Needs Assessment

Evidence-Informed Policy Making Course in the Parliament of Zimbabwe

ZeipNET & INASP

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Summary

This assessment of the Parliament of Zimbabwe aimed at understanding the training needs of members of the Administration of Parliament, focusing on their capacity to access, evaluate and use research evidence to support parliamentary processes. The information obtained from the assessment will support the development of content for the VakaYiko Evidence-Informed Policy Making (EIPM) courses, which will be delivered to Parliament support staff during 2014/15.

The needs assessment, carried out at the end of a sensitization workshop, was participatory in nature and participants were drawn from departments with a remit to support the parliamentary processes through the provision of information. The following four departments participated:

- Research
- Committees
- Library
- Information Communication Technologies.

The assessment was made up of two components:

1. **A brainstorming session**
   For this component, a problem tree analysis was used as an instrument to brainstorm on the current use or non-use of research evidence and the causal-effect relationships thereof.
2. **A needs assessment survey**
   Participants also completed a needs assessment survey that consisted of questions that sought to identify knowledge and capacity gaps in sourcing, accessing and evaluating information to support decision-making processes in Parliament.

The participants who took part in the needs assessment are relevant participants for the proposed EIPM capacity-building course because within their work roles they support the parliamentary process through the provision of research evidence.

The brainstorming session indicated that the participants are fully aware of the importance and need to use research evidence to inform decisions in parliamentary processes. They are also aware of the threats and/or barriers to the use of research evidence. Participants also managed to identify capacity gaps and suggested possible interventions to support the use of evidence. These identified gaps correspond to some of the content of the planned EIPM course modules.

The results from this needs assessment will be a valuable contribution to the EIPM module content development process, as well as for the selection of the right participants.

1. Introduction

The work of the Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Network (ZeipNET) revolves around interventions to mainstream the use of evidence in policy making processes. The organization works on programmes that support the use of EIPM in Zimbabwe. These programmes include capacity-building activities and the active engagement of various stakeholders in the policy agenda.

ZeipNET is part of the VakaYiko Consortium. The consortium, which is led by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), involves five organizations working primarily in Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe to develop the capacity of policy makers to use research evidence. The project, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) under the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE), operates on the assumption that the routine use of research evidence to inform policy requires at least three factors to be in place: individuals with skills to access, evaluate and use research evidence, processes for handling research evidence in policy making departments; and a facilitating environment that identifies and responds appropriately to research uptake needs. In Zimbabwe, ZeipNET works with the Ministry of Youth Development, Ministry of Industry and Commerce as well as the Parliament of Zimbabwe to improve the use of research evidence in responds to departmental priorities.

In order to understand the needs of the Zimbabwean Parliament in as far as accessing, assessing and communicating research evidence to support the Parliamentary process, a needs assessment exercise was carried out. The findings of this assessment will support the content development process for the EIPM capacity building modules to be delivered in 2015.

2. Methodology

The needs assessment was part of a sensitization workshop in August 2014 in which participants from the Parliament of Zimbabwe familiarized themselves with the concept of EIPM.

The assessment consists of two parts:

- First, a problem tree analysis was used as a group brainstorming exercise. The aim of this was to facilitate a participative analysis of the existing research-policy situation and to get participants to identify major problems and main causal relationships. Hereby, participants were divided into groups and given a causal-effect policy making scenario. Then they were asked to describe the same scenario with its effect if policy makers did not have the chance to use research evidence. Groups had time to discuss the matter and report back to the others afterwards. After the report-back session, participants were asked to suggest possible interventions to make sure policy makers used evidence in policy making. At the end of this part, participants were asked to identify their own training needs.
- Secondly, participants completed a survey consisting of open-ended and multiple-choice questions to assess knowledge and capacities on EIPM, sourcing information for policy making and understanding research methods. In addition, suggestions for the capacity-building programme were requested. Closed-ended questions were used to assess different capacity levels on the above-mentioned topics:
    - *Full capacity* - Respondents understand the topic completely and do not need further capacity building assistance
    - *Sufficient capacity* - Respondents have enough understanding of the topic but there is a need for strengthening and clarifying some concepts and terms

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- *Some capacity* - Respondents have had some approximation to the topic before and have some skills that can be improved
- *Very limited capacity* - Respondents have heard of the existence of the topic but never experienced it practically
- *No capacity* - Respondents never heard of the topic before

3. **Results**

3.1 **Problem tree analysis**

3.1.1 Causes

The main causes that could hamper the use of evidence by policy makers can be divided and summarized as follows:

Technical skills to access, evaluate & effectively communicate research information	Policy makers not appreciating the importance of research evidence	Lack of political will and resistance to change
Lack of resources i.e. ICT infrastructure, access to scientific databases etc.	Knowledge of the existence of initiatives to support access to research evidence e.g. the Open-Access movement	Conflicting or ulterior motives
	Lack of knowledge on role played by researchers and research intermediaries	Political complexities around the policy making matrix
		Political ideologies
		Lack of accountability
		National security issues

3.1.2 Effects

Having outlined the above causes, participants described potential effects. For example, a very adverse effect on the resulting policies may lead to policies of insufficient quality, inconsistent policies, policy reversals, policy overlaps and policies that fail to address problems or achieve policy objectives, including policy implementation challenges. As a result, policy makers could lose their credibility, which is a sign of poor governance. In the worst case, this could lead to a collapse of the economy and the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe.

3.1.3 Identified capacity needs (brainstorming session)

In the brainstorming sessions, participants identified the following potential interventions that could mitigate the effects outlined above:

- Sensitization of policy makers and high level technocrats
- Improving the interface between policy makers and researchers
- Improving Information and ICT infrastructure
- Training in accessing, assessing and communicating research information

- Identification of change champions

The group discussions reflected that, in general terms, participants recognize the importance of using research evidence along with other evidence to inform decisions in parliamentary processes. Participants suggested possible interventions to promote the use of research information.

3.2 Needs assessment survey

3.2.1 Sample description

All the targeted participants (34 in total) responded to the needs assessment survey. The participants were drawn from the Research, Committees, Library, Public Relations and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) departments of the Parliament of Zimbabwe.

The group consisted of 20 female participants and 14 male participants. The average number of years that participants had worked in the Parliament of Zimbabwe was around 10 years. This indicates that most of the participants are well acquainted with institutional processes. It was also identified that most of the participants had either a Master's or a first degree.

It can be concluded that the majority of the survey participants are relevant for the EIPM training due to their experience and job roles.

3.2.2 EIPM knowledge

Two thirds of the survey participants have not participated in any course to improve access and use research information to inform decisions, policy or law making. The remaining third indicated that they participated in INASP-supported information-literacy workshops, budget reporting and analysis workshops.

75% of the survey participants agreed that they are expected to use research information in their work. 80% acknowledged the importance to use research evidence, however they self-assessed only **limited skills** to access and use research evidence.

Regarding research methods, there is **some capacity** among some of the respondents and very limited amongst others. As such, differences between qualitative and quantitative data are not clear and the rigour of research designs could not be properly assessed.

When asked to give examples of the use of research or any other type of evidence in their work, participants stated that they were mainly preparing background, research and concept papers, as well as committee reports. They also stated that they use information from stakeholders and government ministries to enhance deliberations by portfolio committees of Parliament.

Some cited examples were:

- The use of evidence on inflation rates from Zimstats to inform MPs on the current levels of inflation.

- The use of research evidence from Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries to inform MPs on the current levels of productivity in the industry.

There is **sufficient capacity** among the majority of respondents to use the various sources that can best inform policy, and the skills associated in using these. For instance, most participants (76.6%) consider data as a key type of information for their work. Public opinion is also highly considered as an important type of evidence, including evaluations. Perceptions based on personal experience were considered the least type of information relevant to their work. Two sources considered relevant in gathering and communicating information to policy makers were policy briefs and independent think-

tanks. 54% of the participants acknowledged that they use databases to search for information, but only few (35%) were able to name examples such as Google Scholar, DevInfo or HINARI/AGORA.

No single participant was able to cite a database that has direct link to Parliament work. It was identified that 60% of the participants have the skills to use search engines such as Google, Google Scholar and dogpile to look for information.

The survey showed an appreciation of the importance of EIPM among participants, including a general understanding of issues around evidence, e.g. biases. Participants agreed there was a need to further develop their limited knowledge and skills to effectively access and use research evidence and that they could do this by taking part in future EIPM courses.

3.2.3 Self-assessed capacity needs (survey)

Participants cited the following programmes/activities as the most successful and appropriate in promoting the use of evidence in policy making within the Parliament of Zimbabwe:

- Evidence literacy
- Information literacy
- Study visits and exchange programmes
- Access to information and exposure to research-oriented institutions
- Public hearings to allow legislators to hear public opinions
- Capacity-building workshops, as these enhance networking and sharing of information
- Building skills on how to access current research through reputable databases, training in policy research and analysis

Overall, participants are motivated to learn more on EIPM-related topics as expressed above.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The participants who took part in the needs assessment are relevant participants for the proposed EIPM capacity-building course because, within their work roles, they support the parliamentary process through the provision of research evidence.

The brainstorming session indicated that the participants are fully aware of the importance and need to use research evidence to inform decisions in parliamentary processes. They are aware of the threats and/or barriers to this use. Participants also managed to identify capacity gaps and suggested possible interventions to support the use of evidence. These identified gaps correspond to some of the content of the planned EIPM course modules.

The results from the needs assessment survey will be a valuable contribution to the EIPM module content development process, as well as for the selection of the right participants.