

Africa Evidence Network and Zimbabwe Evidence-Informed Policy Network Roadshow Report

05 February 2016

Crowne Plaza Monomotapa Hotel,
Harare



Funded by



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1. Introduction

The Africa Evidence Network (AEN) has partnered with local African networks in order to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) in Southern Africa. Some of the networks include the Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Network (ZiepNet), Policy Action Network within the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa, and the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR) in Malawi. Through a series of roadshows, the AEN seeks to promote the activities of the network to various stakeholders in evidence-informed decision-making. The first of a series of roadshows to promote the production and use of evidence amongst key role players in Africa was organised by the ZeipNET and was held in Harare at the Crown Plaza Monomatapa Hotel on 5 February, 2016. The event was attended by 47 delegates (11 female and 36 male) from a range of professions in the evidence and policy sphere .i.e. government officials, academics, businesses. This report presents the proceedings of the one day roadshow held.

2. The roadshow proceedings

To start the roadshow, ZeipNET and AEN provided an overview of their initiatives in promoting evidence-informed policy-making. After this, UJ-BCURE showcased their EIDM initiatives through a film highlighting UJ-BCURE's workshop and mentoring approaches in promoting EIDM in South Africa and Malawi. This showcase was followed by an overview from the AEN of its activities, progress, and upcoming events. The 2016 Conference to be hosted at the Council for Social and Industrial Research (CSIR) generated great interest from the participants. Following the presentation, a total of twenty-six participants signed up to be members of the AEN. The following section gives an overview of the road show proceedings.

2.1 Keynote address

Following the presentations by ZeipNET and AEN Professor C.J Chetsanga, Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), provided a keynote address. Prof Chetsanga highlighted the Zimbabwean government's commitment to sponsoring development projects that are linked to policy formulation and implementation strategies. He emphasised the use of evidence in decision-making as being critical, and stated that decisions made by the 'triple helix', - a tripartite partnership between those in government, academia, and industry - must apply an evidence-based approach. Prof Chetsanga also highlighted that the policy development measures adopted by governments play a critical role in policy-making; there is a need for subsequent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to evaluate the success of policies. He concluded his address by commending ZeipNET's efforts in promoting evidence-informed policy in Zimbabwe. The keynote address was followed by panel discussions.

2.2 Panel discussions

The panellists were Gordon Chigumira, Executive Director of the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis: Research Unit (ZEPARU); Ms. Constance Zhanje, Director of Research Development, Ministry of Trade and Commerce; and Artwell Kadungure, a Senior Research Fellow-Training and Support Centre (TARSC). The role of the panellists was to present their perspectives on evidence use and policy based on their experiences in their fields of employment. Following the keynote address, to initiate discussion, the panellists began with responses and comments to Prof Chetsanga's address.

Some of the comments were that the keynote address depicted evidence as being context specific and varying across countries as opposed to homogenous. Therefore it is imperative to understand each country in its relevant context i.e. Zimbabwe and South Africa may have different experiences in their approaches to evidence and policy. The panel emphasised the growing need to promote evidence use in policy and inculcating a culture of this practise for both researchers and policy-makers. Evidence use was seen as useful in promoting efficient utilisation of resources in a space where resources are scarce. There was a general discussion on the roles of stakeholders and ways to promote collaboration in the production and use of evidence, as well as barriers to collaboration subsequent to the comments by panellists on the keynote address.

The roadshow in Harare focussed on the Zimbabwean EIDM context. Following are some of the highlights from the panel discussion regarding collaboration between EIDM role players, the role of research in EIDM, and the challenges faced by the various stakeholders in EIDM.

Collaboration of key players in evidence and policy use

Collaboration between people in academia, industry, and government was viewed as critical for EIDM in Zimbabwe. Shortcomings in government, civil society, industry, and academia were provided as pointing to the need for collaboration. In terms of evidence and policy in Zimbabwe, participants articulated that the government is renowned for formulating good policies, but implementation of such policies was the primary weakness. A need to design strategies in which the government can up-scale on policy implementation was identified. Researchers were encouraged to produce comprehensive and well-researched policy documents able to inform government on significant local issues. Although the country is faced with resource constraints, the participants highlighted the need to set up institutional processes that involve people within government, academia, and industry.

There was discussion about the role of government in EIDM in relation to the private sector. Contrary to popular perception, it was emphasised that the role of government is not to 'do business' as this is the private sector's mandate. Instead, the role of government is to set up a policy environment that is business friendly. Businesses should highlight to government the policies that affect them as the private sector. The Parliament Reform Unit Office within government comprises of research officers that examine issues from an evidence-informed perspective; evaluation of available evidence was deemed critical in identifying the strengths and weaknesses in policy processes.

The role of research in the context of evidence and policy in Zimbabwe

The government's role in supporting universities in Zimbabwe was highlighted as fundamental. Annually, the government receives submissions of research results from all fifteen universities in Zimbabwe which Prof Chetsanga highlighted to encourage academics to publish research and share it with those in government. He stated that the absence of research emanating from within Zimbabwe was concerning.

A key issue that was brought to the fore was academic motivation towards providing research evidence. Some of the motives for academics to share their research findings are self-driven instead of policy focussed: researchers aim to be published and promoted. These self-driven motives risk blinding academics to undertaking research that influences policy. In some cases, researchers may publish to influence other researchers rather than policy-makers which would affect the uptake of evidence in policy-making. It was generally agreed that academics have the capacity to contribute to

the policy arena, yet some do not take cognisance of their value. As a result they fail to maximise their potential.

Institutional capacities were another issue that was discussed. Research producers were encouraged to be strategic when negotiating their way into government. There is a need to identify points of entry into the government system and to ensure that they are presenting credible evidence to policy-makers. There was discussion around the general feeling that research documents lack impact; researchers are cautious to not make bold sweeping statements to influence policy. Another challenge pertaining to institutional arrangements in local universities in Zimbabwe that was discussed is that researchers are made to coordinate and set research priorities, but do not have the mandate to direct research due to resource constraints. A prime concern voiced was that universities were unable to contribute to meaningful research due to financial and resource challenges. Currently, such institutions are finding it difficult to operate. In spite of this challenge, there was a perceived expectation from government for universities to still identify and provide good research. Still, government shared that presently there were insufficient funds to maximise research capacity within universities. Universities were advised to steer away from generalised research and to produce research that is focussed and targeted at specific and relevant issues. Should funds be made available, universities were encouraged to pitch their institutions in ways that their efforts would be visible to government.

In terms of academic research, a concern raised was that the recommendations section is the smallest and yet most useful component of research reports. Recommendations are useful in creating a platform for policy papers. Researchers were advised to make use their recommendations in reaching out to policy-makers. Efforts in academic research were seen to be channelled towards the literature, methodology, and findings and not recommendations. As a result researchers were seen to address the what, why, where, but not the how. Emphasis was put on researchers to summarise and package their recommendations in ways that are relevant to policy-makers.

Challenges in evidence production and use in policy making

The general viewpoint during the panel discussions was that Zimbabwe has a legacy of developing good policies but that the successful implementation of policies is stifled by ideological and political factors. The main challenges noted to affect implementation of policies included:

- A lack of commitment by government, researchers, and industry experts to implement policy.
- Policies are driven by parties that dictate the pace that must be taken. Consequently, timely policies are not implemented. Due to such delays influential people in decision-making roles may no longer be available, causing further delays in implementation.
- Most policies in Zimbabwe are reactive rather than proactive thereby making EIDM complex.
- A lack of information about and awareness of EIDM. For instance, people at the district level were not know the provisions of the Public Health Act.

3. Key questions and comments raised from the roadshow

During the Q&A session, participants raised some key questions that, it was suggested, the AEN as an African EIDM network should be aware of. These include:

- What can be done differently in your policy-making to include the youth?

- What is being done to promote the link between universities and industry?
- Questions around policy uncertainty and inconsistencies in Zimbabwe.
- Is there evidence literacy in Zimbabwe? To what extent are people familiar with issues around evidence and policy?
- How can civil society organisations be empowered with skills to create evidence-based campaigns and also know how to harvest evidence?

4. Recommendations

Key recommendations that emerged from the discussions are provided below.

- There is a need for policy-makers to update and implement policies within useful timeframes.
- Resources must be channelled towards research and development. If funding for full research is not available, pilot studies can provide useful information on the types of research that can be pursued.
- The issue of research funding is not only a government responsibility, but there is also a need for organisations and businesses within the private sector to set up research and development units that work closely with government and feed into various Ministries.

The following recommendations centred on collaboration between people working in different sectors as a mechanism to avoid operating in silos. It was felt achieving this collaboration would support EIDM efforts in Zimbabwe.

- Multidisciplinary consortiums can contribute meaningfully to evidence and policy.
- Collaboration between researchers and government must begin at lower levels and not on a broader scale. For instance, the government is working in partnership with the University of Zimbabwe's School of Medicine, particularly with students enrolled for the Masters in Public Health course. The aim of this collaboration is to make use of evidence from communities on issues of primary health care and waste management. There is need for similar collaborative efforts across different sectors.
- Knowledge and information sharing through networks like the AEN is critical as is the establishment of communities of practice around EIDM.
- Building synergies within organisations and between networks and role players in EIDM as a strategy for enhancing collaboration.
- Embedding civil society in evidence and policy, especially through their advocacy roles to promote evidence-based advocacy.
- Establishing forums through which people at universities can collaborate with professionals in various industries.
- Media should be more involved in communicating evidence and policy.
- Key government Ministries should be open to dialogue, knowledge sharing, and networks that promote issues around EIDM.

5. Conclusions

The general consensus was that forums such as had been created by ZeipNET and the AEN are useful for creating opportunities for dialogue amongst role players in evidence production and use. In spite of minimal resources to fund initiatives on promoting evidence and policy, there is need for ongoing conversations between government, researchers, and other role players such as those in the private sector. The roadshow was useful for developing and understanding the role of evidence in policy-making, sharing ideas and information around current EIDM efforts in Zimbabwe, subjecting current evidence and policy to scrutiny, and evaluating the good and the bad of EIDM.

Participants were encouraged to make use of evidence to improve the lives of people and to consider the various role players involved in the EIDM process. Specifically, local communities of citizens within Zimbabwe were identified as a useful potential source of evidence; their involvement was considered crucial for enhancing the quality of research. Academic institutions were also highlighted as critical in providing research evidence that is useful to policy, despite funding and resource challenges. In addition, role players in evidence and policy should draw on think-tanks that contribute meaningfully to EIDM.

This report has provided an overview of the key issues discussed at the ZeipNET/AEN roadshow attended by various stakeholders with an interest in evidence and policy. The meeting stimulated conversations on how key stakeholders can make collaborative efforts towards improving the production and use of evidence in Zimbabwe. The strengths and weaknesses of the different role players were discussed and ways in which they could contribute to EIDM in Zimbabwe were discussed. The workshop concluded with a networking event for participants that created opportunities for further informal engagement of information sharing and relationship building.

The discussions and level of engagement during the panel discussion demonstrated that roadshows are an effective way of bringing together multiple partners from a variety of sectors to deliberate on issues of EIDM. Such opportunities should continually be utilised to raise awareness of the existing networks engaged with evidence and policy, and to encourage participants to join and promote networks to others.