported acquiring new knowledge, and 78% felt it improved their decision-making skills, though 42% cited time constraints as a barrier – highlighting how motivation wanes without structural support. Clark et al. (2024) add that embedding knowledge broker roles within organizations enhances individual capability; in one health agency, brokers synthesized evidence into briefs, enabling managers to act swiftly on public health priorities. MacKillop et al. (2020) emphasize relational skills – empathy, negotiation, and trust-building – as critical for brokers, noting their success when embedded in policy teams, as in Hoeijmakers et al.’s (2013) deliberative forums that shaped local health policies. Conversely, Aiyede (2023) warns that without incentives or training, academics’ motivation to engage policymakers falters, as promotion systems reward publishing over impact – a systemic barrier to skill application. These insights reveal that individual motivations and skills are not static but dynamic, shaped by training, role clarity, and institutional reinforcement, collectively determining evidence’s practical influence. For instance, Raymaekers et al. (2025) found that Flemish government officials with extensive experience in public administration perceived higher EIDM use, likely due to accumulated skills and contextual familiarity, while OECD (2020) stresses that skills like stakeholder engagement and evidence synthesis must be collective, not individual, to sustain systemic change – underscoring the need for a supportive organizational scaffold to maximize individual contributions.

## Barriers and Challenges to Evidence Use

Numerous obstacles undermine the influence of evidence-generating activities, ranging from misuse to structural complexities. These barriers, detailed below with examples and implications, reveal the fragility of EIDM when confronted with human, organizational, and systemic challenges.

### Misuse

Misuse – intentional or unethical distortion of evidence – severely limits its utility. Alkin and King (2017) categorize misuse across commissioning (e.g., symbolic evaluations for funding), process (e.g., delaying data access), and findings (e.g., cherry-picking), as when administrators misrepresented results to fit agendas. Kupiec and Wrońska (2024) observed symbolic use in Poland, where evaluations satisfied legal requirements without influencing decisions, eroding trust. Oliver and Cairney (2019) note political misunderstandings, where evidence is rejected if it clashes with values, as in partisan cherry-picking during UK policy debates. Lorenc et al. (2014) found transport policymakers used evidence tactically to legitimize pre-decided actions, reducing its substantive impact. This misuse undermines credibility and shifts focus from problem-solving to political posturing, stunting evidence’s transformative potential.

### Capacity Gaps and Resource Constraints

Insufficient capacity – skills, time, and resources – hampers evidence use. Edwards et al. (2019) highlight that policymakers often lack the technical background to synthesize research themselves, a challenge mirrored by OECD’s (2020) findings of global capacity shortfalls among civil servants. Clark et al. (2024) detail staff turnover in health organizations, where knowledge loss disrupted EIDM continuity – e.g., an Ontario case with untrained managers unable to guide staff. Yarber et al. (2015) note time and funding constraints in public health, with 42% of trainees citing workload as a barrier to applying evidence. These gaps create a vicious cycle: limited capacity reduces evidence use, which in turn limits investment in capacity-building, perpetuating reliance on intuition over data.

### Ideological Resistance and the Political Economy of Knowledge Production

Political and ideological resistance often overrides even the most robust evidence, particularly when it challenges prevailing beliefs or entrenched interests. Aiyede (2023) highlighted that some African policymakers may reject research that conflicts with dominant ideologies, a dynamic worsened by donor-driven agendas that frequently sideline locally produced knowledge. Similarly, Oliver and Cairney (2019) argue that policymakers operate within the bounds of "bounded rationality," favoring beliefs, political expediency, and stakeholder pressures over empirical findings – an insight echoed by Head (2015), who describes instances of political leaders prioritizing short-term support over evaluation results.

These forms of resistance are deeply intertwined with the broader political economy that shapes which types of evidence are produced, funded, and ultimately valued. Oliver (2022) critiques the dominance of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in evidence hierarchies, warning that this emphasis marginalizes qualitative insights and local knowledge, particularly in areas like social policy. In the African context, donor influence often skews the research agenda, as seen in Ghana where externally funded sanitation initiatives initially sidelined community-led evidence until deliberate efforts – such as dialogue platforms – enabled more balanced engagement (Amisi et al., 2021).

Even in high-capacity systems, ideological conflict and institutional culture can blunt evidence uptake. Kelstrup and Jørgensen (2024) contrast Denmark’s employment ministry, where evidence was readily embraced, with the education sector’s resistance to 2014 reforms, which faced strong teacher opposition that diluted research influence. These examples underscore a recurring challenge: evidence does not exist in a vacuum but must navigate complex political landscapes, institutional norms, and competing power structures. Addressing these barriers requires not only diversifying what counts as legitimate evidence but also reshaping the incentives and structures that govern its production and use.

### Structural Complexity and Policy Accumulation

Structural complexity complicates evidence attribution and utility. Adam et al. (2018) introduce “policy accumulation” – layering new instruments atop old ones – creating complexity and interaction effects that obscure causal links. For instance, EU emissions policies yielded varied outcomes across countries due to differing policy mixes, challenging quasi-experimental evaluations. Daviter (2015) adds that “epistemologically closed” agencies filter out evidence that conflicts with their institutional logic or problem definitions, as the observed case of social service agencies ignoring homelessness research that reframed the issue as a mental health need. Bundi (2016) notes Swiss parliamentary overload, where excessive information reduced evaluation focus. This complexity diminishes evidence’s clarity and political utility, as nuanced findings struggle to inform dense, interdependent systems.

### Cultural Resistance and Information Overload

Cultural and informational barriers further impede uptake. Raymaekers et al. (2025) identify cultural resistance in Flanders, where technical staff undervalued EIDM, preferring established norms. OECD (2020) and Perl et al. (2018) highlight information overload and disinformation, respectively, with social media amplifying “post-fact” distortions during Brexit, eroding trust in expertise. Punton (2016) notes psychological resistance in Southern Africa, where evidence contradicting beliefs was ignored. These barriers – cultural inertia and data deluge – overload decision-makers, fostering skepticism and reducing evidence’s impact on practice.

These challenges – misuse eroding trust, capacity gaps limiting skills, resistance prioritizing politics, complexity clouding attribution, and cultural/informational overload fostering doubt – collectively undermine EIDM. They suggest that even robust evidence struggles without strategies to align it with human and systemic realities.

## Conclusion

This review reveals that evidence-generating activities succeed in influencing policy and programmatic decisions through interdependent factors. High-quality, relevant evidence (Stewart et al., 2019) is foundational, amplified by tailoring to local needs (Edwards et al., 2019) and clear presentation (Poot et al., 2018). Stakeholder trust and co-production (Goldman & Pabari, 2020) enhance uptake, as do supportive institutional systems like SEIAS (Stewart, 2022) and governance frameworks (Parkhurst, 2017). Incentives (Kupiec & Wrońska, 2024), motivations (Jakobsen et al., 2019), and cognitive framing (Cantarelli et al., 2023) further drive use, though tempered by barriers like misuse (Alkin & King, 2017), capacity gaps (OECD, 2020), resistance (Aiyede, 2023), and complexity (Adam et al., 2018). These factors interact – e.g., credible evidence with strong relationships amplifies impact (Amisi et al., 2021) – demonstrating the necessity of integrating technical rigor with relational and systemic strategies across diverse contexts.

Policymakers and evaluators can leverage these insights by incentivizing voluntary evidence use (Punton, 2016), fostering co-production (Duiveman, 2020), and building legitimate evidence systems (Parkhurst, 2017). Yet, gaps persist: the political economy’s funding biases (Oliver, 2022) and digital misinformation’s rise (Perl et al., 2018) require deeper exploration. Future research should prioritize comparative analyses of evidence systems across nations (Martinaitis et al., 2018) and longitudinal studies of incentive impacts, refining EIDM’s practical effectiveness in real-world settings.

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