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The Policy-Research Disconnect in East Africa: An Institutional Capacity Constraints and Evidence-Based Policymaking

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Abstract
Evidence-based policymaking has evolved as a necessary tool to enhance governance, public service delivery and sustainable development. Over the past decades, governments around East Africa have increasingly acknowledged the need to incorporate scientific research into public policy for tackling the multifaceted socioeconomic, health, environmental and governance issues. Although there have been increasing investments in higher education, research institutions, and national policy frameworks, the use of research evidence in policy making is inconsistent due to the lack of capacity of the institutions. Current gaps; lack of policy analysis capacity, poor knowledge translation, lack of integrated data systems, limited research funding and poor working relationships between researchers and policy makers remain challenges to evidence-informed decision making. This qualitative narrative literature review summarizes the state of the policy–research divide in East Africa, specifically the institutional obstacles that hinder evidence-based policy making. Information published from 2018 to 2026 was located through peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, regional and international organisations. Reviewed literature was thematically analysed to highlight common themes, issues in the context, and gaps in the research. The review reveals that while East African countries have been successful in strengthening research systems and policy institutions, there are significant institutional hurdles in the ways research evidence is translated to public policy. For a more evidence informed governance and sustainable development in East Africa, it is crucial to build institutional capacities, enhance knowledge translation processes, foster researcher-policymaker partnerships and invest in national research and data systems.

Keywords: evidence-based policymaking, research utilisation, institutional capacity, knowledge translation, governance, East Africa, narrative literature review

Introduction

The growing complexity of socio-economic development, public health, environmental management and governance problems have strengthened the need for evidence-based policy making to enhance the effectiveness and accountability of government. The role of science in informing policies is gaining momentum, with the increasing expectation from governments to provide robust scientific evidence to guide policy-making for better policy quality, efficient resource utilization and successful sustainable development outcomes (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2023) [5, 13]. Evidence-based policymaking is a process that brings research evidence, statistical data, expert knowledge, and contextual information into the making, enacting, monitoring, and evaluating of policies (Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017) [3, 7]. This has led other organisations like the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank to continue promoting the improved use of research evidence in public decision-making processes (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; Asiimwe & Magunda, 2024) [2, 5, 11].

Governments have been making increased investments in universities, research institutions, national statistical systems, and policy advisory institutions in East Africa to build capacities for evidence-informed governance. There has been a growing emphasis on research, innovation, and data-driven decision-making as key factors for sustainable development (East African Community, 2023; African Union Commission, 2024) [1, 29] at regional level through the East African Community (EAC), the African Union (AU) and at the national level. In spite of these efforts, there are still significant differences in the use of research evidence to influence policy decisions in the region.

There is increasing evidence that institutional capacity gaps remain as a major obstacle to effective use of research evidence in policy making across the countries in East Africa. Frequently, weak policy analysis capacity, limited funding for research, fragmented information systems, weak mechanisms for information translation, poor inter-sectoral collaboration between researchers and policy makers and political influences limit the utilization of evidence (Langer *et al*., 2022; UNECA, 2023) [4, 10]. These difficulties were clearly observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when institutional capabilities played a role in determining the capacity of policy-makers to incorporate scientific evidence into policy responses (WHO, 2022) [12].

While there is literature available for each country in the East African region and specific policy areas that focus on evidence-based policy making, there is limited synthesis of the regional evidence on institutional factors that contribute to the policy–research disconnect. This is a qualitative narrative literature review that aims to synthesize current literature from 2018 to 2026, and include seminal studies if needed, to explore the constraints in institutional capacities to evidence-based policymaking in East Africa. The purpose of the review is to find commonalities in barriers, enabling factors, and research gaps that will help to guide more robust evidence-based governance at the regional level.

Rationale

Although research and policy institutions in Africa are growing in size and funding, the use of research evidence in public policy is not consistent, as institutional capacity is still a challenge. So far existing studies are mostly based on a country or sector level, with little synthesis of the continent's institutional conditions that may explain the policy–research disconnect. To this end, a qualitative narrative literature review was conducted to synthesize evidence of the institutional capacity constraints that hinder EBM in Continental Africa over the last eight years (2018–2026), to identify common challenges and enablers, and to identify areas for future research. The results are anticipated to contribute to strengthening evidence-informed governance and institutional capacity for sustainable development (Langer *et al*., 2022; OECD, 2020; UNECA, 2023) [4, 5, 10] at the policy level, research, development partnership and academic institutional levels.

Methods and Material

This study used a narrative literature review design, which aimed to synthesize and critically discuss the body of evidence with respect to policy–research disconnect and institutional capacity constraints influencing evidence-based policy-making in East Africa. The narrative literature review was deemed to be the best option as it allows for the findings of a variety of empirical studies, reports and documents on policy, and theoretical literature to be integrated, interpreted, and the themes and gaps of knowledge to be identified while this approach to research does not involve primary data collection (Snyder, 2019; Asiimwe & Magunda, 2024) [2, 33]. Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library and JSTOR were searched using a comprehensive literature search. Further literature was sourced from the publications of the East African Community (EAC), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), UNDP, OECD, UNESCO, World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO). Key words used were evidence-based policymaking, research utilisation, policy–research disconnect, institutional capacity, knowledge translation, public policy, governance, and East Africa.

The review consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and institutional publications covering the years 2018–2026, as well as seminal studies where they were relevant to provide conceptual or theoretical bases. Eligible studies involved the institutional capacity, research utilisation, or evidence-based policymaking in either East African countries or similar settings. Thematic analysis was used to synthesize data from pertinent publications to identify common themes around institutional capacity, knowledge translation, researcher–policymaker collaboration, barriers to evidence use, enabling factors and research gaps. A primary concern was to ensure credibility and recent peer reviewed literature and reports from reputable regional and international organisations were used.

Literature Review

How the policy–research interface and evidence-based policymaking work.

Evidence based policymaking (EBPM) is now a core tenet of contemporary public management that entails the deliberate use of research evidence, statistical information and expert knowledge in shaping, executing, tracking and assessing policy (Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Asiimwe & Magunda, 2024) [2, 3, 7]. The strategy is aimed at making better policies, making decisions for the government based on the best available evidence and not just political philosophy or ministry routine. It has been adapted over time to become evidence-informed policymaking, acknowledging that while research evidence is one of a set of factors that influences public decisions, there are other factors, including political priorities, institutional realities, stakeholder interests and resource availability (Head, 2024) [41].

Researcher-policymaker interactions are increasingly recognized as not unidirectional. Effective evidence use requires high quality research production, as well as capacity to translate knowledge, facilitate policy dialogue, and ensure ongoing research-policy interaction (Langer *et al*., 2022) [4]. Knowledge translation activities such as policy briefs, technical reports, consultation with stakeholders and policy dialogues are a vital way of ensuring that scientific evidence is accessible and relevant to the policy-making process (Oliver *et al*., 2019) [6]. There is a positive relationship between countries with robust institutional arrangements for such interactions and those that show high levels of research evidence informational integration into governance processes (OECD, 2020; Asiimwe & Magunda, 2024) [2, 5].

However, there are political, organizational and contextual factors that continue to affect research utilisation. In fact, policymakers are frequently caught between pressing

demands to balance scientific evidence with electoral, fiscal, public opinion, and institutional priorities, and researchers are often left with inconclusive results that don't meet the policy demands at hand (Parkhurst, 2017) [7]. To improve the policy–research interface, there is a need for institutional arrangements that foster trust, cooperation, and ongoing dialogue between actors who create the policy and actors who use it.

The Institutional Capacity Limitation of Evidence-Based Policymaking

The capacity of institutions is well known as a key component for evidence-informed policymaking. It covers the human resources, organizational structures, financial resources, legal structures, technological infrastructure, and governance systems needed to produce, interpret, synthesize and use the research evidence effectively (UNDP, 2021) [9]. There are examples of how well governments with strong institutional capacity can incorporate scientific evidence into policy processes, assess programme impacts, and address new development challenges.

New research highlights some of the institutional challenges to evidence use in policy. Some of these include lack of policy analysis capacity, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, fragmented national data systems, inadequate research funding, poor access to quality evidence, and poor coordination between government institutions and research organisations (OECD, 2020; UNECA, 2023) [5, 10]. Limited human resources are also a major issue: public institutions often do not have sufficiently qualified policy analysts, statisticians and research specialists who can translate complex scientific evidence for use in policy making.

Other factors affect the use of evidence as well: political and organisational. However, in a number of contexts, brief political cycles, competing governmental agendas, fragmentation of the bureaucracy, and the absence of incentives to use evidence, make it less likely that research will inform policy making (Oliver *et al*., 2019) [6]. Likewise, researchers and policymakers do not always talk to each other and important research may be published in academic journals that have minimal policy relevance. All these institutional limits add to the well-known policy–research disconnect in many LMICs.

The Policy–Research Disconnect in East Africa

In the last 20 years, there has been significant progress in strengthening higher education, Research Institutes, National Statistical and policy advisory capacities in the EA countries. Research, innovation and evidence-based governance are increasingly a key part of the governance framework of the East African Community (EAC), the African Union Commission (AUC) and national governments as key factors of sustainable development initiatives (East African Community, 2023; African Union Commission, 2024) [1, 29]. In spite of these improvements, there is still an uneven rate of using research evidence to support policy decisions across the region.

Empirical evidence also shows that in several countries, such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Burundi, the capacity of institutions remains weak, thereby limiting evidence-based policymaking (Langer *et al*., 2022; UNECA, 2023) [4, 10]. The problems that are common include inadequate research funding, poor knowledge translation systems, poor data linkage and integration systems, low level of collaboration between universities and government institutions and lack of analytical capacity of policies. Scientific information is poorly disseminated to policy makers and governmental institutions might not have mechanisms for routinely identifying, evaluating and using science to inform policy decisions.

The importance of scientific evidence and the gaps in the use of scientific evidence in East Africa were brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the value of scientific evidence and institutional gaps in its use in East Africa. Countries with a relatively robust surveillance system, research institutions and public health coordination mechanisms tended to be better equipped to incorporate evidence into policy responses, while those with less technical capacity and institutional fragmentation and poor data systems struggled with these challenges (WHO, 2022) [12]. These experiences highlighted the need for the investments in resilient research systems and institutional arrangements that can help to bridge the gap between evidence and timely policy action.

While the concept of evidence-based policymaking has been growing in policy prominence across East Africa, the literature is fragmented and mostly country or sector specific. There has been limited reporting that has systematically explored the institutional factors that lead to the policy-research disconnect in the region. To that end, partnerships between researchers and policymakers must be strengthened, research and policy institutions need to be continuously funded, knowledge translation networks must be expanded, and institutional changes must be implemented to ensure the integration of evidence use in the policy process. These are critical to enhance governance, boost the delivery of public services and facilitate sustainable development in the region of East Africa.

Discussions

The literature reviewed shows that the policy–research disconnect in East Africa is mainly an institutional problem and not research production. There is continuing strong scientific evidence emerging from universities, research institutes and partners in all areas, including health, education, agriculture, and governance; however, the ability to translate scientific evidence into public policy is inconsistent. This finding underscores the need for not only quality research to underpin effective evidence-based policymaking, but also institutional processes that support evidence generation, synthesis, translation and utilisation (Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017) [3, 7]. As a result, country-level evidence-informed decision making is higher than in countries with less robust governance systems.

The review also points out that the linkages between the research community and policy makers are still low in many countries in Eastern Africa. The uptake of research evidence is still hindered by variation in research priorities, styles of professional interaction and policy timelines. Academic researchers tend to publish their research in academic journals that are not readily available to policy makers, while policy makers need quick, timely, and specific evidence that will feed their decision-making process. These results support the Two Communities Theory that posits that researchers and policymakers have different institutional cultures, and thus, need to structure their knowledge translation efforts to address the gap (Caplan, 1979) [50]. Recent studies also demonstrate the positive effect of

sustained engagement in government through policy dialogues, evidence briefs, embedded researchers and knowledge broker on research uptake in government (Langer *et al*., 2022; Oliver *et al*., 2019; Asiimwe & Magunda, 2024) [2, 4, 6].

One of the most important factors in determining evidence-informed policymaking was institutional capacity. Governments' capacity to effectively use scientific evidence remains limited due to a variety of factors, including limited capacity in policy analysis, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, disjointed national data systems, low levels of scientific research investment, and a lack of skilled personnel, across East Africa (OECD, 2020; UNECA, 2023) [5, 10]. The results support Policy Capacity Theory, which highlights that analytical, operational and political capacities are interrelated and will influence governments' capacity to develop and execute evidence informed policies (Wu *et al*., 2018) [57]. The institutional capacity strengthening also should not be limited to the creation and development of research outputs but should include investments in policy analysis units, statistical systems, knowledge management systems and human resource development in public service.

Another key finding is related to the increasing significance of the role of knowledge translation as a link between research and policy. The results of research are more likely to inform policy when they are published in a policy brief, rapid evidence synthesis, stakeholder dialogue, and other formats designed to inform policy rather than traditional academic publications (Oliver *et al*., 2019) [6]. Knowledge translation is also a global priority for the World Health Organization in the field of enhancing evidence utilisation in policy-making and the organization is helping to coordinate global research priorities to better use evidence in policy decisions across countries. This trend is reflected in the many recent projects focused on facilitating institutional knowledge systems that can support evidence-based governance, such as the Partnerships for Stronger Knowledge Systems in Africa (KNOSA) in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia.

It is also noted that there has been significant progress in East Africa on institutions supporting evidence-informed governance. The governments have built up the national statistical systems, boosted universities and research institutions, and created policy advisory bodies with the assistance of regional organisations and development partners. However, countries do not implement these initiatives uniformly due to financial limitations, the lack of institutional coordination and different political interest in the use of evidence. Other studies have investigated the structures and processes for knowledge translation in the WHO African Region and found that less than half of the countries surveyed had mechanisms in place for evidence synthesis and policy translation. The findings indicate that the presence of research institutions is not enough without the presence of institutional setups which have a regular practice of using evidence in policy making.

COVID-19 further highlighted the weaknesses and strengths of the institutional capacity in East Africa. There were more challenges in countries with weaker institutional systems in generating and using evidence quickly during policy responses, as opposed to countries with better surveillance systems and public health institutions and research networks (WHO, 2022) [12]. These experiences make it more important to invest in resilient national knowledge systems that can address day to day governance issues and the public emergency. There is also recent mixed methods evidence from African countries that shows that there is a relationship between knowledge translation and evidence uptake, and between knowledge translation and institutional learning, which is improved when it is integrated and characterized by continued collaboration between researchers and policymakers.

Although there has been an increasing body of literature on the subject of evidence-informed policymaking, there are still gaps in research. The literature available is primarily related to the health sector, with relatively little available for education, agriculture, environmental management, digital governance, and public administration. In addition, many studies in the literature have been descriptive, cross sectional studies, with only a handful of longitudinal studies reporting on the impact of institutional reforms on evidence utilisation in the long-term. Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) undertook an evidence mapping process which also found that research across the globe is still focused largely in high-income countries and the health field, with a significant lack of evidence on effective interventions to support evidence-informed policy-making in low and middle-income contexts. Future research should, therefore, take a multidisciplinary and comparative approach and investigate institutional reforms in various sectors within East Africa.

Overall, the literature reviewed indicated that the policy–research disconnect in East Africa can be overcome by enhancing institutional capacity, building sustainable knowledge translation mechanisms, investing in national research and data systems and developing long-term partnerships between researchers and policy makers. The integration of evidence use into the normal work of governments, with political buy-in and sufficient funding, will be crucial to enhance governance, policy effectiveness and sustainable development across the region.

Conclusions

This qualitative narrative literature review explored the policy–research disconnect in East Africa by summarizing the evidence on capacity constraints of institutions in the evidence-based policymaking process. The review shows that East African countries have made significant strides in building research institutions, strengthening higher education, national statistical systems and policy frameworks, but integrating research evidence into public policy is inconsistent. Institutional issues such as the low capacity of policy analysis, lack of funding for research, lack of efficient means of disseminating research findings, lack of coordination between researchers and policy makers, lack of data systems, and low institutional incentives for using evidence are responsible for much of the disconnect.

The review also points out that the creation of good quality research is not enough to facilitate the production of effective evidence-based policies. It relies on strong institutional arrangements that can produce, combine, interpret and utilize evidence across the policy cycle. This requires strengthening partnerships between researchers and policymakers, institutionalizing knowledge translation platforms, strengthening policy analysis and monitoring systems and technical capacity building of public institutions to improve evidence informed governance in the region.

While work on evidence-informed policymaking in East Africa is growing, there are still many gaps in knowledge.

The literature reviewed is largely focused on the health sector and at the national level; there is relatively little comparative and cross-sectoral literature on capacity building of institutions in the region. Going forward, efforts should be made to test the effectiveness of institutional reforms and knowledge translation tools in improving evidence use in a multidisciplinary, longitudinal, and comparative manner, across various policy sectors.

In sum, a policy-research interface gap that is narrow over the longer term will require continued political will, investment in national research and innovation systems, greater engagement between researchers and policy-makers, and institutional changes to ensure that evidence is integrated into more routine government policy making processes. Progress on these priorities will enhance governance, enable effective public policies and support sustainable socioeconomic development in the entire East Africa region.

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