



Centre for
Public Impact

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A brief introduction to.. Evidence-informed policymaking

Evidence-informed policymaking

Drawing on existing evidence to inform policymaking



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What is evidence-informed policymaking?

Government uses evidence to inform its decision-making by regularly and methodically collecting data – and investing in generating data – about the merits, design and implementation of its policies.

Evidence has become far easier to incorporate into policymaking, owing to the continuous increase in data availability, which facilitates an objective and timely evaluation of the costs and benefits of public investments. This indicates not only what works but also what more efficient alternatives may exist.

The methodology behind evidence is usually seen as existing on a spectrum of rigour, with systematic reviews typically featuring as the most rigorous, and expert opinion and anecdotal experience as the least rigorous types of evidence. However, rigorous evidence can only help improve outcomes if it is also actionable. This means that evidence needs to be understandable, pragmatic and demand-led, answering the questions policymakers are already asking.

Evidence-informed policymaking is best used in conjunction with systematic policy experimentation in order to broaden the evidence base.

What does it seek to achieve?

Evidence-informed policymaking seeks to increase the role of empirical data and insights in policy decisions. Since it is not always apparent whether policies work or may actually cause more harm than good, drawing on robust evidence is essential for optimising the government's positive impact. Due to the nature of politics, evidence can rarely prescribe what it is "right" to do – as implied by the original term "evidence-based policymaking" – but it can be an invaluable tool for setting realistic expectations about the advantages and shortcomings of various policy choices.

Naturally, evidence-informed policymaking should not be at odds with innovation. Where evidence is unreliable, uninformative or simply non-existent, it is essential to assess current efforts, explore novel ways to realise public goals, and possibly pilot new policies – which in turn generate evidence for future policy decisions.

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Keys to success



What are the key success factors?

- ✓ Actionable evidence that provides policymakers and practitioners with input they can easily digest, answers questions of real interest in a timely manner, and acknowledges political and operational constraints
- ✓ An evidence base that is constantly expanded and updated as new evidence is created
- ✓ Robust data validated by or sourced from independent and respected parties

Ongoing engagement with relevant research communities can dramatically increase the utilisation of evidence, since the dynamics of decision-making seldom allow sufficient time for anything but readily available data.

Gradually improving policymakers' capacity to process evidence and assess its effect on outcomes also facilitates commitment to an institutional cycle of learning.

Keys to success



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Things to look out for

The following table displays three specific challenges related to evidence-informed policymaking, as well as potential mitigating factors.

Issue	Main challenges to address	Ways to mitigate
Manipulating evidence	Cherry-picking evidence for political or other reasons can distort decision-making.	Opening up evidence to the public in order for it to undergo public scrutiny. Making the role of evidence in policymaking transparent.
Contextual differences	Findings on the effectiveness of policies in one context may not apply to other contexts.	Following a clear methodology to assess the generalisability of context-dependent data.
Outdated insights	Citizens may be lacking awareness or motivation to participate.	Sharing priorities with researchers to elicit more up-to-date and actionable evidence.

Approaches

and tools



Drawing on upfront evidence

Ensuring that existing evidence is employed in the justification, design or evaluation of government policies.



Drawing on existing evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs):

on the more rigorous end of the spectrum is the use of evidence from RCTs, where units of interest (people, households, schools, etc) are randomly assigned to control and treatment groups to compare the distinct causal effect of an intervention.

Example:

Australia's National Bowel Cancer Screening Programme was based on evidence from RCTs that demonstrated that screening and fecal testing was an effective way of reducing bowel cancer.

See: Centre for Public Impact, *The Australian National Bowel Cancer Screening Programme (NBCSP)*



Drawing on existing qualitative comparative evidence:

Building on non-standardised evidence, for example from interviews or expert opinions, already generated in a different context (in terms of geography, timing or demographics) while considering or devising a policy. Non-rigorous evidence such as expert opinions or anecdotal evidence is usually associated with a higher risk of bias; however, sometimes this can be offset if the evidence is highly actionable.

Example:

the Dutch city of Delft based its cycling infrastructure on the experience of other cities such as The Hague and Tilburg, learning from their successful implementation of cycle lanes and bike-racks. This has led to a national strategy that in turn was built on the collective experiences of the country's major cities.

See: Centre for Public Impact, *The rise of cycling in the urban areas of The Netherlands*

Fundamentals

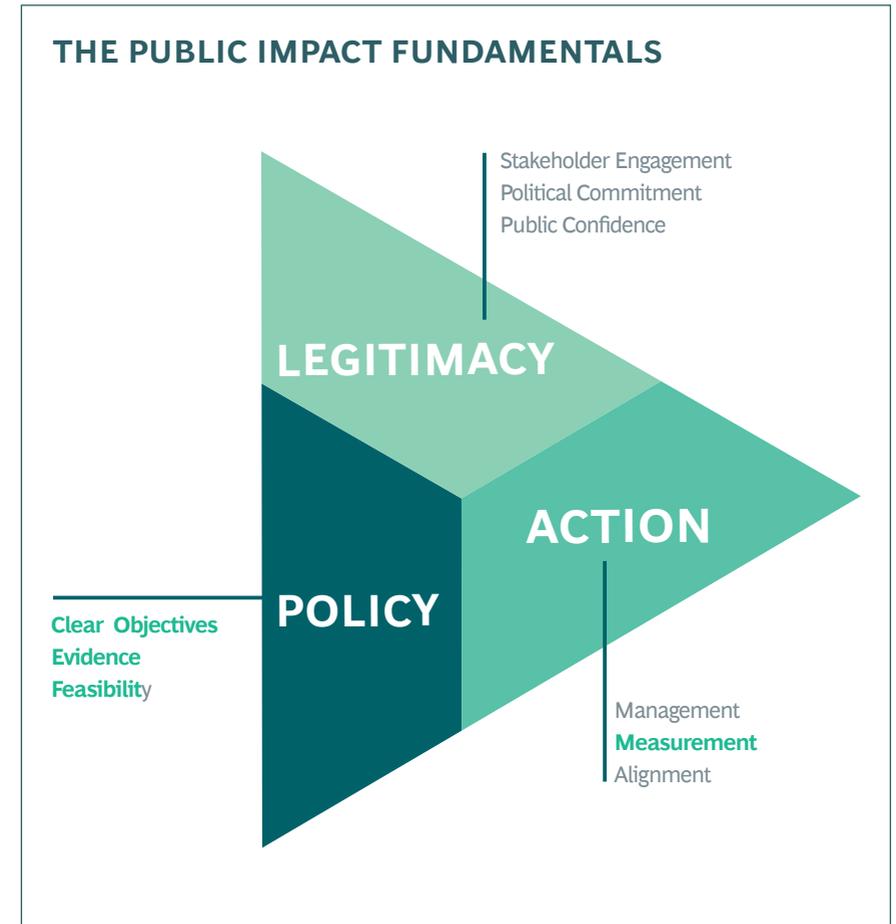
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Photography by Manuel Sousa-filipe

How does Evidence-informed policymaking help achieve greater public impact?

CPI's Public Impact Fundamentals are a systematic attempt to understand what makes a successful policy outcome and describe what can be done to maximise the chances of achieving public impact. Below, we have highlighted the elements of the Fundamentals that are most likely to be positively influenced by Evidence-informed policymaking.



Further reading

Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative,
Principles of Evidence-Based Policymaking, 2016

Jill Rutter,
Evidence and Evaluation in Policy Making,
Institute for Government, 2012

Mark Egan,
List of 19 Natural Experiments,
“economics, psychology, policy” blog, 2015



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