Research Uptake in Policymaking: From Papers to Policy

Jennifer Brown[1], Robert Cartridge[2], Stacey Davies[3], Ehtisham ul Hassan[4], Chui Hsia[5], Tanvi Lal[6], Dionne Mackison[7], Radhika Menon[6], Marta Moratti[8], Violet Murunga[9], Alexis Le Nestour[4], Lizzy Whitehead[10], Howard White[1]

September 2018

[1] Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning
[1] Practical Action
[1] Practical Action Publishing
[4] Save the Children
[5] Campbell Collaboration
[6] International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
[7] Department for International Development
[8] Oxford Policy Management
[9] African Institute for Development Policy
[10] ICF

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper is based on discussions which took place during a Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning (CEDIL) workshop *'Promoting the use of research findings in policy and practice: an experience sharing workshop'* held on 7th November 2017. It explores the rise of evidence-based decision-making and the role that knowledge brokers play within it. It looks at the skills and qualities needed for effective knowledge brokering and how to plan for effective research uptake in policy. The paper focuses on the importance of relationship building and effective communication in knowledge brokering and provides case studies where evidence-based decision-making and knowledge brokering have been used effectively by governments and non-governmental organisations alike.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a rapid rise in evidence based decision-making. Leading organisations leading in the field, such as the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation and the Campbell Collaboration, have produced a wealth of systematic reviews, as shown in Figure 1 below, and *evidence and gap maps* which have enabled researchers to focus their efforts on areas where there is a dearth of evidence. For example, a recent evidence and gap map was commissioned by the Centre for Homelessness Impact as 'there [were] no reliable tools to help [them] identify what [they] know and what [they] don't. Evidence [was] scattered around different databases, journals, websites, and in grey literature, and there [was] no way for decision makers to get a quick overview of the existing evidence base. This is a barrier to the use of the best available evidence. It also makes it hard for research funders to ensure that limited resources are spent effectively' (Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2018, p. 5).
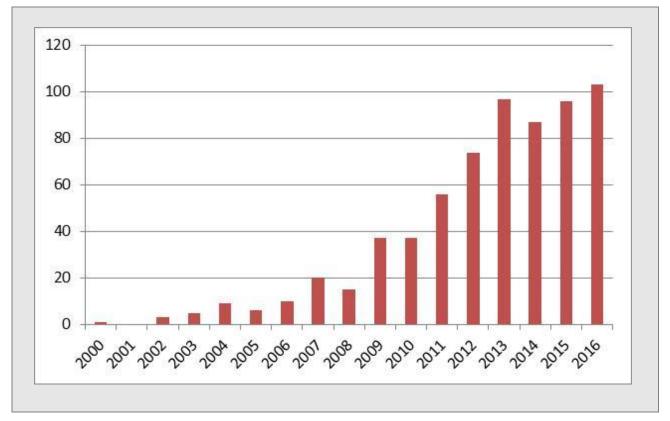
Figure 1: No. of Systematic Reviews Published by Year

Source: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation Database

As the evidence revolution has gathered pace, there has been increasing recognition that the generation and publication of evidence is not, in itself, sufficient to ensure the use of that evidence. In consequence there has been an increased focus on knowledge brokering as a distinct activity requiring a specific set of skills. Drawing from the experiences of researchers, communications experts, government personnel and knowledge brokers within international development, this paper explores the challenges currently faced by researchers and policymakers in the uptake of research. It looks at the importance of fostering open communication channels and the key role of 'knowledge brokers' within the sector. Drawing from tangible examples from the field, it then suggests practical ways to foster a reciprocal relationship between knowledge generation and uptake, ensuring that research is based on an in-depth understanding of the end user.

The paper is based on discussions which took place during a CEDIL workshop entitled *'Promoting the use of research findings in policy and practice: an experience sharing workshop'* held on Tuesday 7th November 2017. Twelve people were in attendance from the CEDIL secretariat, Practical Action, Save the Children, The Campbell Collaboration, International Initiative for Impact evaluation, Department for International Development (DFID), Oxford Policy Management, African Institute for Development Policy and ICF.

This workshop brought together a range of practitioners with direct experience working as knowledge brokers rather than experts on evidence use. Hence the workshop was a unique opportunity to learn from the 'frontline' of knowledge brokering.

Section 2

What's in a Name: Knowledge Brokering as an Emerging Field

2.1 The Rise of Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

The focus on evidence-informed decision-making has become increasingly important in international development in recent years, with bi-lateral donors, non-governmental organisation and governments all advocating for programmes which are grounded in evidence. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched its Evaluation Policy in 2011 with 'an ambitious commitment to building an evaluation practice that values good planning and design, independent judgment, high-quality methods and evidence-based findings for what is and is not working in USAID programs' (USAID, 2016, p. 2). Similarly, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) invested in an "Evidence into Action" team, which was established to 'strengthen evidence use to inform policy and practice decisions, on the basis that

this leads to better policy outcomes for poverty reduction' (DFID, 2014, p. 8). Southern governments are increasingly seeing the value of evidence-informed decision-making and the South African Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) is leading the way in this, with their 'Evidence and Knowledge System' branch, which has a key remit to 'coordinate and support the generation, collation, accessibility and timely use of quality evidence to support performance monitoring and evaluation across government' (DPME, 2018).

The increased emphasis on evidence-informed decision-making is coupled with a growth in the availability of evidence, specifically in the form of impact evaluations in international development, as seen in Figure 2 below. Cameron et al. (2016) found, since the mid-1990s, both a rapid rise in the number of impact evaluations conducted and the formation of specialist institutions such as the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), the World Bank's Development Impact Evaluation Initiative (DIME) and the Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund (SIEF) at the World Bank (Cameron, Mishra and Brown, 2016, p. 6).
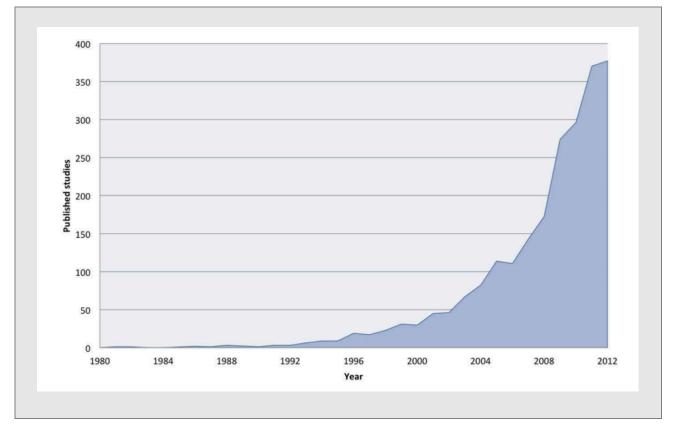
Figure 2: No. of Impact Evaluations Published by Year

Source: Cameron et al., 2016.

This increase in both the supply and demand for evidence in international development means that there is a crucial role for knowledge brokers to bridge the gap between

research and policy and ensure that research is communicated and utilised in the most effective way.

A knowledge broker can be defined as 'persons or organizations that facilitate the creation, sharing, and use of knowledge' (Sverrisson, in Meyer, 2010, p. 119). The role can be fulfilled by different people across organisations, but 'the defining feature of such a role is to develop relationships and networks with, among and between producers and users of knowledge to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout this network and build capacity for evidence-based decision-making' (Bornbaun et al., in Cvitanovic et al., 2017, p. 257). Cvitanovic (2017) states that, when given the opportunity, knowledge brokers have the ability to make a real impact on the way that organisations and governments develop their programmes and policies, by promoting a culture where stakeholders are engaged and evidence is at the forefront of decision-making.

2.2 Skills and Qualities for Effective Knowledge Brokering

Workshop participants who attended CEDIL's *'promoting the use of research findings in policy and practice: an experience sharing workshop'* identified several different job roles and titles where knowledge brokering can play a key role. These included the following:

- Researchers
- Academics
- Policy outreach professionals
- Evidence brokers
- Research communications professionals
- App developers

Furthermore, specific skills and qualities were identified for successful knowledge brokering, comprising:

Skills

- Interpersonal
- Networking
  - o Ability to foster relationships
- Communication
  - o The ability to express in plain language whilst preserving accuracy, integrity and intention
  - o The ability to craft key messages based on the audience
  - o Multilingual
  - o Public speaker
- Analytical
  - o The ability to interpret and synthesise long reports and assess the key points for the target audience
- Research
  - o An understanding of methods and an ability to briefly explain methodologies to non-technical stakeholders.
  - o An ability to keep abreast of developments in the field

- Technological – these are skills which can be outsourced to other organisations with specific expertise
    - The ability to create tools that enable non-specialists to access data such as apps and data visualisations
    - Digital literacy

Qualities

- Trust of the community
- An understanding of research
- Independence, neutrality
- Credibility
- Access to key audiences
- Ability to act as an intermediary or conduit

Topp and Mair (2018) suggest that the key skills required by knowledge brokers can be grouped into 8 "'skills clusters" as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3: Skills Clusters to Aid Better Evidence-Informed Policies

Source: Topp and Mair, 2018.

These skills ensure that knowledge brokers are able to understand and synthesise research and evidence into easily digestible 'nuggets', which can be repackaged and disseminated through traditional and modern communications channels.

However, knowledge brokering often does not garner the attention and resources that other skillsets attract. Some organisations have specific roles for research uptake managers or specify knowledge brokering as a key element of work within communication teams but Meyer (2010) emphasised that knowledge brokerage is often not acknowledged or seen as important in many organisations (Meyer, 2010, p. 122). The often inadvertent nature of knowledge brokering means that many people are

unaware of the number of other colleagues in partner organisations who are playing similar roles, albeit under different job titles.

Steps have been taken to mitigate this and encourage 'communities of practice' where knowledge brokers can liaise with one another and share best practice. Colleagues working on climate change have established the Climate Knowledge Brokers[1] network, whose vision is 'a world in which people make climate sensitive decisions fully informed by the best available climate knowledge' (Bauer and Smith, 2015, p. 3). They describe their role as 'filters, interfaces and translators between knowledge producers and users, across different disciplines, fields and sectors' (Bauer and Smith, 2015, p. 5).

Planning for Research Uptake

The important role of knowledge translation for policy uptake of research is often overlooked by both researchers and research funders when proposals are formulated. Cvitanovic (2017) analysed the influence that knowledge brokers had on policy uptake and found that 'the use of a knowledge broker ensured the research undertaken was highly relevant to decision-makers' (Cvitanovic, 2017). Crucially, he also found that 'by understanding the knowledge needs of decision-makers, participants… noted that they were more successful when submitting funding proposals' (Cvitanovic, 2017).

Organisations conducting research should plan for knowledge uptake at the proposal writing stage and embed personnel and skills development to ensure an effective dissemination strategy and evidence uptake plans are developed. The key elements of such are:

- Context analysis
- Uptake objectives
- Mapping of audience
- Engagement and communications plan with a need to consider events where the publication will be topical.
- Monitoring of research uptake which is useful for demonstrating the utility of the research, ensuring that uptake strategies are implemented and lessons learning for future research uptake plans.

Communication strategies should be incorporated and include elements such as early dissemination of baseline findings to build understanding, trust, credibility and commitment. Evidence uptake plans should consider the most relevant communications products which can range from full reports and datasets to plain language summaries, blogs and op-eds. Dissemination can be undertaken through a variety of activities such as meetings, workshops and conferences.

---

[1] For more information, see https://www.climateknowledgebrokers.net/

Making research uptake a key determinant of success can also help to ensure that it is given the due attention that is needed. It can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation plans and specific indicators such as numbers of downloads, citation tracking and sales figures (as appropriate) can be taken into account.

Structure, People and Relationships

Organisations should ensure that they have an understanding of target audiences for their research as well as a clear understanding of how to reach these constituencies and what resources they will need to disseminate information related to their research. The incorporation of stakeholder mapping into the research process is a useful tool to help understand one's audience and how to access and influence them.

Furthermore, organisations should be cognisant of the structures within the government departments that they hope to influence. Decision-making processes within governments are often opaque and difficult to grasp for the uninitiated. This makes it hard for smaller or less well-known organisations to access the decision-makers. CEDIL workshop attendees commented that junior and early career/ entry level employees are often more likely to engage with detailed technical reports. It was noted that senior level employees tend to be more focused on high level findings and summary reports. For this reason, many organisations adapt their research outputs to appeal to a range of target audiences. For each of their systematic reviews, *The Campbell Collaboration*, for example, produces more accessible plain language summaries (short two-pagers that have a much broader readership than the full documents, which often run into the hundreds of pages).

Timeliness of Research

A key element of successful research uptake that was identified during CEDIL's workshop was that of timeliness. Research is most likely to be used by government and other key stakeholders if it comes at a key time in their decision-making processes and the policy cycle. DFID's research uptake guidance advises that researchers should make use of 'official routes of evidence use' such as responding to government consultations and providing timely information to key advisors (DFID, 2016, p.4). This requires having an 'ear to the ground' and ensuring that such opportunities are built into the research workplans.

This is demonstrated in the following case study of International Initiative for Impact Evaluation's (3ie) education systematic review.

Case Study: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation's (3ie) Education Systematic review in Nepal

Approximately 250 million children in low-and middle-income countries (L&MICs) cannot read, write or do basic maths. A range of different education interventions have been implemented to resolve what is being seen as a learning crisis and, to answer the question of whether these interventions work, 3ie carried out a comprehensive systematic review on effectiveness of education programmes in L&MICs. The review examines the impact of 216 education programmes in 52 countries. It synthesises evidence on the effects of 21 different types of education interventions on school enrolment and completion, attendance and learning.

A key remit of 3ie is to ensure that their research is used in the most effective ways. Therefore, with support from Nepal's planning commission and their education ministry, 3ie organised a day long policy dialogue around the education effectiveness review. The objective was to provide a forum for conversation among researchers, policymakers and programme managers about Nepal's education policy priorities, engage with stakeholders and draw on the education review to discuss evidence-informed solutions for the challenges identified. 3ie also wanted the education dialogue to feed into a country policy programme in Nepal.

3ie ensured that a knowledge broker from its policy, advocacy and communication team was present to contextualise the report and highlight the key policy-relevant findings for consideration in Nepal. This included assessment of student learning, teacher-related interventions, school-based management, public-private partnerships and vocational education.

Participants were able to engage in a substantive discussion about how the evidence presented could be used to reform education policy with the country. It provided a platform for government officials, NGOs and inter-governmental organisations to exchange ideas and learning in this sector.

3ie organised a similar policy dialogue event with the ministry of education and the Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda.

Such dissemination activities are essential to ensuring that research reaches the right audiences and that they have the space and time to critically engage with it, outside of their busy schedules.

A Reciprocal Approach to Research Uptake

In addition to ensuring that the most appropriate and accessible resources are available to policymakers and that research is timely and effectively communicated, we must also consider whether the research is indeed needed and if it is necessary. Organisations often conduct research based on their own strategic priorities, which are then presented to governments and policymakers with suggestions for uptake. There is an implicit presumption within this structure of working which suggests that the researchers' role is to impart knowledge on the policymakers. In order to redress the balance, a more integrated approach is needed, where policymakers are at the heart of research and are present at all stages. This is demonstrated in the example of South Africa's Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME).

Case Study: DPME and Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

The DPME partnered with the University of Johannesburg on a DFID funded project 'Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence' (UJ-BCURE), with a remit to 'improve the use of research evidence in South Africa and Malawi emphasising personal relationships and policy-driven ownership' (Langer *et al.*, 2015, p. 466).

In 2015, the DPME embarked on their own version of evidence synthesis, enabling civil servants to quickly obtain policy-relevant research. They created an evidence map related to the Human Settlements sector, with the aim of informing the design of the Draft White Paper on the transition from Housing to Human Settlements in South Africa (Langer, 2016).

The DPME partnered with the University of Johannesburg, as well as human settlements experts, to review over 2000 pieces of evidence from the sector. They assessed the evidence's applicability to the South African context with any relevant evidence summarised and entered into an interactive database, and links to full text versions.

At its international launch, the tool received much support from researchers and policymakers alike, who noted that it was an innovative way of ensuring research uptake within policy. The evidence map has since shaped decisions about the Human Settlements white paper, and also become a systematically structured evidence base from which rapid responses to urgent questions can be formulated.

The tool is part of a range of mechanisms within the South African government to embed evidence use at the core of policymaking and encourage civil servants to be both producers, as well as consumers of research.

Section 7

Knowledge Brokering in the Centre–Stage

The workshop participants noted the positive impact that knowledge brokering can have on an organisation if it is seen as a key 'way of working'. One organisation which has placed knowledge brokering at front and centre is Practical Action, which was founded in the late 1960s with a key remit to harness the power of knowledge sharing.

Case Study: Practical Action's Approach to Research

From its inception, Practical Action (then called Intermediate Technology Development Group - ITDG) offered a Technical Enquiries Service which provided, in response to demand, information to Governments and other development actors free of charge. Early on, the organisation also set up a subsidiary publishing company and a consultancy company – all recognising that getting knowledge moving around the world was the best way to tackle poverty. The enquiries service, the publishing company and the consultancy all continue to exist today.

These elements have helped to ensure that Practical Action's knowledge services are demand driven. When organisations and individuals approach Practical Action for assistance, they respond with resources which are contextualised to the user's needs. The publishing and consultancy companies also have a business model reliant on responding to demand, rather than creating a supply which may not be relevant or necessary.

Practical Action's ability as knowledge broker is also predicated on its ability to generate knowledge, often from within their own programme experience. Most recently this has been captured in a new Framework for Change which helps the organisation focus its efforts on driving systemic change. Having identified the changes that they want to see in the world (such as energy access for all), Practical Action has planned what needs to be learned and then develops projects on the ground to generate the learning.

Practical Action's strength lies in its ability to understand the most appropriate tool for disseminating knowledge and research. It has a traditional publishing company, which publishes books for leading organisations such as Oxfam, but also utilises innovative dissemination tools. For example, Practical Action runs a low-cost call centre in Bangladesh which sits within the Ministry of Agriculture. This ensures that questions that cannot be immediately answered from a database can be referred immediately to Ministry experts. In Zimbabwe, their podcasting work takes recordings of government agriculture offices out to the communities they cannot reach, and brings back questions to the experts to answer next time.

Practical Action acknowledges that there are times when it isn't perfect. Like all organisations, they can fail to share knowledge even internally and there are big questions still remaining such as how to financially sustain a helpdesk, or indeed, to tell the story of their own impact. Their fundamental stance, however, of putting the people they serve first and foremost, help to mitigate these issues[2].

---

[2] For more information on Practical Action's knowledge journey, see http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/impact-lab/collection/intermediate-technology-technology-justice

Conclusion

The CEDIL workshop attendees acknowledged that knowledge brokers and the skills they possess play a key role in evidence-informed decision-making. Whether undertaken by colleagues specifically employed as knowledge brokers or by 'upskilled' colleagues from research or communications backgrounds, there is a greater need to ensure that research has the needs of its stakeholders at it centre, and is able to effectively work with them and communicate any results that may be relevant in policymaking. This requires an in-depth understanding of the policy cycle, the context that policymakers work within and the challenges that policymakers face, as well as an understanding of the research and subsequent recommendations.

The skills, both soft and hard, of a knowledge broker should not be undermined or overlooked as they are often key in successful policy uptake of research and ensure that organisations are able to secure future funding to conduct innovate and useful research.

Recommendations for DFID and CEDIL

This paper suggests the important role that knowledge brokers play in policy uptake of research, and recommend that sufficient resources for comprehensive knowledge brokering are integrated into both the proposals, design, plans and the implementation of impact evaluations. Further, the authors recommend that CEDIL and DFID consider the following:

- Ensure that grants to conduct impact evaluations explicitly include resources for knowledge brokering and research communications.
- As Ex ante specification of the policy objectives of studies funded by CEDIL where appropriate (for example, not in the case of methods research).
- A robust plan for ensuring research communications and policy uptake of the research developed at the conception phase, indicating timelines and stakeholder mapping suitable activities.
- To develop templates and guidance for a common reporting structure, to include knowledge broker activities and evidence of impact as a key reporting requirement.

References

Bauer, F. and Smith, J. (2015) *The Climate Knowledge Brokers Manifesto. Informed decision making for a climate resilient future*.

Callen, M. Khan, A. Khwaja, A. Liaqat, A. and Myers, E. *et al.* (2017) 'These 3 barriers make it hard for policymakers to use the evidence that development researchers produce', *The Washington Post*, 13 August.

Cameron, D. B., Mishra, A. and Brown, A. N. (2016) 'The growth of impact evaluation for international development: how much have we learned?', *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 8(1), pp. 1–21. doi: 10.1080/19439342.2015.1034156.

Centre for Homelessness Impact (2018) 'Evidence and Gap Maps on Homelessness. A launch pad for strategic evidence production and use Part 1: Global Evidence and Gap Map of Effectiveness Studies'. Available at: https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/5aea3a8feb6f2594f99576c8_evidence-and-gap-maps-on-homelessness_2018.pdf (Accessed: 5 July 2018).

Cvitanovic, C. Cunningham, R. Dowd, A-M. Howden, S.M. van Putten, E.I. (2017) 'Using Social Network Analysis to Monitor and Assess the Effectiveness of Knowledge Brokers at Connecting Scientists and Decision-Makers: An Australian case study', *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 27(3), pp. 256–269. doi: 10.1002/eet.1752.

Cvitanovic, C. (2017) *Three ways that knowledge brokers can strengthen the impact of scientific research*, *Research to Action: The Global Guide to Research Impact*. Available at: http://www.researchtoaction.org/2017/04/three-ways-knowledge-brokers-can-strengthen-impact-scientific-research/ (Accessed: 16 March 2018).

Department for International Development (2014) 'Strengthening Communication of Research Evidence for Development (SCRED) Business Case Summary Sheet'.

Department for International Development (2016) 'Research Uptake: A Guide for DFID Funded Research Programmes' Available at: https://www.acu.ac.uk/publication/download?publication=691 (Accessed: 5 July 2018).

Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (2018) http://www.dpme.gov.za/about/Pages/Evidence-and-Knowledge-Systems.aspx (Accessed: 5 July 2018).

Langer, L. (2016) *Policy-relevant evidence maps: DPME leading innovation in evidence-informed decision-making*, *Africa Evidence Network*. Available at: http://www.africaevidencenetwork.org/policy-relevant-evidence-maps-dpme-leading-innovation-in-evidence-informed-decision-making/.

Langer, L. Stewart, R. Erasmus, Y. and de Wet, T. (2015) 'Walking the last mile on the long road to evidence-informed development: building capacity to use research evidence', *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 7(4), pp. 462–470. doi: 10.1080/19439342.2015.1095783.

Meyer, M. (2010) 'The Rise of the Knowledge Broker', *Science Communication*, (31 (1)), pp. 118–127. doi: 10.1177/1075547009359797.Milner, T. (2017) *The Knowledge Sharing Journey of Practical Action*. Available at: http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/impact-lab/collection/intermediate-technology-technology-justice (Accessed: 18 January 2018).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 1: What should we do to ensure that research evidence is both useful and used?*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/2017/07/04/what-should-we-do-to-ensure-that-research-evidence-is-both-useful-and-used/#_ftn1 (Accessed: 15 December 2017).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 3: What do we know about how to facilitate evidence use?*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/category/networks-series-3-what-do-we-know-about-how-to-facilitate-evidence-use/ (Accessed: 20 December 2017).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 4: We need greater understanding of decision-making and decision-makers*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/2017/08/15/networks-series-4-we-need-greater-understanding-of-decision-making-and-decision-makers/ (Accessed: 5 January 2018).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 5: Capacity-sharing to support the use of evidence in decision-making*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/2017/08/29/networks-series-5-capacity-sharing-to-support-the-use-of-evidence-in-decision-making/ (Accessed: 5 January 2018).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 6: Better networks to support the use of evidence in decision-making*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/category/network-series-6-better-networks-to-support-the-use-of-evidence-in-decision-making/ (Accessed: 5 January 2018).

Stewart, R. (2017) *Networks Series 7: Networks and relationships change the nature of evidence*, *Africa Centre for Evidence*. Available at: https://africacentreforevidence.org/category/networks-series-7-networks-and-relationships-change-the-nature-of-evidence/.

Topp, L. and Mair, D. (2018) 'Knowledge Management for Policy: A New Collective Skillset', *European Public Mosaic*, 4, pp. 12–19.

USAID (2016) *Strengthening Evidence Based Development: Five Years of Better Evaluation Practice and USAID 2011–2016*.

Contact Us

Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning

London International Development Centre

36 Gordon Square

WC1H 0PD

www.cedilprogramme.org

@CEDILProgramme