



APPENDIX 9: CASE STUDY ON THE ACCESS & COMMUNICATION MECHANISM

Title of the case study:

Policy-relevant evidence maps: an innovative tool for policy-makers to access and make sense of evidence

What mechanism is the case about?

Mechanism: Providing communication of, and access to, evidence.

This mechanism emphasises the importance of policy-makers receiving effective communication of evidence and convenient access to evidence.

What happened (description of the background to the case and its key features)?

Evidence maps are an evidence synthesis tool that allows decision-makers to rapidly access a body of evidence relevant to their policy questions. Based on a rigorous and transparent research methodology (i.e. systematic review), they collect, organise, and appraise different forms of policy-relevant evidence (e.g. evaluations, case studies, surveys, government reports). This evidence is then mapped against a policy framework and visualised on an interactive evidence interface to allow public servants to interrogate and engage with the evidence.

In 2015/16, South Africa's National Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) undertook a pilot Evidence Mapping exercise in response to a critical policy moment in the human settlements sector in South Africa, which was generating a high demand for policy-relevant evidence. Decision-makers in the public sector expressed a need to take stock of and engage with the body of evidence available to support the transition from housing policy to human settlements policy. Therefore, an appropriate research methodology was required that seeks to source, appraise, and synthesise all types of relevant evidence to inform policy analysis and to summarise what works, why, in what context, and for whom.

Due to a lack of responses following the procurement of intellectual services and further driven by a need to adapt evidence synthesis to the needs of public servants, DPME decided to undertake the production of policy-relevant evidence synthesis in-house. In this effort, local as well as international researchers joined the Departmental team to adapt and innovate the evidence synthesis methodology. The multi-disciplinary team of technical and content policy experts, methodologists, and human settlements researchers reviewed, modified, and transformed the research methodology (i.e. systematic review) into a decision-making tool in the public sector producing a policy-relevant evidence map in the human settlements sector. The Department also invested in its own evidence mapping and knowledge managing platform hosted by its IT department. This knowledge management software facilitates direct access to the individual studies and reports as well as 1-page summaries of these.



Given the positive response to the Human Settlements evidence map and its effect on policy-making, DPME decided to enhance its evidence mapping programme and by January 2019 had produced three additional evidence maps in strategic policy areas: state capability, early-grade mathematics, and spatial planning. The evidence mapping platform was also further updated allowing for more advanced knowledge management and visualisation. The Department then started to experiment with using the evidence maps to support rapid responses to key policy questions with six such responses being completed in 2018 alone.

What impact did the case have? / What is the importance of the case to EBPM?

The objective of DPME's policy-relevant evidence mapping programme is to facilitate the use of evidence by public servants. That is, the evidence maps present a method to inform policy-making using the best available evidence and explicitly fulfil a knowledge management and translation function. By appraising all policy-relevant evidence on a policy question, the maps ensure that policy-makers engage with evidence that is trustworthy. They also make the use of evidence less labour-intensive and more engaging. Policy-makers who wish to use evidence have a repository of the available evidence at hand that they can tailor to their own needs and access only the types of evidence they require and trust. Evidence maps thereby encourage public servants to consult a variety of evidence when making decisions rather than consulting individual studies and reports, or selected experts and consultants.

A key component of the evidence maps is to structure the available evidence around existing policy frameworks such as the MTSF and to build an evidence-base that is inclusive of academic evidence as much as of government's own evidence. This constitutes the policy relevance of the maps as they organise the evidence according to policy decision needs and not vice versa. This evidence-base can then conveniently be accessed by policy-makers in-house ensuring a responsive interaction between policy decision needs and the best available evidence.

What is the relevance of the case for South Africa?

Following a review of the produced evidence maps, eight applications of evidence maps in a policy context were explored in South Africa:

Using evidence maps as:

- a scoping tool to set policy objectives and outline policy direction, background, and evaluation.
- a decision-making tool to inform policy design and implementation.
- an engagement tool to facilitate policy conversations with different actors from a mutual basis.
- an organisational tool to raise awareness for evidence-based policymaking and to facilitate its process.
- a knowledge management tool providing a repository of easily accessible and policy-relevant evidence tailored to decision-makers' needs.
- a research tool to identify gaps, coverage, and patterns in the available evidence on a policy question.
- an accountability tool to record the evidence behind a decision and the construction of different evidence-bases and narratives for future decisions.
- a research commissioning tool to target funding for new primary and secondary evidence.



These apply across policy sectors and evidence mapping is a knowledge management tool applicable to each government department.

Conclusion: why does this case illustrate the power of the mechanism in supporting the use of evidence?

Access to evidence is major bottleneck for policy-makers. In a high-pressured and rapid decision-making context in the public service, policy-makers rarely have time to search for all the evidence (with the academic evidence often inaccessible behind paywalls). Policy-relevant evidence maps can unlock the bottleneck in two ways: first, they take care of searching for and collecting all the available evidence. The maps provide a repository of the available research evidence as well as the available government and grey literature evidence. Second, evidence maps provide a meaningful and convenient interaction to this evidence-base. The available evidence is organised and visualised according to policy-makers' needs and preference, with the ability to individually tailor the maps as needed. This allows the maps to serve as a versatile and flexible tool providing tailor-made and rapid access to the relevant evidence for policy-makers.

References

DPME (2016) Policy-relevant evidence maps: a tool to inform decision-making in the public sector. Departmental Guidance Note. DPME: Pretoria, South Africa.