

E-TOOLKIT ON APPLICATION, UPTAKE AND USE OF EVIDENCE FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS IN AFRICA

August 2022



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This document is prepared for review by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It is prepared by the Assessment, Analysis, and Development of Tools to Strengthen the Use of Evidence in Policies and Legislation in Africa (TSUE) activity, a partnership of the United States Department of Agriculture/Foreign Agriculture Service (USDA/FAS), the University of Rhode Island (URI) and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST).





PROJECT DATA SHEET

Project Title

Assessment, Analysis, and Development of Tools to Strengthen the Use of Evidence in Policies and Legislation in Africa (TSUE)

Start and End Dates

July 2021-September 2022

Implementing Partners

United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agriculture Services (USDA/FAS); University of Rhode Island (URI) and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology (KNUST), Ghana

Coordinating Center

Bureau of Integrated Rural Development (BIRD), College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, KNUST, Ghana

Agreement number

AFR-P-13-00001

Geographic Coverage

Africa

CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr Albert Arhin

Main Point of Contact

Bureau of Integrated Rural Development (BIRD)

College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR)

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)

Kumasi, Ghana

Email: aaarhin@knust.edu.gh

Harold Tarver

Agricultural Development Advisor

Agricultural Extension and Market Systems

Agricultural Economic Development Division

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Washington, DC 20250 USA

Email: harold.tarver@usda.gov

Karen Kent

Principal Investigator, URI ASSESS Project

Coastal Resources Center,

The University of Rhode Island, Narragansett, RI

Email: karenkent@uri.edu

Prof. Paul Sarfo-Mensah

Principal Investigator, KNUST ASSESS Project

Associate Professor/Development Consultant

Bureau of Integrated Rural Development (BIRD)

College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR)

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)

Kumasi, Ghana

Email: psmensah@assess-wa.org

ACRONYMS

CSOs	CSOs Civil Society Organisations
IFLA	IFLA International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
IPU	IPU Inter-Parliamentary Union
Mps	Mps Members of Parliament
TSUE	TSUE Tools to Strengthen the Use of Evidence
USAID	USAID United States Agency for International Development
USD	USD Aunited States Department of Agriculture

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing demand for and recognition of the importance of evidence in legislation and policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The current demand for evidence in policy making could be attributed to a growing demand for a more robust policy making process that is able to take into consideration factors that impact policymaking: accountability to donors and taxpayers, as well as the interest of multiple stakeholders who want policies that work. In a survey of 109 Members of Parliament (MPs) and Staff of African Parliaments,¹ more than half of all respondents indicated their use of evidence to drive legislation and policy.

It is important to emphasize that access to and use of information is fundamental to the performance of Parliament's constitutional roles of legislation, representation and oversight. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), “MPs' ability to perform [their] roles all along the policy and legislative cycle [is] shaped by their access to authoritative and reliable information” (IPU and IFLA, 2015). Both individual MPs and parliamentary committees require a wide range of evidence to effectively scrutinize the government, hold informed debates, and make decisions which are reflective of the needs and realities of citizens' experience while considering budgetary and other considerations.

¹ The Parliaments are Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The study was under the “Assessment, Analysis and Development of Tools to Strengthen the use of Evidence in Policies and Legislation” jointly implemented by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its implementing partners (University of Rhode Island, USA and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana) with the overall objective of understanding the current state of evidence use in African Parliaments and identify gaps and opportunities that exist.

² Ibid.

Who is this toolkit for?

This Toolkit is designed to help MPs and their staff in the application of evidence once it is available to them. The Toolkit is intended to be a quick reference guide for MPs and their staff because as busy people who often do not have time to read documents that are bulky, the Toolkit provides easy and quick reference in their effort to apply evidence to their daily functions of legislation and policy making.

How was this toolkit produced?

The Toolkit is derived from a comprehensive report of an assessment evidence informed policy making in 10 African countries.² The assessment was based on questionnaires that were administered, as indicated above, to 109 MPs and staff across the 10 countries. The assessment was preceded by an extensive literature review of evidence informed policy making.

How is the toolkit structured?

The Toolkit is divided into seven parts. The first part briefly describes the evidence informed making cycle. This is followed by a discussion on the sources of evidence available to Parliaments. Section three talks about the types of evidence. In section four we outline how to develop an evidence search strategy. Section five focuses on how to assess the quality of evidence. In section six, we highlight factors that shape evidence uptake. The last part – section seven delves into the core of the toolkit – how evidence is applied to the work of Parliaments.

It is important to note that there are different stakeholders within the evidence generation and evidence use eco-system. It is not a linear process. Rather, the processes are interdependent and interrelated. For example, Sections Four and Five are primarily for evidence producers/researchers; Section Six deals with the institutional architecture of Parliament that can facilitate the uptake of evidence and understanding of key stakeholders by evidence producers. Finally, Section Seven deals with the how MPs can use or apply evidence in policy making and legislations.

SECTION ONE:

The Evidence Informed Policy Making Cycle

Legislative and Policy-making must be evidence-informed. Members of Parliament, Parliamentary research support staff and policy-makers need to ensure that policies and legislations are informed by evidence. To use evidence to inform legislation and policymaking, it is important for MPs or their research staff to note that the evidence informed policy making process is generally made up of five key steps:³

- 1.** Ask question or define the problem.
- 2.** Search for the best available evidence/answer to the question.
- 3.** Critically appraise the evidence available.
- 4.** Apply the evidence (in this case to lawmaking or policy).
- 5.** Evaluate the effectiveness of the policy making process.

Following from that, they will also evaluate the usefulness of what has been provided to them (step 3 above). An earlier toolkit (hyperlink) explored the steps for generating and searching for the evidence. This toolkit is more concerned about steps 4 and 5.

³ See for example, *Evidence-Based Practice: 5 steps of Evidence Based Practice – Overview* at <https://library.health.nt.gov.au/EBP/Overview>: Accessed August 17, 2022.

SECTION TWO:

Sources of Evidence

This section summarises the main sources of evidence for Parliamentarians and Parliamentary Staff. Further details have been provided in the toolkit for generating evidence ([hyperlink](#)). In general, Parliamentarians and Staff get evidence from three main sources. These are:

- ✓ **Online/virtual:** These are either internal or external. Internal online sources are parliamentary sources such as parliamentary websites, online databases, the websites of Libraries of Parliaments, intranet sources or exchange platforms created for communication by parliamentary committees, caucuses, and networks. External online sources include Academia, Think Tanks, International and Multilateral Organizations and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).
- ✓ **Internal:** Mainly from parliamentary sources – Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), committee reports, research departments and other information generation units.
- ✓ **External:** Academia, Think Tanks, research organizations, media, citizens' feedback, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

SECTION THREE:

Types of Evidence

From the literature and study undertaken as part of this work, there are many types of evidence available to MPs. Notable among them are the following:

- ✓ **Research reports** – these are reports produced by research organizations, think tanks, universities, CSOs and other organizations.
- ✓ **Administrative reports** – these are periodic (quarterly or annual) reports from government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs).
- ✓ **Investigative/Special Committee reports** – these are reports coming from special committee(s) set up by Parliament to investigate a specific problem/issue.
- ✓ **Evaluation reports** – these are assessment reports on the implementation of government policies and programs carried out by the Monitoring and Evaluation teams/units.
- ✓ **Citizens' Feedback/report** – these are reports that capture citizens' inputs/feedback on any policy or issue of concern.
- ✓ **Quantitative reports** – these are reports from quantitative research. They contain numerical data that can be manipulated using mathematical procedures to produce statistics. Quantitative research is the systematic scientific investigation of quantitative properties, phenomena and their relationships.
- ✓ **Qualitative report** - these are reports from qualitative research and are usually text-based and can be derived from in-depth interviews, observations, analysis of written documentation or open-ended questionnaires.
- ✓ **Expert Opinion** – These are opinions/testimonies from subject matter experts. They are experts in the field/areas under considerations/discussion.

SECTION FOUR:

Developing an Evidence Search Strategy

Developing an evidence search strategy is critical because of the large volume of information available – online and physically. A systematic process of searching for evidence will help find appropriate information/evidence useful to answer a policy question. Evidence search is an iterative and rigorous process, and it should be conducted in a systematic manner.

Basic steps of conducting evidence search:

1. Formulate research question. This will focus on the need of the research and define key concepts. In other words, what is the problem one is trying to solve?
2. Brainstorm on the terms that could be used in the search. Look at any references that appear to be right on target and see what terms are relevant.
3. Decide on relevant databases/other sources to be searched. Depending on the subject matter, there are different databases/sources that cover various issues. Once decisions have been made regarding which database/sources that will be searched, the following key decisions will need to be made as well:
 - a. Determine the key words or combination of key words.
 - b. Ascertain any geographic considerations.
 - c. Decide the time period that one is interested in and other relevant information.
4. Launch the database search.
5. Evaluate the results of the search based on the criteria defined in the next section on “Assessing the Quality of Evidence”.
6. Document the references. One can use an Excel spreadsheet or an MS Word document to collect and organize references.

SECTION FOUR

Assessing the Quality of Evidence

Before MPs or Parliamentarians set out to use the Evidence that are available to them, it is important that they confirm the quality of the evidence by posing a number of simple, but critical questions. These questions will enable them to determine the quality of information before them. Some of these questions include:

- What makes the study, facts or information that is available to the MP important?
- Do the findings make sense?
- Who conducted the research and wrote the report?
- Who published the report?
- Are the methods appropriate to the research purpose?
- Could the data be biased as a result of poor research design, or vested interests?⁴

Besides the strength of evidence, it is also important to look at content quality criteria in the appraisal. In this context, there are five key issues and the third in the list is particularly important for MPs:

1. Uniqueness – is it original?
2. Completeness – is any information missing?
3. Coverage – what depth does it go into?
4. Relevance – Is the research/study relevant to MP's situation/need or context?
5. Timeliness – is it abreast of the times?⁵

⁴See *Guidelines for Evidence Use in Decision Making – Parliament of Malawi*

⁵*Ibid.*

SECTION SIX:

Factors that Shape Evidence Uptake and Use

Once MPs or Parliamentary appraise available evidence, facts or information, it is important to understand that the availability of evidence to Parliamentarians and policy makers does not automatically guarantee uptake or its use. Several factors determine whether Parliamentarians and policy makers will consider the evidence that is available to them. It is important that they are aware of the array of factors that shape uptake and use of evidence. These factors are categorized into demand and supply. In the case of factors that shape evidence uptake and use⁶ from the demand side, there are key questions around the institutional architecture of Parliament as well as capacity to use evidence. The institutional architecture of Parliament is an important pre-condition and critical to the demand for and use of evidence by MPs. Apart from the architecture, the quality and credibility of evidence is also important. These are outlined below.

INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE

- ✓ Does the institutional architecture of Parliament ensure that data/evidence is used to make decisions and formulate policies or pass legislation? Here, the issue is whether a Parliament is properly set up with the right structures, i.e. research and allied departments to process and package evidence for use by MPs.
- ✓ Does leadership of the Parliament encourage and promote the use of data/evidence in policy formulation or passing legislation? If a Parliament is one that approves anything that comes before it, critical analyses, using evidence becomes less a priority for the leadership of Parliament.
- ✓ Does the prevailing atmosphere in Parliament put the people's interest before politics? If the Parliament is excessively partisan, evidence has no little place in policy making.
- ✓ Is there a knowledge management system in place that is designed to store evidence and make it available for use by MPs? How much has a Parliament invested in information technology and other methods of storing information that is available to the institution.
- ✓ Are parliamentary staff equipped with relevant tools and skillsets to package the evidence in a usable format for the MPs? Have staff been appropriately prepared to support MPs?
- ✓ Is there a knowledge management system in place that is designed to store evidence & make it available for use by staff?

⁶Evaluating Advocacy August 2020: Measuring uptake of evidence by policy makers

USEABILITY: QUALITY, CREDIBILITY, AND RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH/EVIDENCE

- ✓ What type of evidence and from where was it accessed? (Primary research, academic literature, unpublished studies, systematic reviews, data from registries, expert opinion commissioned research?)
The MPs should also have an understanding of how the evidence was produced.
- ✓ Was it appraised for relevance and quality? For example, was the evidence provided actionable, clear, and useful?
- ✓ Was it applicable to policy and local contexts?
- ✓ Was it aligned with values, knowledge, and experience of policymakers, particularly the MPs?
- ✓ What is the credibility and experience of the organization providing the evidence?
- ✓ Were the research design and methods robust?

From the supply side, the interest is on how evidence champions including research institutions, academia, think-tanks, advocacy groups can make sure that evidence produced in support of a policy or legislations are actually taken up by Parliamentarians or Parliamentary

research support staff. Drawing from the research and country experiences on evidence uptake and use (e.g. Kenya)⁷, five key factors emerge as important factors that also shape the uptake of evidence. This has been summarized below. These include the timeliness of evidence, understanding the target audience, developing a communication strategy, clarity of the message as well as the clarity and conciseness of the evidence.

TIMELINESS: DEADLINE DOMINATED

- ✓ Reaching MPs, staff and policymakers at the right time with evidence.
- ✓ Understand how parliaments works.
- ✓ Being mindful about timelines or deadlines for different phases of particular policy or legislation
- ✓ Be familiar with the entry point(s) (e.g., Key MPs on parliamentary committees).
- ✓ Cultivate allies among parliamentary staff and MPs.
- ✓ Have knowledge of the 'evidence champions' in Parliament.

UNDERSTANDING AND ANALYZING THE TARGET AUDIENCES

Before presenting any available evidence, it is important that the group that will use the evidence is recognised and understood.

⁷Government of Kenya. Ministry of Health (2016). *Guidelines for Evidence Use in Policy Making*

An important first step in analyzing the target audience (such as committee members/chair, committee clerks, influential MPs, party caucuses, party leadership, evidence champions, leadership of the Parliament, etc.) is categorizing them so that one is clear on:

- ✓ Who is the Primary Audience? – The policymaker/MPs who can directly affect policy on the issue in question. Know their interests and motivations
- ✓ Who is the Secondary Audience? – Policymaker/MPs and other actors who can influence the primary audience (allies).
- ✓ Who are the Opponents? – Policymakers/MPs and other actors opposed to the policy reform.

CLARITY OF MESSAGING

- ✓ Develop a compelling message with actionable recommendations.
- ✓ Keep the number of key messages for each group to a maximum of two to three messages.
- ✓ Tailor the message to fit the audience – it is the audience that should drive

message content. Focus primarily on what is important to them.

- ✓ **Ensure the message is delivered by a credible source** (The messenger is often as important or sometimes more important than the message).
- ✓ Keep the message at the level of the audience: avoid technical jargon.

PRESENTATION – CLARITY AND CONCISENESS

- ✓ Let your presentation be concise and compelling.
- ✓ Use data visualizations such as graphs, pictures, charts, infographics, and dashboards to illustrate your point.
- ✓ Use quotes where necessary.
- ✓ Keep your message simple by unpacking complex issues into simple messages.
- ✓ Simplify complex evidence.
- ✓ Present it in a persuasive manner.

SECTION SEVEN:

Application of Evidence

Once evidence is available to Parliamentarians, the key question is “how should it be applied in the range of functions they perform”? Parliamentarians need to reflect on their experience or actions when deciding if a particular piece of evidence is usable. Consider the following in the application of an evidence⁸:

DEVELOPMENT OF A PRESENTATION STRATEGY

- ✓ Have a clear strategy on how to present the evidence to colleagues and other stakeholders to facilitate its uptake in decision-making.
- ✓ Information exchange, via formal or informal channels (like during coffee with an influential MP).

POLITICAL ACCEPTABILITY OR LEVERAGE

- ✓ Will the policy option/legislation be allowed or supported in the current political climate?
- ✓ Will the public and target groups accept and support the policy option/legislation in its current format?
- ✓ Will the leadership of the Parliament allow the evidence to be used in its

current format?

- ✓ Have all the key stakeholders been consulted and kept informed before the evidence is publicly presented?
- ✓ Was there a demand for the evidence or information from key stakeholders from the start?

SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY

- ✓ Will the target population be interested in the policy option/legislation?
- ✓ Is the policy option/legislation socially acceptable?

AVAILABLE ESSENTIAL RESOURCES (PERSONNEL AND FINANCIAL)

- ✓ What human and financial resources are needed to implement the policy/legislation?
- ✓ Are these resources available?

⁸Parliament of Malawi. (2016) *Guidelines for Evidence Use in Decision-Making*

- ✓ Are people adequately trained to support the policy option/legislation? If not, is training available and affordable?
- ✓ What are the full costs (supplies, systems, space requirements for staff, training, technology/administrative supports) per unit of expected outcome?

ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERTISE AND CAPACITY

- ✓ Is the current strategic plan/operational plan of the implementing agency/department in alignment with the policy option/legislation?
- ✓ Does the policy option/legislation fit with the agency's mission and priorities?
- ✓ Does it conform to existing legislation

or regulations (either local or provincial?)

- ✓ Does it overlap/conflict with existing programs/legislation or is it symbiotic?
- ✓ Does the agency/department have the capacity to implement the policy option/legislation?
- ✓ Any organizational barriers/structural issues or approval processes to be addressed before the policy/legislation can be implemented?
- ✓ Will the policy option/legislation require creation of a new entity?
- ✓ Is there technical expertise available to manage the new entity?

CONCLUSION

This toolkit provides a quick reference guide to parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on the application, uptake, and use of evidence in policy making and enacting legislation. It is important to point out that parliaments are not a single or monolithic institution. In fact, parliaments are made up of multiple intersecting institutions with varying mandates and purposes. It is very essential, therefore, to understand how Parliament works in order to have effective application uptake, and use of evidence within the institution. The institutional architecture and the prevailing environment in each Parliament will play major roles in the application, uptake, and use of evidence

Appendix – Online Databases

Box I : Sample Online Databases for accessing online resources for evidence use

- i. Africa Capacity Building Foundation: a globally recognised knowledge hub on capacity development in Africa. The publications in its virtual library are free to download. <http://elibrary.acbfpact.org>
- ii. Africa Portal Library: an online library collection of over 4,000 books, journals, and digital documents related to African policy issues. The entire repository is open access. www.africaportal.org/library
- iii. African Bibliographic Databases: collection of Africana social science titles, presented in one easily accessible location on the internet. www.africabib.org
- iv. African Economic Outlook is a collaborative project between the African Development Bank, the OECD Development Centre and the United Nations Development Programme. The website provides comprehensive and comparable data and analysis of 54 African economies. www.africaneconomicoutlook.org
- v. African Journal of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development is an open access journal that publishes articles dealing with agricultural economics with special focus on people living in rural areas. www.internationalscholarsjournals.org/journal/ijaerd
- vi. African Journals Online the world's largest online collection of African Published open access peer-reviewed scholarly journals www.ajol.info/index.php/index/browse/alpha/index
- vii. AGORA: Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture, run by FAO. More than 3000 journals in agriculture and related biological, environmental and social sciences. www.fao.org/agora
- viii. ARDI Research for Development & Innovation Innovation 17 publishers provide access to around 20,000 journals, books, and reference works for 117 developing countries and territories. www.wipo.int/ardi
- ix. British Library of Development Studies Europe's largest library on development studies with an extensive e-library including open access resources. <http://blds.ids.ac.uk/blds-collection/e-library>
- x. [CINAHL](http://cinahl.org) Access to nursing and allied health journals, books, legal cases, research instruments, standards of practice, and clinical trials.

- xi. Connecting Africa a gateway to African research information and materials produced worldwide. It provides access to 54731 publications from 92 repositories. www.connecting-africa.net
- xii. Directory of Open Access Journals online directory that indexes and provides access to quality open access, peer-reviewed journals. www.doaj.org
- xiii. Eldis provides free access to relevant, up-to-date and diverse research on international development issues. Content from over 7, 500 development partners. Useful 'Research Guides' to key topics as well as links to related literature. www.eldis.org
- xiv. [Essential Evidence Plus](#) Comprehensive clinical decision support system developed as a point-of-care tool for physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Integrated with The Cochrane Library.
- xv. Evidence on Demand is an international development information hub, providing access to quality assured resources relating to climate & environment, infrastructure and livelihoods.
- xvi. HINARI Access to Research in Health, set up by WHO together with major publishers, one of the world's largest collections of biomedical and health literature. Up to 13,000 journals (in 30 different languages), up to 29,000 e-books, up to 70 other information resources are now available to health institutions in more than 100 countries. www.who.int/hinari
- xvii. International journal of MCH and AIDS is a US-based open access journal that focuses on the intersections between MCH and HIV/AIDS around the world, specifically in low and middle-income countries. www.mchandaids.org/?page_id=1323#Articles
- xviii. JSTOR African Access Initiative provides free access to the entire archive for any African institution (including government). It has about. 2000 journals across 50 disciplines. <http://about.jstor.org/libraries/african-access-initiative>
- xix. OARE Research in Environment up to 5710 peer reviewed journals and 1119 online books, and other information resources. www.unep.org/oare
- xx. OMICS International is a scientific organization that drives the progress of research through open access journals www.omicsonline.org/agri-food-aquaand-vet-journals.php
- xxi. Open Access Journals Search Engine (OAJSE) allows you to search for open access journals in a range of disciplines www.oajse.com
- xxii. Open Science Directory has about 13, 000 scientific journals. Aims to enhance the access of open access/special access collections by creating direct links to the journals. www.opensciencedirectory.net

xxiii. PLOS (Public Library of Science) is a non-profit publisher and advocacy organization founded to accelerate progress in science and medicine by leading a transformation in research communication. www.plos.org/publications

xxiv. [PubMed](#) The primary database for biomedical and health sciences abstracts, including MEDLINE, with links to Shimberg Library full-text articles.

xxv. Research4Life a partnership of the WHO, FAO, UNEP, WIPO, Cornell and Yale Universities and the International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers. African government offices are eligible for free registration. Research4Life consists of the following organisations:

xxvi. SAE International cover all areas relevant to ground vehicle and aerospace engineering technology www.store.sae.org/saejournals

xxvii. Science Direct journals, articles, books and other open access content www.sciencedirect.com

xxviii. Scopus the largest abstract and citation database of peer reviewed literature. It has smart tools, so that you can track, analyse and visualise research. You or your institution need to sign up to this database to get access. www.scopus.com

xxix. Social Science Research Network Almost 60,000 social science articles, with 40,000 available to download. Includes focused networks in specific disciplines including politics and economics. www.ssrn.com

xxx. Springer Open 160+ peer-reviewed fully open access journals across all areas of science ranging from very specialized titles to Springer Plus, an interdisciplinary open access journal that covers all disciplines. www.springeropen.com/about/open-access

xxxi. [Web of Science \[formerly Web of Knowledge\]](#)

xxxii. Wiley Open Access publishes peer reviewed journals across a wide range of disciplines www.wileyopenaccess.com/view/journals.html

U.S.AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, DC 20523

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