

Use of research evidence in the policy domain: A best-evidence synthesis of social science research in Africa, Asia, and Latin America

Daniel Sidney Fussy^{1,2}

¹Mkwawa University College of Education
(A Constituent College of the University of
Dar es Salaam), Iringa, Tanzania

²Global Development Network, New Delhi, India

Correspondence

Daniel Sidney Fussy, Mkwawa University College
of Education (A Constituent College of the
University of Dar es Salaam), Iringa, Tanzania.
Email: dfussy@gdn.int; daniel.fussy@muce.ac.tz

[Correction added on 5 Aug 2022, after first online
publication: country name India corrected to
Indonesia at two places and second affiliation
added.]

Abstract

The use of research evidence in policymaking provides policymakers with a sound basis for policy decisions and actions. While the use of research evidence is on the rise, its evidence remains largely under-reported especially from social sciences and developing world context. This may perpetuate the prevailing myth that policymakers do not use research evidence in policy deliberations and, thus, discourage researchers, funders, and policymakers from making greater investment in producing, disseminating, and using research evidence. Using the intersection of Weiss' typology of research use and a best-evidence synthesis approach, this paper reviews and reports evidence on the use of research evidence in the policy domain from four national level studies undertaken in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Conceptual and instrumental uses of research evidence are evident through a demand for research evidence, research-based policy products, and citations of research in policy documents. The paper broadens our understanding on the use of research evidence from developing countries context and social science research, and informs different funders, researchers, and policymakers about the potential utility of research they respectively fund and/or undertake.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social science researchers, research institutions, and funding agencies normally ask about how to increase the chances that the policymaking process is informed by research evidence. In the course of finding answers to the question, they increasingly realise that the primary concern to evidence-based policy is not getting evidence being produced, but getting the evidence being used (Gamoran 2018; Gitomer and Crouse 2019; Goldman and Pabari 2020; Gunn and Mintrom 2021). The use of research evidence in policymaking gives policymakers a sound basis for their policy decisions and actions, enables them to ask critical questions when presented with counter or supportive evidence, and evaluate successes or failures in implementing various policies (Yanovitzky and Weber 2020).

Literature shows that the use of research evidence (URE) in policymaking is increasing in recent years; however, evidence on URE remains largely under-reported in the current literature (Kathryn and Boaz 2019; Yanovitzky and Weber 2020). Studies on URE have been mostly conducted in developed countries (e.g., Gough et al. 2018 in the United Kingdom, Tseng et al. 2018 and Nutley and Tseng 2014 in the United States, Amara et al. 2004 in Canada, Wehrens et al. 2010 in the Netherlands, Blewden et al. 2010 in New Zealand). Some initiatives in URE are evident in developing countries as reported in *Using Evidence in Policy and Practice* – an edited volume by Goldman and Pabari (2020) which focuses on eight African countries. Even then, little is known about URE in developing countries. Additionally, previous URE studies are not distributed and shared across disciplines, as most of these studies have been dominated by health and medical disciplines, a situation which leaves much to be desired for social science disciplines. Yet, findings on URE cannot be generalised across disciplines and contexts. Davies et al. (2008) maintain that the use of research evidence is normally context-dependent and that URE ought to be studied in relation to local priorities, cultures, as well as organisational structures.

Similarly, most of the evidence and examples of URE studies tend to be testimonies of a specific funder who initially funded an intervention or an empirical investigation. As existing lessons on research use are not shared and mostly confined to the funding agency-sponsored studies, different funders and researchers become less informed about the potential utility of research they respectively fund or undertake. This may perpetuate the prevailing myth that policymakers do not use research evidence in policy deliberations and, thus, discourage researchers and policymakers from investing greater efforts on producing and making better use of research evidence (Kathryn and Boaz 2019; Tseng 2015). Thus, using the intersection of the Weiss' typology of research use and a best-evidence synthesis approach, the current paper reviews and reports evidence on URE in the policy domain from four national level studies undertaken in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By providing evidence on research use, this paper broadens our understanding on URE from developing countries context and social science research, and informs different funders, researchers, and policymakers about the potential utility of research they respectively fund and/or undertake.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of URE finds its root in knowledge utilisation, which refers to “research, scholarly, and programmatic intervention activities aimed at increasing the use of knowledge to solve human problems” (Backer 1991, p. 226), such as employment, education, and healthcare. This suggests that URE denotes the incorporation of research evidence in decision making, thinking about problems and possible solutions, as well as rationalising the present resolution of problems (Weiss 1979). W.T Grant Foundation (2020) expands further on conceptualising research evidence by referring to it as the type of evidence generated through systematic and transparent collection and analysis of data that addresses a predetermined question or hypothesis. The stated evidence can be generated from descriptive studies – both qualitative and quantitative – meta-analyses studies, cost-effectiveness studies, intervention and evaluation studies undertaken within or outside research organisations. Broadening Backer's (1991) and Weiss's (1979) conceptions of URE, the W.T Grant Foundation aptly states:

use of research evidence can happen in many ways and may involve the direct application of research evidence to decision making, conceptual influences on how decision makers think about problems and potential solutions, strategic uses of research to justify existing stances or positions, or imposed uses that require decision makers to engage with research (2020, p. 4).

The W.T Grant Foundation offers a depth and breadth definition of URE as it suggests the multiple and different use of research evidence by policymakers and practitioners, which can be summarised as instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic uses of research. *Instrumental use* involves a direct application

of research evidence in decision-making. For example, when a policymaker adopts a new mathematics curriculum after perusing a study or studies that show the new curriculum had positive student outcomes (Lawlor et al. 2019; Tseng 2015). *Conceptual use* occurs when research evidence enlightens policymakers' and practitioners' thinking about different issues, problems, and/or potential solutions. For example, when a policymaker or practitioner uses a review of literature to guide their thinking about a problem that they are currently working on to improve (Lawlor et al. 2019; Tseng 2015). Such information generated from the literature review may serve as a frame to start designing policies. Finally, *symbolic use*, also called *tactical use*, occurs when research evidence is used to rationalise or justify particular decisions or positions that have already been made, such as using research evidence to support a piece of legislation or challenge a current implemented practice (Lawlor et al. 2019; Tseng 2015).

This classification of three types of research builds on the pioneering work of Weiss (1979) and has been commonly adopted in different theoretical and empirical literature (e.g., Blewden et al. 2010; Lawlor et al. 2019) as well as organisations which support the use of research evidence (e.g., W. T. Grant Foundation). Scholarship on research use has recently expanded due to efforts of funders to promote greater use in both policy and practice of the research findings they fund (Gamoran 2018). For example, the W. T. Grant Foundation has been supporting a portfolio on the use of research evidence in informing policies and practices especially that affect youth since 2009, with a continued effort to the present. Studies produced as a result of this initiative showed that URE is never linear and single-sourced (Nutley and Tseng 2014; Tseng et al. 2018). This finding echoes a study funded by the EU commission which found that policymakers use a range of sources in searching for evidence and more often than not these policymakers make an indirect use of research evidence (Oliver and de Vocht 2017). Blewden et al. (2010) drew evidence of research use from two examples of immigration policy development in New Zealand. The study found that the conceptual use and enlightenment were largely evident in the earliest stages of policy formulation such as agenda-setting, while the instrumental use of research evidence was most evident in later stages – policy implementation stage – where researchers were more likely to be interacting with policymakers.

In a survey that involved 833 respondents who were professionals and managers in Canadian and provincial government agencies, Amara et al. (2004) found that the conceptual use of research was more frequent than instrumental use. The authors concluded that the three types of URE simultaneously play a significant role in government agencies. They then recommended that more URE could be achieved by encouraging researchers to increase the production of rigorous research especially large-scale quantitative studies and relevant research to the needs of government agencies, pay more attention to the work context in which government agencies operate, and intensify their interactions with those professionals and managers in government agencies.

The political nature of policymaking normally makes the concept of URE complex. In this sense, since URE in the policy domain involves two sides (research evidence and policymaking process), it is worth examining the idea of evidence-based policymaking. Evidence-based policymaking is generally understood as a process that transparently uses rigorous and robust evidence to inform public policy development and implementation (Nutley et al. 2009). There are three main characteristics underlying the concept of evidence-based policy making, namely evidence should be rigorous, tested, and capable of replication; robust and methodically sound; and the entire process of evidence use should be transparent. The concept has evolved from the field of medicine as evidence-based medicine, and gained popularity in recent decades in the field of social sciences (Pahlman 2014; Nutley et al. 2007). In particular, the concept gained popularity in 1999 during the election of the Tony Blair Government in the UK on the platform of “what matters is what works” (Nutley et al. 2009, p. 4). Considered as pragmatic and anti-ideological, the Blair Government questioned “inherited ways of doing things” (Blair and Cunningham 1999, p. 16) and avowed to develop public policies which were based on evidence rather than interim responses to political pressures and elections largely informed by part ideologies. Additionally, the increase of educated, critical, and questioning public has promoted the

rise of evidence-based policymaking, as policymakers have to be able to elaborate the relevance and usefulness of their policy choices in consideration to their cost-benefit and efficiency (Pahlman 2014; Solesbury 2001).

Evidence is imperative to ensuring success in the policymaking process and implementation. Evidence is viewed as a mechanism to persuasively overcome the influence of special interest and political ideology and ensure robustness in the policy debate (Nutley et al. 2009). Based on this discussion, the idea of evidence-based policymaking appears to be straightforward; however, it is largely problematic and has attracted a corpus of criticism from critics of evidence-based policymaking. First, policymaking in itself is an inherently political process. It would be naïve to assume that research evidence can provide completely objective solutions or remedies to political problems such as those relating to education, criminal justice, or social welfare (Nutley et al. 2009; Pahlman 2014). Second, the process of evidence generation and evaluation itself is political as all knowledge is socially constructed and in many ways contingent (Pawson 2006; Taylor and Balloch 2005). Policymaking will never detach from politics, nor will scientific research negate its political nature because the process of researching, as with any other human endeavour, inevitably relies on researchers' interpretation and judgement despite being guided by methodological principles (Banks 2009). With the fallible nature of evidence, it should be rational to expect policymakers to analyse and assess research claims critically, based on their professional knowledge and experiences.

Third, the question of how evidence is produced, who produces it, and how it is disseminated to the public domain and discussed is another critical area for comprehending the reliability of evidence (Nutley et al. 2009; Pahlman 2014). Networks of organisations outside of government and public entities have emerged in many policy areas to play a major role in shaping policy (Nutley et al. 2009). These include think tanks, charitable agencies, lobby groups, and campaign organisations which normally have an active research function. While these groups are considered to be democratic in the policy process, in that they are more participatory and have a greater diversity of perspectives, the assumptions and values entrenched in their research should not be overlooked (Nutley et al. 2009; Pahlman 2014). In most cases, the research and analyses conducted by these groups is not "in the interest of knowledge, but as a side effect of advocacy" (Weiss 1986, p. 280).

Fourth, the issue of selective framing and partisan use of evidence (McConnell 2010; Nutley et al. 2009). This means that the typical policymaking context is made up of competing and diverse interests which tend to favour the wishes and values of certain policy actors over others. While they may emphasise using evidence in legitimising their policy choices, policymakers can cherry pick the evidence that best suits and supports their prior established opinions and ideologies (McConnell 2010). This means, evidence will only be used when it supports one's politically motivated priorities to ensure their political survival. One may not be surprised to see the same research evidence is used by competing interests to support opposing arguments. The selective framing of evidence has considerable implications for research and scientific knowledge. Nowadays, politics play an influential role on what kind of research gets funded, endorsed, or supported, and the way it is conducted (Nutley et al. 2009). This is extremely challenging especially for one who considers the separation of research and policy as necessary to holding governments accountable in the sense that independent research and analyses can "speak truth to power" (Nutley et al. 2009, p. 8).

The criticism levelled against evidence-based policymaking suggests that tracking research use in policymaking has been a complex undertaking. The complexity of tracking URE is enhanced by limited capacity of established data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, document analyses, observations, social network analyses, and experiments, which are used to study policymakers' use of research evidence. These methods have been praised for their ability to capture evidence of research use however criticised for their inability to capture the use of research evidence (Gamoran 2018; Yanovitzky and Weber 2020). Considering the limitations of established methodologies, the current study reviews and reports evidence on URE using a best-evidence synthesis approach applied to four national level studies from Bolivia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nigeria.

3 | BEST EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

This paper employs a best-evidence synthesis (Slavin 1986; 2008) to systematically and critically review social science reports from Bolivia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nigeria. The best-evidence synthesis (BES) is a research approach for synthesising empirical studies that allows researchers to combine results from a purposefully and carefully selected number of studies to provide a more focused and interpretable account and arrive at a given conclusion (Cheung et al. 2017; Slavin 1986; 2008). The BES method is unlike a meta-analysis which necessitates the combination of results from multiple studies. Cheung et al. (2017) maintain that BES is distinctive in that it provides further descriptions of key studies under review in addition to numerical summaries, with the intention of enabling readers to comprehend the programmes and studies, and to gain insight into the research under review beyond that which meta-analyses could ordinarily provide. The reader is thus familiarised with the nature of the original studies, methodological issues they raise, and findings that go beyond the focus of the review.

An example of BES is Willems and Van den Bossche (2019), who purposefully selected five studies that reported the effectiveness of a lesson study as a powerful professional development approach for teachers' professional learning. Their review concluded that a significant change or improvement for knowledge, skills, beliefs, and behaviour were reported among teachers. Using the BES method and following Willems and Van den Bossche (2019) procedures, this review sought to establish evidence of URE from four country reports, namely Egbetokun et al. 2020 in Nigeria, Cuba et al. 2020 in Bolivia, Rakhmani et al. 2020 in Indonesia, and Glutting et al. 2020 in Myanmar. The four country reports were purposefully selected and included in the current review because they employed and were guided by a standard methodology of data collection in social science research called Doing Research Assessment (DRA). The four country studies used the same data generation methodology and research variables as guided by DRA to undertake research in their respective countries to study the social science research system in the three core areas of research production, diffusion, and use (uptake) from 2018 through 2020.

The DRA is the methodology developed by the Global Development Network (GDN) to study the research system, after its 2014–2016 pilot in 11 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. DRA specifically aims to assess systematically how the features of national research system impact the capacity to produce, diffuse, and use quality social science research to the benefit of social and economic development (GDN 2020). As an analytical framework of research system, the DRA consists of 12 determinants (four for each of the three core areas of production, diffusion, and uptake of social science research). While the four country studies report the findings on all the three core areas, the current paper reviews the reports' findings on the third core area – the (research) uptake – by demonstrating evidence of URE in the policy domain within the four countries.

Research uptake is defined in DRA as “the exploitation and adoption of research-based knowledge for use or application in specific policy domains” (GDN 2020, p. 3). In the DRA methodology, the research uptake has four determinants including policy-friendly research, research-based policymaking, research-based policy tools, and research for better policies (see Appendix 1). These four determinants with their respective 13 indicators were used as key variables in generating data on research use by policymakers in four country reports under review. The author has access to the full dataset linked to each report following the permission granted by GDN. The author is among the GDN's fellows who were involved in reviewing and commenting on the four studies' design and draft reports. Therefore, the current review is done by the author who has first-hand knowledge of how the four studies were designed, how their data were collected, analysed, and reported.

4 | CONTEXT OF THE FOUR COUNTRIES

It is useful to characterise the four countries based on their four different settings in ways relevant to the current review of research use. Indonesia is a place where research is much polarised along ideological lines and capacity is fragmented because of the geomorphological features of the country. Most of the active researchers and universities are based on the industrial and heavily urbanised island of Java, with implications for the equitable distribution of research capacity across the country. The Indonesia report under review indicates that its sample was represented by 102 participants distributed as 28 policymakers, 40 research administrators, and 34 researchers. Bolivia is a country where the commissioning of research is polarised too, and where researchers work in extreme isolation, within and outside the country. The Bolivia report under review indicates that its sample was represented by 221 participants distributed as 155 researchers, 59 research administrators, and seven policymakers.

Myanmar is a country characterised by difficulty in finding research output, and supposedly social science graduates are 0.2 per cent. Most research is produced by international actors and not translated, and informality prevails in research-policy interactions. The Myanmar report under review shows that its sample was represented by 136 participants in the category of eight policymakers, 114 researchers, and 14 research administrators. Finally, Nigeria is a large country with a lot of social scientists, but there is no clear quality or accreditation system for nationally published research. The Nigeria report under review shows that its sample was represented by 710 individuals in the category of 504 researchers, 145 administrators, and 61 policymakers.

Data in all the four reports under review were collected through surveys and in-depth interviews from three groups of participants – researchers, research administrators, and policymakers – who were sourced from individual countries' higher education institutions, government agencies, and civil society organisations. The study's participants in the four reports were accessed through purposive, simple random, and snowballing sampling depending on the context and nature of the participants. Interview data in the four reports were analysed using thematic analysis based on the indicators and determinants of the DRA, and the survey data were coded and run into the computer using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Survey data were then subjected to descriptive analysis, where frequencies and percentages were generated.

5 | EVIDENCE ON URE IN BOLIVIA, INDONESIA, MYANMAR, AND NIGERIA

Analysis of the four country reports revealed three indicators which are used to evidence URE, namely demand for research evidence, research-based policy products, and citations of research inputs.

5.1 | Demand for research evidence

Evidence from the four country reports indicate that policymakers from different government organisations commissioned research so that researchers can produce evidence that is needed to inform the policymaking process. The commission of research by policymakers is an indication of the recognition that research evidence is vital to evidence-based policymaking.

5.1.1 | Nigeria

Data from the Nigeria report show that an encouraging number of policymakers (23 per cent of 61) commissioned research in the last three years since 2020. The commissioned research was conducted

by both national and international researchers. Most requests to undertake policy research were informal, only a small share of researchers (17 per cent of the 504 researchers) did receive a formal request from policymakers. The frequency of these requests was also encouraging at both individual and institutional levels. About one-third of researchers had received more than one request at both the individual and institutional levels (62 per cent of 117 institutions).

5.1.2 | Myanmar

A considerable level of engagement with policymakers' commissioned research projects is also reported in Myanmar, as 18 per cent of 114 researchers have worked on at least one research project commissioned by policymakers within the past three years. Like what is prevailing in Nigeria, the Myanmar government also makes use of informal channels to commission research work. Only 38 per cent of commissioned researchers had received any funding for the research. Commissioned research in Myanmar is considered as a means of developing or maintaining good relationships with policymakers.

5.1.3 | Indonesia

Most researchers (66.7 per cent) in Indonesia had received requests from policymakers for their inputs on social science issues during policy development in the last three years. Similarly, the majority of researchers (68.3 per cent) have worked on policymakers' commissioned research. This suggests an increasing recognition of the significance of evidence-based policymaking in Indonesia, which has resulted in a greater research demand.

5.1.4 | Bolivia

About one-third of researchers (33 per cent of 155) in Bolivia had received requests for inputs for public policy, and half of surveyed research institutions (50 per cent of 59) had worked directly with policymakers over the last three years. More than half of these institutions (56 per cent) had worked two or three times with policymakers over the same period. Equally, 65 per cent of seven policymakers had requested research inputs in the last three years. Additionally, interview data was reported in a Bolivia report where a director in a social science research institute at one university in Bolivia explained an incident that made their municipality consider taking an active role in pushing for legislation after being presented with the research findings that encouraged the municipality to reach out to local communities and teach techniques for self-diagnosing cervical cancer.

5.2 | Research-based policy products

The four country reports also provide evidence on the involvement of researchers in the production of research-based policy products including policy briefs, technical reports, and white papers resulted from social science research findings.

5.2.1 | Nigeria

A number of organisations, including universities and research institutes in Nigeria, regularly produce communication materials aimed at policymakers. For example, the research and training

department of National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS) regularly produces policy briefs on social issues. These materials are made directly available to policymakers. Similarly, an encouraging number of researchers (23 per cent of 500) had produced technical reports as an outcome of consultancies or commissioned projects, and 289 researchers (58 per cent) had produced policy briefs. Nigeria's report also indicates that policymakers were also involved in the authoring or co-authoring of these research-based policy materials. More than one-third of policymakers (37 per cent of 60) reported to have authored or co-authored policy materials based on social science research. One researcher at the university setting reported to obtain feedback from the Nigerian Government on some of his research-based policy materials published in the public domain.

5.2.2 | Myanmar

There is no reported data on the number of policy briefs or technical reports produced in Myanmar; however, there is evidence of use of research-based policy materials. For example, the Myanmar report indicates that the tripartite minimum wage committee established in 2017 has been using labour force survey data owned by the Ministry of Labour and providing relevant inputs to stakeholders when the minimum wage policy is adjusted every two years. The tripartite minimum wage committee is made up of government representatives, employers, workers, and five economics researchers.

5.2.3 | Indonesia

The report shows that most policymakers in Indonesia (82 per cent of 28) have collaborated with researchers in co-authoring policy-based materials. However, the total number of annually produced policy materials was not reported.

5.2.4 | Bolivia

There is no mention of the quantity of produced research-based policy products in Bolivia. However, evidence of use of research results is present as shown in section 4.3.

5.3 | Citations of research inputs

Citations of research inputs refer to the extent to which policymakers consult and use policy-related research inputs/findings. This can be indicated by examining citations of research papers or reports in policy documents and policymakers' references of research in their communications.

5.3.1 | Nigeria

More than two-thirds of policymakers (68 per cent of 60) in Nigeria had access to research communication materials and have used them to deliberate on various policies. Data reported from interviews indicate that policymakers in legislative departments had listened to research findings during public and investigative hearings. The report, however, does not indicate the frequency with which those policymakers use research evidence to support decision making.

5.3.2 | Myanmar

While the number of research citations in policy documents is not readily available, the Myanmar report offers examples of recent policy documents that have cited a number of social science research studies. For instance, the Agriculture Development Strategy and Investment Plan of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (the Ministry's flagship policy document), cites 15 other research studies undertaken by various international organisations and individual researchers. The National Aquaculture Development Plan of the Department of Fisheries also contains several citations of research studies conducted by international and local researchers. Likewise, several research administrators shared their perception on the rise of research use in recent years. The report also states that at least half of the research administrators (seven out of 14) believed that their research products were used to inform policy decisions.

5.3.3 | Indonesia

Almost all policymakers (93 per cent of 28) in Indonesia reported to have had benefitted from research-based products including peer-reviewed papers, working papers, research reports, presentations, and position papers.

5.3.4 | Bolivia

Most policymakers (71 per cent of seven) in Bolivia reported to have had benefitted personally and through their institutions, from the researchers' products, and nearly half of these policymakers (48 per cent) have used the researchers' products to produce policy-relevant materials.

6 | DISCUSSION

Evidence on the use of social science research to inform the policymaking process in Bolivia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nigeria has been established in this paper. Three indicators are presented as evidence of research use in four country reports, namely demand for research evidence, research-based policy products, and citations of research inputs.

The review shows that the demand of research evidence was evident in the four studies through policymakers' commissioning of research projects and direct request of inputs and advice from researchers during the development of policy. This finding suggests the conceptual use of research evidence as policymakers sought evidence to enlighten their thinking about the policy problem at hand. The finding is similar to past research which found the prevalence of conceptual use of research evidence during the earliest stages of policy formulation (Blewden et al. 2010; Gamoran 2018; Gitomer and Crouse 2019; Yanovitzky and Weber 2020) and in the managers' day-to-day professional activity in Canadian government agencies (Amara et al. 2004).

Policymakers in three country reports often used informal approaches to request researchers to undertake policy relevant research and/or share their inputs and advice during policy development. This finding reflects a South African study which found that the primary source of evidence for policymakers was informal rather than formal sources of evidence (Cronin and Sadan 2015). In this regard, the current review and that of Cronin and Sadan (2015) suggest that the use of research evidence is not normally straightforward and systematic. As the process is usually indirect and not easily noticeable, the general public may not trace the impact of a particular study or a specific finding on a public decision. Similarly, the social science researchers themselves who conduct policy research could not often

be aware of the impact of their studies on policy, something which may compel the social science researchers to give up on their efforts to produce policy-relevant research and sometimes write denunciations to journals criticising policymakers for their neglect of research evidence (Gamoran 2018; Weiss 1977). Gunn and Mintrom (2021) have provided two justifications on the tensions which arise from demonstrating the impact of research evidence in the policymaking process. First, with the use of the informality approach, policymakers may not be aware of the origins of the research evidence or knowledge they are using. Second, policymakers may sometimes need a high degree of confidentiality and thus formulate policies and use evidence in a “safe space” in which officials and experts come together to discuss policy development with total anonymity.

A concern worthy of noting is how social science researchers can leverage informality in policymakers’ use of research evidence. There is a body of research (Newman et al. 2013) and some evidence from four country reports (Egbetokun et al. 2020; Cuba et al. 2020; Rakhmani et al. 2020; Glutting et al. 2020) which suggest informality is being preferred by policymakers because they want to invite in researchers who will just support policymakers’ initial hypotheses/preferences, rather than analyse the reality objectively. In contrast, a semi-structured interview study conducted in Australia to 26 Australian civil servants, ministers, and ministerial advisors – as group of policymakers – reported how policymakers find and evaluate researchers of whom they expect to consult or collaborate. The findings shown that policymakers valued researchers who possess three key attributes: competence (exemplary academic reputation with pragmatic knowledge of government processes, adept at communicating and collaboration), integrity (independence and faithful in reporting research findings), and benevolence (commitment to policy reform) (Haynes et al. 2012). The implication is that regardless of the approach that policymakers could use to reach or request researchers, researchers who wish to influence policy should at least conform to these three attributes.

The findings on research-based products show that researchers took initiatives to produce policy briefs, technical reports, and white papers on social science research findings they conducted. This finding reflects what Blewden et al. (2010) found in their in-depth interview study with policymakers and social science researchers working in the immigration area in New Zealand. Both researchers and policymakers stressed the imperative of researcher-initiated research which is not necessarily closely connected to current policy issues. The researcher self-initiated research enables the researcher to have content for production of policy communication materials such as policy briefs, technical reports, and white papers. Indeed, researchers and policymakers in Blewden et al.’s study felt that researcher self-initiated research should rather be informed than driven by policy concerns to allow researchers to address questions or issues which were not yet thought of by policymakers. The implication is that in order for URE to occur, social science researchers do not need to cling to policymakers such that they produce research conceptualised largely in project-based or instrumental terms (Blewden et al. 2010; Gunn and Mintrom 2021; Nutley and Tseng 2014; Oliver and de Vocht 2017). This view is also evident in the current review especially in the Nigeria, Indonesia, and Myanmar reports, where researchers who were producing policy briefs reported to obtain feedback from their respective policymakers in the governments while original studies for those policy briefs were not commissioned by the policymakers. Some policymakers even reported getting involved in the co-authoring of those policy briefs based on generated social science research results.

Furthermore, the findings on the citations of research inputs indicate that policymakers make direct use of research evidence in policy development. This is evident through referencing research studies/findings in a given policy. The Myanmar report provides a case where different public policies have cited research studies, while the Nigeria, Indonesia, and Bolivia reports provide examples where policymakers had directly used research findings from researchers’ presentations to develop policies. In Weiss’ typology of research use, these findings suggest the instrumental use of research evidence, where research evidence or findings are direct and specifically applied in policy deliberations and decision-making processes. While the findings suggest policymakers’ instrumental use of research evidence, participation or engagement of these policymakers in research design was mentioned as a challenge throughout the four country reports. For example, one participant researcher in the

Nigeria report explained that “they [policymakers] are only interested in your research finding, so they don’t participate in the research design or anything like that” (Egbetokun et al., p. 103). This finding contrasts the tenets of instrumental use of research findings, where it is anticipated to occur at the policy development stages, with researchers more likely to be working consensually and collaboratively with policymakers, as Blewden et al. (2010) found in their study that examined the development of immigration policy in New Zealand.

A substantial body of knowledge has highlighted the benefits of researchers and policymakers’ engagement at the earliest stages of research and ways to increase the level of engagement between social science researchers and policymakers (Blewden et al. 2010; Gitomer and Crouse 2019; Landry et al. 2001; Landry et al. 2003; Luukkonen and Nedeva 2010; Nutley et al. 2007). Kano and Hayashi (2021), for example, have recently developed a framework to enable researchers and policymakers to align themselves in dealing with evidence in policymaking and increase the level of engagement. The framework contains five elements, namely methodological rigorousness, consistency, proximity, social appropriateness, and legitimacy. Methodological rigor refers to the quality of research evidence derived from systematic research designs or scientific methodologies that were selected and designed by both researchers and policymakers. Consistency refers to the steadiness of research evidence even when it is generated from multiple studies or analyses. Proximity considers the relevance of the research evidence to policy targets and context. Legitimacy requires policymakers to anchor their decision-making on research evidence rather than on events and experiences. Social appropriateness refers to whether the production and use of research evidence adequately considers the socio-political context including being ethical, legal, and socially acceptable. With Kano and Hayashi (2021)’s framework for implementing evidence in policymaking, the onus is on reinforcing a two-way interactive relationship between the two sides so that researchers undertake studies that likely answer the real needs of policymakers, while policymakers shape research questions to guide researchers on the right direction in producing policy-relevant research.

7 | CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research evidence enters the policy domain through a variety of ways, and policymakers use the evidence in a number of different ways during policy development (Tseng 2015). The current review has established evidence on URE in policy deliberations and decision making from four country reports in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Both conceptual and instrumental uses of research evidence as per Weiss’ typologies of research use were evident in the reports. There was a demand for research evidence by policymakers in all four country reports, and it was met through commissioning various research projects and consulting various researchers mostly in informal ways. There were also some considerable initiatives for researchers to produce research-based policy materials such as policy briefs, working papers, and technical reports from researchers’ self-initiated research. With the research-based policy materials generated through researchers’ self-initiated research, policymakers are being presented with ready-made and objectively analysed research evidence. There are also instances of direct use of research evidence as evident through citations of research in policy documents in some country reports such as the Myanmar report, and testimonies of policymakers’ direct use of research findings from researchers’ presentations to develop policies as in the Nigeria, Indonesia, and Bolivia reports.

Based on this analysis, this paper broadens our understanding on URE from developing countries where such studies are scarce and based mainly in healthy and medical-related fields. By providing evidence on URE, different funders and researchers are better informed about the potential utility of research they respectively fund and/or undertake. As such, the paper argues that it can take time for research evidence to infiltrate the policy domain and contribute to policy decisions. Indeed, policymakers may not be aware or even able to account for how research findings have shifted their ideas and have contributed to policies (Farrell and Coburn 2016; Tseng et al. 2018). Tracing such changes take

patience and willingness to continue observing how research evidence travel across policy domains in different settings.

The paper recommends an increase of the level of mutual engagement between social science researchers and policymakers from the earliest stages of research, as this will also increase an understanding of what kind of evidence is being produced by researchers and maximise policymakers' use of research evidence in conceptual, instrumental, or symbolic terms. Kano and Hayashi (2021, p. 86) highlight that "an essential task for the effective use of evidence in policymaking is for scientists and policymakers to share a common understanding of how evidence should be produced and used". Additionally, the paper recommends that future research on URE could focus on how URE happens in specific contexts, the type of evidence which policymakers prefer to use in making policy decisions, and the characteristics of researchers whom policymakers prefer to consult and collaborate.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/issj.12357>

REFERENCES

- Amara, N., M. Ouimet, and R. Landry. 2004. "New evidence on instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic utilization of university research in Government agencies." *Science Communication* 26(1): 75–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547004267491>
- Backer, T. E. 1991. "Knowledge utilization: The third wave." *Knowledge* 12(3): 225–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107554709101200303>
- Banks, G. 2009. *Evidence-based policy making: What is it? How do we get it?* Canberra: ANU Public Lecture Series. Productivity Commission.
- Blair, T., and J. Cunningham. 1999. *Modernising government*. London: Prime Minister and Minister for the Cabinet Office.
- Blewden, M., P. Carroll, and K. Witten. 2010. "The use of social science research to inform policy development: Case studies from recent immigration policy." *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 5(1): 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1175083X.2010.498087>
- Cheung, A., R. E. Slavin, E. Kim, and C. Lake. 2017. "Effective secondary science programs: A best-evidence synthesis." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 54(1): 58–81.
- Cronin, P. G., and M. Sadan. 2015. "Use of evidence in policy making in South Africa: An exploratory study of attitudes of senior government officials." *African Evaluation Journal* 3(1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v3i1.145>
- Cuba, L. P., R. Laserna, S. Ribera, and M. Gomez. 2020. *Doing research in Bolivia country report*. GDN CERES, http://gdn.int/DRA_Bolivia2020
- Davies, H., S. Nutley, and I. Walter. 2008. "Why 'knowledge transfer' is misconceived for applied social research." *Health Services Research & Policy* 13: 188–90.
- Egbetokun, A., A. Olofinyehun, A. Ayo-Lawal, O. Oluwatope, M. Sanni, and U. Yusuff. 2020. *Doing research in Nigeria country report*. GDN NACETEM. http://gdn.int/DRA_Nigeria2020
- Farrell, C., and C. Coburn 2016. "What is the conceptual use of research and why is it important?" Available at: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/conceptual-use-research-important>
- Gamoran, A. 2018. "Evidence-based policy in the real world: A cautionary view." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 678: 180–91.
- GDN 2020. "Doing Research Assessment." Available at: <http://www.gdn.int/doing-researchassessment>
- Gitomer, D. H., and K. Crouse 2019. "Studying the use of research evidence: A review of methods." A William T. Grant Foundation Monograph. Available at <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2019/02/A-Review-of-Methods-FINAL003.pdf>
- Glutting, J. R., Z. Oo, Z. X. Anders Lee, N. L. Htet, N. Lin, N. C. Win, N. C. Aung, and T. Z. Oo. 2020. *Doing research in Myanmar country report*. GDN CESD. http://gdn.int/DRA_Myanmar2020
- Goldman I., and Pabari M., eds. 2020. *Using evidence in policy and practice*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gough, D., C. Maidment, and J. Sharples 2018. "UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts." London. Available at: <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3731>
- Gunn, A., and M. Mintrom. 2021. "Where evidence-based policy meets research impact." *Aust J Publ Admin* 80: 544–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12499>

- Haynes, A. S., G. E. Derrick, S. Redman, W. D. Hall, and J. A. Gillespie. 2012. "Identifying trustworthy experts: How do policymakers find and assess public health researchers worth consulting or collaborating with?" *PLoS ONE* 7(3): e32665. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0032665>
- Kano, H., and T. I. Hayashi. 2021. "A framework for implementing evidence in policymaking: Perspectives and phases of evidence evaluation in the science-policy interaction." *Environmental Science and Policy* 116: 86–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.09.001>
- Kathryn, O., and A. Boaz. 2019. "Transforming evidence for policy and practice: Creating space for new conversations." *Palgrave Communications*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0266-1>
- Landry, R., M. Lamari, and N. Amara. 2003. "Extent and determinants of utilisation of university research in public administration." *Public Administration Review* 63(2): 191–204.
- Landry, R., N. Amara, and M. Lamari. 2001. "Utilization of social science research knowledge in Canada." *Research Policy* 30: 333–49.
- Lawlor, J., K. Mills, Z. Neal, J. W. Neal, C. Wilson, and K. Mcalindon. 2019. "Approaches to measuring use of research evidence in K-12 settings: A systematic review." *Educational Research Review* 27: 218–28.
- Luukkonen, T., and M. Nedeva. 2010. "Towards understanding integration in research and research policy." *Research Policy* 39(5): 674–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2010.02.008>
- McConnell, A. 2010. *Understanding policy success: Rethinking public policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Newman, K., A. Capillo, A. Famurewa, C. Nath, and W. Siyanbola. 2013. "What is the evidence on evidence-informed policy making?" *Lessons from the international conference on evidence-informed policy making*. International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications.
- Nutley, S. M., and V. Tseng. 2014. "Building the infrastructure to improve the use and usefulness of research in education." In K. S. Finnigan, and A. J. Daly (Eds.). *Using research evidence in education: From the schoolhouse door to Capitol Hill. Policy implications of research in education*. 163–75. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04690-7_11
- Nutley, S., I. Walter, and H. Davies. 2007. *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Nutley, S., I. Walter, and H. Davies. 2009. "Past, present and possible futures for evidence-based policy." In A. George (Ed.). *Evidence for policy and decision-making: A practical guide*. (1–23). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Oliver, K. A., and F. de Vocht. 2017. "Defining 'evidence' in public health: A survey of policymakers' uses and preferences." *European Journal of Public Health* 27(2): 112–7.
- Pahlman, K. 2014. "A critical examination of the idea of evidence-based policymaking." *The ANU Undergraduate Research Journal* 6: 83–93.
- Pawson, R. 2006. *Evidence-based policy: A realist perspective*. London: Sage.
- Rakhmani, I., Z. Sakhiyya, A. S. Ramadhan, and W. Agahari. 2020. "Doing research in Indonesia country report." GDN CIPG, http://gdn.int/DRA_Indonesia2020
- Slavin, R. E. 1986. "Best-evidence synthesis: An alternative to meta-analytic and traditional reviews." *Educational Researcher* 15(9): 5–11.
- Slavin, R. E. 2008. "What works? Issues in synthesizing educational program evaluations." *Educational Researcher* 37: 5–14.
- Solesbury, W. 2001. "Evidence based policy: Whence it came and where it's going." Working Paper 1. ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, University of London.
- Taylor, M., and S. Balloch. 2005. "The politics of evaluation: An overview." In M. Taylor, and S. Balloch (Eds.). *The politics of evaluation: Participation and policy implementation*. (1–17). Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Tseng, V. 2015. "Studying the use of research evidence in policy & practice." <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/09/Studying-the-Use-of-Research-Evidence-in-Policy-and-Practice.pdf>
- Tseng, V., J. Q. Easton, and L. H. Supplee. 2018. "Research-practice partnerships: Building two-way streets of engagement." Soc Policy Report. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2017.tb00089.x>
- W.T Grant Foundation. 2020. "Research grants on improving the use of research evidence: 2020 application guidelines." Available at <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2020/01/2020-Guidelines-Research-Grants-Improving-Use-of-Research-Evidence.pdf>
- Wehrens, R., M. Bekker, and R. Bal. 2010. "The construction of evidence-based local health policy through partnerships: Research infrastructure, process, and context in the Rotterdam 'Healthy in the City' programme." *J Public Health Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jphp.2010.33>
- Weiss, C. 1986. "The circuitry of enlightenment: Diffusion of social science research to policymakers." *Science Communication* 8(2): 271–81.
- Weiss, C. 1977. "Research for policy's sake: The enlightenment function of social research." *Policy Analysis* 3(4): 531–45.
- Weiss, C. H. 1979. "The many meanings of research utilization." *Public Administration Review* 39(5): 426–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3109916>.
- Willems, I., and P. Van den Bossche. 2019. "Lesson Study effectiveness for teachers' professional learning: A best evidence synthesis." *International Journal for Lesson and Learning Studies* 8(4): 257–71. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLLS-04-2019-0031>
- Yanovitzky, I., and M. Weber. 2020. "Analysing use of evidence in public policymaking processes: A theory-grounded content analysis methodology." *Evidence & Policy* 16(1): 65–82. <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426418x15378680726175>

How to cite this article: Fussy, Daniel Sidney. 2022. "Use of research evidence in the policy domain: A best-evidence synthesis of social science research in Africa, Asia, and Latin America." *International Social Science Journal*, 72, 1181–1194.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12357>

APPENDIX 1: DOING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT – TABLE OF INDICATORS FOR RESEARCH UPTAKE

Factor	Indicators	Type	Sources
3 Uptake (<i>policy</i>) (1/3)			
3.1 Policy-friendly research (20%) Products of research specifically aimed at supporting policymaking.			
3.1.a. Political value of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of independence of the research produced • Demand for research inputs into policymaking • # of grants received from policymakers, per institution or per researcher 	Rating Rating Absolute	Survey + interviews Desk Review + Survey + Interviews Survey
3.1.b. Policy-relevant research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of participation of policymakers in research design • Number of communication materials produced for policymakers, per researcher 	Rating Absolute	Interviews Desk review + Survey
3.1.c Research-to-Policy nexus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of lectures and policy learning packages for technical officers and policymakers, per institution • # of researchers holding political positions 	Absolute %	Interviews Desk review + Survey
3.2 Research-based policymaking (20%) Activities, capacities, rules, and structures of policymaking that foster the use of research in the policy process.			
3.2.a Formal collaboration: researcher participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share of researcher membership in bodies advising policymakers at the central and decentralized levels 	%	Desk review + Survey
3.2.b Informal collaboration: researcher consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of interaction with policymakers • Perceived influence on policy development 	Rating Rating	Policy Community surveys/Researcher surveys Policy Community surveys/Researcher surveys
3.3 Research-based policy products (30%) Policy products that make use of research.			
3.3.a Instrumental utilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of research citations in policy documents • Frequency of policy implementation support 	Absolute Rating	Altmetrics data or Survey Interviews with policy community
3.4 Research for better policies (30%) End results: policies are based on independent, robust, and transparent evidence and bring improved outcomes.			
3.4.a Influence of research on policy outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of the utility of social science research for policymakers 	Rating	Survey + interviews