

# Evidence-Informed Policymaking Strategy

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## INTRODUCTION

Governments need data and evidence to make decisions and implement programs that effectively, equitably, and justly allocate scarce resources and meet people’s social and economic needs. For this reason, the Hewlett Foundation’s Global Development and Population Program has long supported evaluation, data collection, and research.

Our Evidence-Informed Policymaking Strategy builds on this tradition and focuses on an ambitious, long-term goal that **governments systematically use evidence to improve social and economic policies over time**. We expect to advance this goal by helping to improve country-level policy processes and systems that make evidence use integral to policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring; contributing to evidence-informed improvements in specific government policies and programs that have potential for wider influence; and fortifying the emerging field of evidence-informed policymaking. We focus on East and West Africa, and also fund global work that enables greater progress at the country level.

Recognizing that knowledge and policy problems are dynamic, we are especially interested in the institutionalized and ongoing use of evidence to set priorities, design programs, guide implementation, and iterate. We envision environments in which the use of evidence is not only a technical skill but treated as a moral responsibility and an issue of social justice and equity — an obligation to use the best available information to understand and address the needs of all people and improve their lives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Moral Case for Evidence in Policymaking,” remarks by Ruth Levine, director of the Global Development and Population Program, at the U.S. Agency for International Development’s “Evidence Day” in Washington, D.C., on September 27, 2017, [www.hewlett.org/moral-case-evidence-policy-making](http://www.hewlett.org/moral-case-evidence-policy-making).

We use the term “evidence-informed” instead of “evidence-based” because evidence is only one part of public policy. Other factors, including the expression of public preferences (through voting and ongoing civic participation), political dynamics, public-sector implementation capacity, and budget constraints do — and should — play a role.

For the purposes of this strategy, “evidence” includes traditional and new sources of data, policy research, and impact evaluation, with a particular emphasis on those that are relevant, timely, and practical for government decision making throughout the policy cycle, including implementation. Data, research, and evaluation findings can play a role in helping policymakers decide which issues to focus on, understand the scope of problems, and inform policy responses (see Box 1).

Box 1

### **EVIDENCE SHOULD PLAY A ROLE ACROSS THE POLICY PROCESS**

**Agenda setting — which issues to focus on.** Compelling research can help government officials decide which issues to prioritize. For example, research by the Senegalese think tank Consortium pour le Recherche Économique et Sociale helped put tobacco control on the top of the national policy agenda.\*

**Policy formation — how to respond.** Evaluation findings or analysis of specific data sets can help policymakers turn an identified priority into a policy response. Officials focused on improving education, for instance, may make an evidence-informed decision to improve access to or the quality of education, to target urban or rural communities, or to emphasize particular interventions such as scholarships or special school facilities.

**Policy implementation — how to adapt and improve over time.** There are countless opportunities for evidence to contribute to day-to-day program design, budget management, monitoring approaches, and course corrections.

\* See this case explained by the Think Tank Initiative in a brief ([www.thinktankinitiative.org/content/cres-curbing-tobacco-use-through-research-and-advocacy](http://www.thinktankinitiative.org/content/cres-curbing-tobacco-use-through-research-and-advocacy)) and short film ([www.thinktankinitiative.org/content/film-curbing-tobacco-use-senegal-cres-0](http://www.thinktankinitiative.org/content/film-curbing-tobacco-use-senegal-cres-0)).

This strategy presents challenges and unprecedented opportunities for data, evaluation, and research to inform policy in low- and middle-income countries. We describe the common ingredients needed for governments to increase the use of evidence in their policy decisions. We outline an approach to grantmaking and other activities “beyond the grant dollars” to

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build the field of evidence-informed policymaking. We also identify how we will track progress and highlight some of the risks that may affect our grantees' work and how successful this approach is.

## THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

Decision makers face major technical and political challenges to using evidence to inform policies. In low-income countries the challenge is particularly acute given the dearth of information and analysis about the conditions, problems, and solutions of social and economic development (see Box 2). Even when evidence is available, there is no guarantee that decision makers in the public sector will be able to find and use that evidence when they need it. Often evidence is hard to access and understand, is out of sync with the policy cycle, or fails to produce definitive recommendations. Individual and institutional incentives may lead people to cherry-pick data and research findings to support their prior beliefs or political positions, or to bypass it altogether in favor of what is politically expedient.

Box 2

### **FLYING BLIND: TRYING TO MAKE POLICY DECISIONS IN THE DARK**

Imagine a policymaker trying to design a policy that targets youth unemployment in her country. What data and evidence would she need to do this? She would need data on the scale of the problem, yet 13 of the 54 countries in Africa have no data on income poverty trends after the year 2000, making it difficult to track the rise or fall of poverty and work. Still fewer data sources are available to help her assess the causes of youth employment, with missing data on education quality and job markets. She would like information on what has worked in other places; however, on any given topic there may only be a handful of studies conducted in very different contexts. Further, there are rarely frequently updated sources of data that can indicate if particular interventions are working.

Despite these challenges, and growing consternation about a “post-truth” era in some wealthier countries, there is cause for optimism: many low- and middle-income country governments, research institutions, and advocacy organizations are increasingly demanding and using evidence to inform policy.

The appetite for evidence is driven in part by the success of the decade-long transparency and accountability movement. Open government, accountability to citizens, and transparency of government data has inspired more political and technocratic leaders to look for information that better represents the conditions in which citizens are living and the barriers to their economic and social opportunities. And they're using this information to deliver better results for their citizens.

Increasing demand from low- and middle-income country governments for evidence is also part of a larger trend toward self-determination and decreased dependence on traditional

bilateral and multilateral donors and technical agencies. Governments are less willing to have the World Bank or U.S. Agency for International Development have more data about social and economic conditions than they themselves do, or to have donor projects rather than national priorities drive investments in data collection at the country level.<sup>2</sup>

Skepticism about “cookie-cutter” program design brought in by outside experts is stimulating a demand for local expertise. And governments are finding indigenous technical capacity essential to adequately represent their interests in, say, global trade and climate negotiations. Likewise, greater democratization and professionalization of the civil service in many countries has created more space for research to inform policy decisions, and some nations are explicitly building public-sector capabilities to generate and use evidence (see Box 3).

Box 3

### **INSTITUTIONALIZING EVIDENCE: WHAT GOVERNMENTS ARE ALREADY DOING**

A recent study by Results for All identified more than 100 government strategies and mechanisms that are helping to promote the use of data and evidence in government policy and practice in countries as diverse as Chile, Malaysia, Rwanda, and Greece. For example, Colombia’s Division of Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies established a partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action and the Abdul Lateef Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to upgrade the methodologic quality of its work and to enhance the use of evaluation findings. South Africa’s Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation commissions evaluations of government programs, and the findings are deliberated at the cabinet level. The ministries of health in Kenya and Malawi and the Department of Environmental Affairs in South Africa have developed guidelines for their use of evidence. The Ghana Civil Service Training Center has developed a training program to strengthen the ability of civil servants, senior bureaucrats, and members of parliament to access, understand, and communicate evidence throughout the policymaking process. Pioneering governments from Benin to Uganda are setting up dedicated evidence or evaluation units to test the effectiveness of their programs and experimenting with ways to make sure evidence is used.

The importance of using evidence to inform policies, design and implement programs, and allocate scarce resources is more than a technical challenge. It is a moral imperative, a question of truth and equity. Without collecting the same type of information from each and every individual — or at least a representative sample of each and every type of individual — we know only about the lives, livelihoods, and opinions of the people who have the greatest access to leaders. Data are how we represent and understand people. Without basic data

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of the politics of resources and priority-setting for data collection in Africa, see the Data for African Development Working Group, *Delivering on the Data Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Center for Global Development and African Population and Health Research Center, 2014), [www.cgdev.org/publication/delivering-data-revolution-sub-saharan-africa-o](http://www.cgdev.org/publication/delivering-data-revolution-sub-saharan-africa-o).

about everyone, about their births and deaths, income and economic opportunity, and health and educational outcomes, we simply can't see them. The work of data scientists, evaluators, and researchers is fundamentally about revealing truth. Policymakers who exhibit the courage to ask for and act on the truth about the nature of policy problems and the efficacy of potential solutions have better chances of improving the lives of their fellow citizens.

Appreciation for the power of empirical information in the policy process is on the rise, and demand is growing for greater attention to evidence use. On the global stage, the UN Statistical Commission has identified 230 universal indicators to measure development progress against the 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inspired by a call for a "data revolution" to help measure and meet the new SDGs, a wide range of actors has emerged that seek to improve the quality, availability, and use of data for development. This includes traditional sources such as official statistics and administrative data as well as new, more granular and immediate sources such as satellite imagery, remote sensors, and financial transaction records. After a decade of increased investment in rigorous impact evaluations across sectors, the development community has more evidence to draw from to inform policy and design programs.<sup>3</sup>

A growing community of nongovernmental organizations globally, and quite notably in Africa, are building on strong analytical capacity and policy engagement experience to elevate the use of evidence by governments. Momentum is growing not only in terms of the number of organizations with explicit mandates to advance evidence use, but in the connections among them. For example, the Africa Evidence Network brings together African researchers, government actors, evaluation specialists, and civil-society actors dedicated to increasing the use of evidence in policymaking across the continent.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Twende Mbele, a partnership of African country governments, is collaborating on developing and implementing monitoring and evaluation systems to improve government performance.<sup>5</sup> The emergence and growth in membership and profile of these networks is one important sign of increasing opportunities to advance evidence use in Africa.

Finally, a few major donors have provided support for use of evidence in decision making. For example, the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) Research Evidence Division (RED) division is pioneering evidence-informed policymaking with its Building Capacity for Using Research Evidence (BCURE) program and its Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA) program. Likewise, the Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI), a groundbreaking program between the governments of Indonesia and Australia, seeks to improve the lives of the Indonesian people through better public policies that make use of research, analysis, and evidence. The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation has begun

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Mulgan, "Government, Knowledge and the Business of Policy Making: The Potential and Limits of Evidence-Based Policy." *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice* 1(2): 215-226. Available at [www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/ep/2005/00000001/00000002/art00005](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/ep/2005/00000001/00000002/art00005).

<sup>4</sup> See the Africa Evidence Network website, [www.africaevidencenetwork.org](http://www.africaevidencenetwork.org).

<sup>5</sup> See the Twende Mbele website, [www.twendembele.org](http://www.twendembele.org).

investing in national data systems as an integral part of major investments in sectors such as energy and agriculture.

The Hewlett Foundation is joining this small but growing community with the aim of learning from and supporting the organizations that are already helping to strengthen evidence use in their countries.

## KEY INGREDIENTS FOR EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

Policymaking is complex, unpredictable, and context-specific. Efforts to inform policy — with evidence, advocacy, or other methods — do not lend themselves to neat, linear logic models. This is especially true for efforts that span countries, sectors, and types of actors. Rather than seeking detailed logframes or systems maps to shape our work, we instead identify common ingredients that are essential for evidence-informed policymaking to take place. There are at least four common factors that, while they play out differently in different contexts, are fundamentally important to policy processes in which policy actors regularly use relevant data, research, and evaluation findings to inform decision making. Those key ingredients are as follows (each is discussed in detail below):

1. Evidence exists and is accessible to policymakers.
2. Policymakers are motivated to use evidence.
3. Policymakers have the capacity to use evidence.
4. Policymakers and policymaking bodies have relationships that facilitate the relevance and use of evidence.

### **Accessibility**

For evidence-informed policymaking to thrive, it is critical that high-quality, relevant, and timely evidence exists and is accessible to policymakers. The data need to be accessible not only within public institutions but to outside groups that can develop independent analyses and validate (or challenge) the government's assertions. Beyond basic data collection, evaluation and research efforts have to be built around real-world policy questions, and findings need to be understandable by nontechnical audiences precisely when they can be used for decision making.

While we stress the importance of evidence being policy-relevant, this does not mean evidence should always be used in direct response to a request from a government official or for a specific policy decision. Evidence can also be used to influence how policymakers and

practitioners think about issues, problems, or potential solutions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, evidence producers should have the flexibility to advance ahead-of-the-curve thinking on emerging issues, as well as evidence that challenges a current policy direction.

Country conditions, policy problems, and evidence constantly evolve; therefore, evidence must be generated and shared in an ongoing, deliberative fashion, rather than merely in response to a specific set of questions about what works in a given context or point in time. Likewise, no one methodology or type of evidence is appropriate for all policy questions. That is why we are not prescriptive about methodology, and we expect to support organizations that apply methods that balance rigor, relevance, feasibility, cost, timeliness, accuracy, reliability, and many other considerations.

## Motivation

Having access to data and information is not enough. It is also essential that policymakers are motivated to use evidence in policymaking, and researchers and intermediaries are motivated to be policy-oriented. Individual and institutional incentives influence whether government officials incorporate data, research, or evaluation findings into decision making. By definition, increasing the use of evidence is an exercise in change management and requires both in-house champions and a shift in the values and incentives driving decisions (see Box 4). Likewise, it is important to consider what motivates those who hold data to share them to serve the public interest and what motivates researchers and evaluators to make their studies policy-relevant and timely, not just academically interesting.

## Capacity

Once officials are motivated to use evidence, they need the capacity to use it. This includes being able to formulate clear policy questions, identify existing evidence relevant to policy questions, recognize and fill gaps in knowledge by generating or commissioning evidence, and form partnership with external actors that generate policy-relevant evidence.<sup>7</sup> They need to be able to find, understand, select, and apply evidence that is relevant to their decisions.

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<sup>6</sup> Laurenz Langer, Janice Tripney, and David Gough, *The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making* (London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 2016), [https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/o/PDF\\_reviews\\_and\\_summaries/Science\\_2016\\_Langer\\_report.pdf?ver=2016-04-18-142701-867](https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/o/PDF_reviews_and_summaries/Science_2016_Langer_report.pdf?ver=2016-04-18-142701-867); Department for International Development, *What Is the Evidence on the Impact of Research on International Development?* Version 1.1 (London: DFID, 2014), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089aced915d622c000343/impact-of-research-on-international-development.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See Alf Wills et al., *Evidence and Policy in South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs* (Pretoria: Department of Environmental Affairs; London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016), [www.odi.org/publications/10603-evidence-and-policy-south-africa-s-department-environmental-affairs](http://www.odi.org/publications/10603-evidence-and-policy-south-africa-s-department-environmental-affairs).

Box 4

## CHANGING POLITICAL INCENTIVES

Incentives within governments tend to play out at the country level and are generally beyond the reach of foreign funders or the global evidence-to-policy community. Yet there are a number of ways in which a broader group of actors can influence country-level incentives.

**Success stories** can pique the interest of policymakers by demonstrating that data and evidence can help them deliver. The DataImpacts.org project, for example, published 16 case studies in which new and traditional forms of data were used to address policy problems at scale. In Nairobi, Kenya for instance, mapping public transit improved routing and reduced traffic congestion; in Cali, Colombia, mapping patterns of violence helped law enforcement officials better target their work and reduce crime; and in Namibia, cellular and satellite data have helped target malaria prevention efforts.

**Networks and alliances** can elevate evidence-use champions and help them learn from others. That knowledge sharing can include identifying ways government agencies can build incentives for evidence use into day-to-day aspects of policymaking and implementation. The Alliance for Useful Evidence in the United Kingdom and the Africa Evidence Network aim to do this by bringing people together to share lessons and by shining a spotlight on successful initiatives.

**Advocacy campaigns** can shift incentives on specific decisions, and they can be part of a larger effort to make the use of data and evidence a core value people seek in government officials. For example, Evidence for Democracy in Canada led a 2016 advocacy campaign that mobilized citizen engagement and public pressure in support of the long-form census, a critical source of data for government decision making and budget allocation.

## Relationships

Finally, policymakers rarely act alone without relationships to facilitate the relevance and use of evidence. A complex and context-specific mix of actors, institutions, and dynamics determines if, when, and how evidence reaches policymakers in a way they can understand, trust, and use. For the actors in the evidence-to-policy ecosystem to understand each other, they need to have regular opportunities to connect with each other, develop relationships of mutual trust and respect, and exchange ideas and learning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Julius Court and John Young, "Bridging Research and Policy: Insights from 50 Case Studies," Overseas Development Institute Working Paper 213 (2003), [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/180.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/180.pdf).



## OUR AIMS AND APPROACH TO BUILD THE FIELD OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

The ambitious, long-term goal of this strategy is for governments to systematically and routinely use evidence to improve social and economic policies. As mentioned in the Introduction, we expect our grantmaking to have influence in three areas: in country-level policy systems and processes, in specific policy improvements that have potential for wider influence, and in the broader “field building” of evidence-informed policymaking.

Given our modest budget and lack of regional presence, our “field building” approach aims to bring coherence and connections to a previously fragmented group of actors independently working toward similar aims. We can’t fund every effort in every region, but a field approach can help take a set of issues and principles from the margins to the mainstream, and develop norms and approaches for them to be institutionalized. A coherent field can better raise the profile of evidence-informed policymaking, and mainstream language and concepts related to it.

Through grants, convening, and public engagement we will help build a field to elevate evidence-informed policymaking as a technical, political, and moral issue to improve citizen wellbeing and increase the likelihood that governments will systematically and routinely use evidence to improve social and economic policies. This effort will include strengthening institutions, providing catalytic support, making connections, showing the benefits of using evidence and the risks of failing to do so, and learning and collaborating with other funders.

### **Strengthening institutions**

We will support the emergence and strengthening of anchor institutions, particularly those that build connections between global and national work. Where possible we will offer flexible and sustained support for organizations to be responsive to the policy context in which they operate, assess policy opportunities, identify pressing evidence gaps, build relationships, engage in policy outreach, and share learning. We expect there will be an important role for intermediary organizations that bridge and translate between evidence and government actors and institutions. We believe that local scholars, evaluators, and generators of data should have a more significant voice in national, regional, and global policy dialogues. We are therefore especially interested in supporting African institutions and networks that are part of — and can shape — their country or region’s evidence-to-policy ecosystem.

The evidence-to-policy ecosystem in a given country encompasses far more actors and actions than we can ever influence. These include academies of science, institutions of higher learning, and the core government functions of data generation, such as conducting national censuses and collecting administrative and program monitoring data. We do not have capacity to influence or support these at scale. Instead, we focus on policy-oriented nongovernmental organizations that are nimble and responsive to the national, regional, or global contexts in which they operate.

## **Providing catalytic support**

In addition to longer-term support for organizations, we value fast, flexible, targeted resources that can multiply the effect of emerging opportunities, especially those related to advocacy, strategic planning and convening, and launching multistakeholder initiatives. We will support high-potential approaches to generating evidence, building capacity, and brokering relationships that have the potential to attract ongoing support from governments or other funders. We recognize that for the momentum behind evidence-informed policy to continue, its champions need to point to additional successes. Consequently, we may support a limited number of country- or policy-specific flagship reforms.

## **Making connections**

Our funding will also support organizations that have the capacity and interest to make useful connections between local and global issues, between users and producers of evidence, across countries, and across networks that span different actors. We will also support a select number of networks and coalitions that create opportunities for diverse actors to exchange ideas, share lessons, and have collective impact in fostering government use of evidence. Networks and communities of practice can generate learning, disseminate ideas, and put a spotlight on evidence leaders and exemplary practices. In doing so, a high-profile network can increase incentives for policymakers at the regional and country level to champion the use of evidence.

## **Showing the benefits of using evidence**

Our aim is to help build the case — both the fact-based and moral case — for using evidence as a way for governments to better understand and address the needs of their citizens. By working within three discrete focus areas, yet looking beyond specific sectors of research or single types of actors, we hope to stimulate learning about approaches that could be useful to anyone interested in policy-relevant research and reforming government evidence systems.

## **Learning and collaborating with other funders**

While many funders have supported specific actors (e.g., think tanks) or products (e.g., impact evaluations), few funders have engaged in sustained investment in evidence in policymaking from a more comprehensive perspective (with DFID RED and KSI as important exceptions). We will learn from and collaborate with evidence-in-policymaking pioneers and encourage more funders to support a range of actors, partnerships, incentives, capacities, and systems necessary for governments to use evidence in their policy processes. Where appropriate, we will encourage funders to offer flexible support so that their grantees can become more independent actors in the evidence-to-policy ecosystem and generate the evidence and influence the policies most relevant to their country contexts.

## **HOW WE ARE FOCUSING OUR GRANTMAKING**

While we expect the key ingredients for evidence-informed policy making and our overall approach, as described above, to be enduring, the country-level opportunities in East and

West Africa will evolve over time. Our initial phase concentrates in the three areas: harnessing the data revolution for global development, increasing the use and usefulness of impact evaluations, and helping Southern think tanks promote evidence use and inform national, regional, and global policymaking areas. We discuss each area in more detail below. We will reassess our focus areas in 2020.

## 1. Harness the Data Revolution for Global Development

High-quality data are fundamental building blocks for understanding the conditions that policies aim to improve and the people they aim to help, for tracking change over time, and for enabling accountability for that change.<sup>9</sup> The innovations and political momentum of the “data revolution” create an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen these building blocks. The data revolution refers to the exponential increase in the volume, quality, and types of data available, combined with new technologies that permit faster processing of larger data sets, enable new statistical methods, and allow new data sources for development purposes to interact with and complement traditional ones. New data sources include imagery captured by satellites or drones, data generated by cell phone usage or financial transactions, information from remote sensing, as well as finding patterns in people’s views as expressed in web searches, social media, or radio talk shows. While new data sources are not yet supporting government decision making at scale in many places, there are promising signs of potential (see Box 5).

The data revolution also refers to the growing expectation — at the highest political levels and among citizens — that both traditional and new sources of data will be available and used to make decisions and to design products, policies, and programs. We join a growing number of actors working to bring the data revolution to the field of global development, and we aim to contribute to three outcomes.

We continue to support **high-quality, policy-relevant data**, both from traditional and new sources, that policymakers can find and use. To advance this outcome we may support new methods to enhance traditional data sources such as censuses, administrative data, and surveys that feed into official statistics, making their collection and use more cost-effective and timely, and facilitating interoperability among them and with new data sources.

We would also like to see **frameworks and approaches for using new data sources safely and at scale**. This may include supporting the development of norms, standards, and policy frameworks to balance the risks and rewards of using private data for public good. We may also support a select number of country partnerships that are testing ways to use private data for public good, especially those geared to making data usable for ongoing policymaking rather than one-off decisions. We may also support efforts to build connections, trust, and

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<sup>9</sup> The data-related work under this strategy complements and builds on the success of the Hewlett-funded work to make government data more open under our Transparency, Participation, and Accountability strategy, as well as efforts to improve gender data as supported by our Women’s Economic Empowerment strategy.

Box 5

**SEEING THE POTENTIAL: NEW DATA ARE ALREADY CHANGING HOW GOVERNMENTS WORK**

The Namibian Ministry of Health, together with partners, is tracking how malaria spreads throughout Namibia and identifying where elimination efforts have worked best. Their efforts combine environmental data from satellite images with data on population movements from cell phone records. City governments from Seoul, South Korea, to Nairobi, Kenya, have worked with telecom companies to use cell phone data to better understand human mobility and improve public transit accordingly. New Zealand has officially incorporated retail transaction data into its Consumer Price Index to measure price changes for electronics in a more timely and accurate way than relying on sampling surveys alone. And researchers in universities, nonprofits, and U.N. agencies are exploring the potential for machine learning with satellite imagery to track changes in forest cover, better understand agriculture, and potentially help measure poverty.

One of the key questions of the data revolution is how to build on these isolated cases or small-scale pilots so that governments all over the world have access to and capacity to systematically integrate new data sources, analysis, and insights into policy processes. This requires, at the very least, attention to data access and protection, capacity, and enduring technical partnerships.

Sources: Namibia, <http://dataimpacts.org/project/malaria/>; Korea, <http://dataimpacts.org/project/mobile-phone-data-optimize-bus-routes/>; Kenya, <http://dataimpacts.org/project/mapping-commuters-streamlines-transit/>; New Zealand, [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/economic\\_indicators/CPI\\_inflation/cpi-price-change-scanner-data.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/economic_indicators/CPI_inflation/cpi-price-change-scanner-data.aspx). For researcher examples, see [www.globalforestwatch.org](http://www.globalforestwatch.org), <http://news.stanford.edu/2017/02/13/measure-african-farm-yields-using-high-resolution-satellites>, <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/353/6301/790>, and [www.unglobalpulse.org/projects/measuring-poverty-machine-roof-counting](http://www.unglobalpulse.org/projects/measuring-poverty-machine-roof-counting).

shared learning among data stewards within private firms to champion the responsible public-good uses of the data their companies hold.

Finally, we hope to see governments gain the **capacity, systems, and motivations to integrate new and traditional sources of data into ongoing decision making**. To support this outcome, we would consider grants that strengthen government capacity to bring together and use new and traditional data sources, help modernize government data systems, and strengthen government mechanisms to institutionalize the use of data in decision making. This could include grants that help demonstrate the value of data for impact; celebrate government champions that use data to improve development outcomes; or advocate for public-sector investment in data. We will also encourage other funders to support government data systems or fill gaps.

All of these outcomes require bringing together a diversity of actors to address challenges that no one actor can address alone. In this spirit, we support the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) and other efforts that build trust and collaboration among actors. The GPSDD brings governments, civil society, and the private sector together with international organizations to leverage new and traditional data sources to achieve and measure progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Collaborations and the strands of work we describe above are important only if they lead to increased use of data for decision

making. We will work with partners to understand to what extent these efforts are leading to increased use of evidence, tangible improvements in policies, and systemic improvements in support of better policymaking over time.

## 2. Increase the Use and Usefulness of Impact Evaluations

Government decisions should be informed by high-quality information about the likely development impacts and costs of policies and programs. Impact evaluations play a critical role, because they are the surest way to identify what changes programs and policies cause.<sup>10</sup> Impact evaluations are especially powerful when combined with cost information and when the methodological design and/or qualitative information sheds light on why the program works or not. This knowledge can inform decisions about whether to continue or expand specific programs and can enrich the global policy conversation. For instance, research showing that users fees negatively impact health outcomes because they drastically reduce how many people use these products did just that.

Despite their benefits, however, impact evaluations rarely factor into policy conversations. Too often, decisions are made without knowing whether programs work or not. Ultimately, we envision African governments asking for evidence about the development impact of policies and programs and regularly commissioning impact evaluations that address their policy priorities. We also believe in the importance of impact evaluations that are responsive driven by researchers or nongovernmental organizations rather than governments. We aim to contribute three outcomes, each emphasized below.

Impact evaluations and systematic reviews should be responsive and relevant to the needs of policymakers and program implementers. We will support efforts to build impact evaluation practices that deliver results at the level of rigor and timeliness that evaluation users need, and that include the kind of information needed for programmatic and policy decisions. We may support public goods that make evaluations faster or more robust, such as geospatial evaluation methods and the practice of preregistering studies to promote research transparency.

We also envision that **African institutions will carry out this kind of research, and will facilitate its use.** Currently, the field of impact evaluation is small and dominated by Western development economists and public health researchers. We will support the emergence of African institutions and researchers that conduct high-quality, policy-relevant impact evaluations and systematic reviews and facilitate policymakers integrating evaluation findings into practice. Local institutions and researchers are well positioned to

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<sup>10</sup> The Hewlett Foundation's Evaluation Principles and Practices document defines impact evaluation as a type of evaluation design that assesses the changes that can be attributed to a particular intervention. It is based on models of cause and effect and requires a credible counterfactual (sometimes referred to as a control group or comparison group) to control for factors other than the intervention that might account for the observed change. This definition is also used by others, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development and includes randomized control trials as well as quasi-experimental designs.

understanding the context, political environment, and priorities of government partners. They are also able to build trust by interfacing regularly with policymakers, which is important because many government ministries have frequent turnover.

Finally, we envision that **policymakers will use knowledge relevant to their contexts and needs to improve policies and programs.** An impact evaluation does not provide a policy roadmap; it is just one input among many others, including some combination of external replications, high-quality syntheses of the results of multiple evaluations, and other types of data to determine if an intervention is relevant to the local context. When evidence suggests that a program would be effective in new contexts or at greater scale, there is usually significant work to do to adapt the program.

We will support organizations that are thoughtful about external validity, ensure policymakers receive information in ways that meet their needs, take the steps necessary to adapt a program so that governments can adopt it, and partner with governments to integrate effective programs into government systems (see Box 6 for an example).

We will explore opportunities to build governments' interest in impact evaluations and their capacity and political will to commission them and draw on evaluation results. Concrete examples of success may build momentum, so we may invest in governments taking up specific evidence-informed programs in East and West Africa. Currently, African governments commission and conduct formative, process, and implementation evaluations far more often than impact evaluations. Because such evaluations can be a useful entry point for governments to adopt impact evaluations (and are useful in their own right), we may support limited, especially high-impact work to strengthen national evaluation systems.

### **3. Help Southern Think Tanks Inform National, Regional, and Global Policymaking, and More Broadly Promote Evidence Use in Their Countries**

African policy research institutions have deep experience producing policy-relevant evidence and engaging in ongoing policy processes. They have demonstrated the importance and possibility of African organizations conducting the functions of “think tanking” — generating context-specific, policy-relevant, and politically timely research; connecting citizens, scholars, advocates, and governments; analyzing the effectiveness of development policies and programs; and convening policy actors in the public domain. This makes policy research institutions, and the function of “think tanking” especially important not only to inform specific policies with research but to advance a culture and practice of using evidence in policy processes on the continent. We would like to see African think tanks become more integrated with, and a greater resource to, the broader evidence-informed policymaking community.

Box 6

### **THE TRANSFER PROJECT: A CLIENT-DRIVEN APPROACH TO IMPACT EVALUATION**

The Transfer Project, a collaborative effort by UNICEF, University of North Carolina, and the FAO, works with African governments and local research institutions to generate evidence on the impacts of national cash transfer programs and to factor that evidence into policy decisions.

The program has a unique, client-driven model. Evaluations are commissioned — and often paid for — by governments in collaboration with national development partners, and designed to reflect the government’s priorities. Many of the Transfer Project’s evaluations have been randomized trials or, when that is not possible, quasi-experimental evaluations. Much of its data collection is standardized across countries, allowing the Transfer Project to make cross-country as well as context-specific conclusions.

By working closely with clients, the Transfer Project has contributed to policy changes throughout the evaluation process. For example, Ghana and Malawi significantly increased the value of the transfer after a baseline workshop suggested it would lead to a more effective program. Evaluation results have contributed to Kenya, Zambia, and Lesotho’s decisions to continue or expand cash transfer programs and have informed changes in targeting and program design.

The outcome we seek in this focus area is for governments to use credible, policy-relevant research produced by organizations deeply embedded in their local context to improve policy. Building on the Hewlett Foundation’s experience and learning with the 10-year, multifunder Think Tank Initiative,<sup>11</sup> which ends in 2019, we will continue targeted support to think tanks in East and West Africa. We are especially interested in those pioneering dynamic approaches to informing policy, building new partnerships, and more closely linking their research agendas to their specific policy context. We also hope to see more policy research institutions doing more than promoting their own research and, in addition, actively advancing a broader culture and practice of evidence use among governments.

As momentum grows for evidence-informed policymaking in Africa, and more actors seek meaningful engagement with policymakers, think tanks have a great opportunity for partnership and learning. We aim to support strong research organizations collaborating with those testing the application of new data sources for development purposes or advancing the use of impact evaluation with government ministries (see Box 7 for more). We also seek to support organizations that are using their experience, relationships, and voice to advocate for governments systematically and routinely using evidence to improve social and economic policies.

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<sup>11</sup> The Think Tank Initiative is funded by the Gates Foundation and the governments of Canada, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Box 7

**PIONEERING NEW APPROACHES: THINK TANKS CHANGING HOW THEY ENGAGE WITH POLICY AND ADVANCE EVIDENCE-USE**

A traditional role for think tanks in any country is to generate context- and policy-relevant research and work to have that research inform national policies. A number of organizations are stretching beyond this to pioneer new ways of engaging in policy processes; along the way, they are advancing a broader culture and practice of evidence use among governments.

For example, the African Center for Economic Transformation is facilitating exchange among scholars, policymakers, and private-sector leaders across the continent through a structured coalition with thematic chapters. The African Institute for Development Policy was founded by policy scholars tired of competing for policymakers' attention on specific research studies. Driven by a desire to influence evidence use more broadly, it is now working with governments in several African countries to build capacity to demand, find, and use research evidence in policymaking. The Southern Voice network is elevating the role of Southern scholars and scholarship in global policy deliberations around the Sustainable Development Goals.

## RISKS

There are a number of risks associated with the strategy to promote evidence-informed policymaking, as outlined above. First, by taking an ecosystem approach that explicitly aims to foster connections across a diversity of actors, we face the risk of insufficient focus. It is possible, with such an approach, to pursue too diverse a set of actors and issues to have meaningful impact.

That risk is mitigated to some degree by small size of the evidence-informed policymaking community, which is concentrated in institutions and networks well within our sphere of influence. These groups — already existing in all three of our focus areas — explicitly work on core elements of our strategy. We will advance evidence-informed policymaking as a concept and field, support existing actors' responsiveness to a broader set of players in their own contexts, and endeavor to increase other funders' interest in evidence-informed policy as a field. We will work with grantees to assess whether their work is leading to tangible improvements in policies and specific government systems, and we will adjust our strategy if we do not observe this kind of progress.

Second, our field-building efforts run the risk of shaping the field in suboptimal directions. For example, when we support a specific partner, that partner's views and connections may play an outsized role, potentially at the expense of other views. We will work with partners to ensure that we and grantees incorporate diverse perspectives.

A third risk is the possibility of overestimating the role evidence can play in the policy process. Politics and budget constraints can outweigh evidence in agenda setting, policy formulation, and implementation. However, given the extreme dearth of reliable, policy-



relevant, problem-oriented information in many low- and middle-income countries, we are confident that there is room for more evidence-informed decision making.

Fourth, we are mindful that our funding is a small portion of what is needed to catalyze change, and that the kinds of organizations we aim to support face challenges in the funding landscape. It can be difficult to raise core and flexible organizational support for field-level evidence work. The funding landscape for Southern think tanks is shifting dramatically. As countries graduate out of low-income status, the official development assistance that used to help fund research is waning. Several major funders that supported think tanks in low- and middle-income countries for decades are no longer focused on them. Flexible, core support is consistently diminishing, increasing the degree to which think tanks are pulled toward donors' priorities than their own policy contexts. These dynamics pose a risk to the critical role that think tanks play in increasing the use of evidence in policymaking. While we cannot turn this tide completely, we do hope to raise awareness about the importance of flexible core support, attract new funders, support learning about a think tank business models, and help think tanks better understand and cover their full costs even through more restricted funding channels.

Finally, we face a risk common to all the work in the Global Development and Population Program: space for civic action is shrinking around the world, and restrictions on civil-society organizations are increasing. Some governments have begun passing laws and regulations that inhibit the ability of NGOs or think tanks to safely voice perspectives that differ from the government's views or to effectively engage with policy actors. We will continue to track this trend and will support grantees in navigating specific related challenges or shift resources as the landscape evolves.

As described in the following section, we will track our progress against our goals, with a particular eye toward our assumptions about these risks and our ability to mitigate them, and correct course as necessary.

## HOW WE WILL MEASURE PROGRESS

We will monitor progress throughout the implementation of this strategy through a combination of evaluation and annual monitoring. Throughout these efforts we will on three big questions:

1. **Do our grantees contribute to evidence-informed improvement in specific government policies and programs?** Our primary measure of success is *not* short-term policy wins: we are focused on building institutions and systems that will contribute to long-term policy improvements. Additionally, since many of our grantees make diffuse contributions, we will not be able to track all of our partners' policy contributions. However, to confirm that our strategy is on track, it is important that we observe concrete improvements.
2. **Do our grantees contribute to improvements in country-level policy processes and systems?** Contributions would include, for example, national

statistical offices increasing the accuracy and timeliness of their data and increasing how often colleagues in line ministries use these data to make decisions. Because our goal is for governments to use evidence routinely and sustainably, it's essential that our partners play a role in improving government systems.

3. **Do we and our grantees contribute to building a field of evidence-informed policy?** Contributions would include, for example, building a funding community that supports evidence-informed work and a set of anchor institutions that share lessons and engage with governments on the use of evidence.

We will develop an evaluation plan to help us, our grantees, and external evaluators track progress toward these goals. We will identify specific markers of progress within each focus area and monitor them on an annual basis. For our substrategy of fostering impact evaluations, one such marker could be how many additional African organizations conduct policy-relevant impact evaluations.

## CONCLUSION

With a long tradition of supporting the use of evidence for improved policymaking and program design, the Hewlett Foundation is well positioned to advance the growing field of evidence-informed policymaking. By recognizing that policymaking is enmeshed in a wide ecosystem of dynamic relationships, and by keeping a steady focus on government *use* of evidence, we hope to overcome some persistent challenges in a field so far focused largely on generating evidence and building capacity of evidence-producers and potential users. We hope that support for some novel institutional models, combined with strategic partnership and careful observation and study, will help to realize the vast potential to improve policy — and, by extension, development outcomes — by connecting the policy community to growing bodies of expertise and knowledge.