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Brief 6

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Conceptualising the good governance of evidence

Improving the use of evidence to inform policymaking is a goal widely espoused across virtually all fields of social and public policy. Evidence champions have particularly emphasised the need for more robust and rigorous uses of evidence, raising concerns with the ways that political forces appear to undermine scientific good practices. They call for 'evidence-based policymaking' (EBP) to ensure that policy decisions follow evidence of 'what works'. Yet critical policy scholars have argued that policymaking is an inherently political process, involving contested interests and competing views of what a 'good society' looks like – debates that technical evidence alone cannot resolve. As discussed in Brief 2, the arguments of evidence champions and of critical scholars can be understood to reflect two distinct normative concerns. EBP advocates are primarily concerned with *fidelity to science*, whilst their critics stress the importance of *democratic representation* in decision-making. Recognising the importance of both sets of concerns, however, requires reconsidering what improvements in evidence use looks like from a decidedly political perspective. Rather than simply calling for more evidence use, or greater utilisation of particular forms of evidence, improving the use of evidence within policymaking processes instead requires sustained changes within systems that can work to address both sets of normative concerns – changes that can ensure that rigorous, unbiased, and policy-relevant evidence informs decisions that remain representative of, and accountable to, the multiple concerns of local populations.

As Brief 1 has noted, existing efforts by the EBP community to transfer knowledge and increase evidence utilisation have served as important first steps to improve evidence use. Yet the traditional knowledge translation efforts widely promoted have been limited in their ability to address the decidedly political nature of policymaking. To take the next steps in improving evidence use *for policymaking,* a set of additional required conceptual developments was identified, including: a need to address the political sources of evidentiary bias, a need to consider what constitutes 'good evidence for policy' from a political perspective, and the need to consider what constitutes the 'good use of evidence' within policymaking from the perspective of political legitimacy. Each of these issues has been discussed separately in previous briefs in this series. However, taken in combination, these concepts can be used to construct a framework that reflects a conceptualisation of the 'good governance' of evidence – providing a set of normative principles which can guide thinking on what, ultimately, improvements in evidence use within policy arenas can look like.

At a glance

- Eight key principles constitute the good governance of evidence: *appropriateness, contestability, quality, rigour, stewardship, representation, transparency,* and *deliberation.*
- To improve the use of evidence for policymaking, it is necessary to consider how to shape institutional arrangements to embed these key principles.
- In most cases, the institutionalisation of these principles will involve incrementally altering arrangements within an existing political structure – a process termed: *guided evolution.*

The good governance of evidence

The term 'governance' can broadly refer to the arrangements and processes by which collective decisions are made. There is no single definition of 'good governance'; however, but within the multitude of approaches to the idea, two categories of criteria are often applied. First are aspects of good governance addressing the outcomes of decision-making – such as definitions that include the effectiveness or efficiency of decision-making. A second set of criteria often applied, however, speak to the processes of decision-making itself – such as concern with accountability, transparency, or adherence to the rules of the law within governing processes. Considering the good governance of *evidence* therefore requires identifying the set of values dealing with both processes and outcomes that are of particular relevance to the use of evidence within policymaking.

A framework for the good governance of evidence

A good governance approach to evidence use recognises the importance of maintaining democratic principles within processes of evidence utilisation, whilst also acknowledging the need for scientific fidelity in the identification, interpretation, and use of evidence. The resultant framework therefore brings together and addresses both sets of normative concerns at the core of the EBP debate.

Here, building on a previous framework developed by Hawkins and Parkhurst[1], eight key principles are proposed to constitute the good governance of evidence: *appropriateness, contestability, quality, rigour, stewardship, representation, transparency,* and *deliberation.* The first four of these address the concerns of evidence champions and the EBP movement that evidence to inform policy should be of high scientific quality, while incorporating critical understandings that policy decisions have multiple concerns, and so rather than single hierarchies alone, different forms of evidence are often needed for different issues[2, 3]:

- *Appropriateness:* the choice of evidence should follow an initial assessment of the needs of the

policy decision at hand. In particular: evidence should be selected to address the multiple political considerations relevant to a policy decision; evidence should be created in ways that are useful to achieve policy goals; and the applicability of the evidence to the local context should be explicitly considered;

- *Contestability:* highly technical evidence must be contestable, in that it must be open to critical questioning and appeal. This can involve challenging particular scientific findings, but also enables challenges over decisions about which evidence to utilise. This criterion emphasises the importance of peer review and replicability in scientific pursuits;

- *Quality:* the pieces of evidence used should be judged on their quality. However, the criteria used to make judgements about quality should reflect the methodological principles pertaining to the form of research undertaken (for example, clinical trials versus qualitative interviews), and the nature of the data generated;

- *Rigour:* evidence brought to policy consideration should be comprehensively gathered or synthesized, avoiding selective cherry-picking, for example.

The second four components speak more directly to policy scholars' concerns with democratic principles that may be important within systems that govern the use of evidence for policy:

- *Representation:* final decision authority for policies informed by evidence should lie with democratically representative and publicly accountable officials;

- *Stewardship:* the agent setting the rules and shape of official evidence advisory systems used to inform policymaking should have a formal public mandate;

- *Transparency:* information should be clearly visible and open to public scrutiny. The public should be able to see how the evidence bases informing a decision are identified and utilised. This may be achieved, amongst other mechanisms, by publishing transcripts of expert body deliberations, or by having evidence-review meetings open to the public;

- *Deliberation:* engagement that enables members of the public to bring their multiple competing values and concerns to be considered in the evidence utilisation process, even if not all concerns can be selected in the final policy decision. Example deliberative mechanisms can include public referenda on aspects of evidence use, organisation of citizens' juries for key decisions, or holding consensus conferences.

Together these eight features constitute the framework for the good governance of evidence, illustrated in the graphic below.

In summary, this framework ultimately highlights a set of elements that aim to ensure that rigorous, relevant, and unbiased pieces of evidence are used to inform policy decisions that remain representative of, and accountable to, local populations.

Achieving the good governance of evidence through a process of guided evolution

In order to operationalise the good governance of evidence, there is a need to put in place institutional arrangements which embed the good governance features outlined in the framework. Institutions, in terms of their structures, rules, norms, and practices,

Framework for the good governance of evidence

can be seen as governing the use of evidence within policymaking systems. Focusing on institutional change, however, can also help to overcome limitations of much of the past work to improve evidence use in policymaking through the training of individuals (of researchers to influence decision makers, or of policy makers to use research). While individuals may move on or change their roles, institutional change would, by definition, re-shape the structures and systems themselves in which any individual may serve.

However, building institutions is rarely a simple process of copying templates or choosing from a menu of alternatives. Rather, it necessarily takes place within an existing and historically dependent organisational context. The specific form of the institutional structures put in place will also be context specific. Consequently, most cases of institutionalisation will be incremental, and will require institutions to adapt their functions and values in line with existing political arrangements. Therefore, institutionalising aspects of the good governance of evidence can be defined as a process of 'guided evolution' – *guided* because it requires a normative set of goals to direct change efforts in line

with efforts for improvement, and *evolutionary* in the way in which it incrementally shapes or alters institutional arrangements within an existing political system.

Conclusion

This brief (and the set of briefs on which it builds) argues that long-term improvement in the use of evidence in policy requires building institutional arrangements that can simultaneously incorporate principles of scientific best practice with those of democratic representation. This involves addressing the structures, rules, processes, and practices that work to ensure that rigorous, valid, and relevant bodies of evidence are utilised through transparent and deliberative processes to inform decisions that ultimately remain representative of, and accountable to, local populations. Working towards this goal can help to overcome some past limitations of the EBP movement, and could help to realise the full potential of evidence to accomplish our collective social policy goals.

References

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2.   Petticrew M, Roberts H. Evidence, hierarchies, and typologies: horses for courses. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. 2003;57(7):527-9.
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