

The role of evidence in public sector reform

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Broadly defined, the term “public sector” refers to the entities that serve and the people that are employed for public purposes. They see to the delivery of public programmes, goods and services (Public Sector Commission 2014; Institute of Internal Auditors 2011:3). According to this definition, the public sector may include national governments and not-for-profit or voluntary establishments. However, as commonly defined, and as conceptualized in this article, the public sector refers primarily to national governments, including government controlled or government funded institutions that exercise functions or provide services in the public interest (Cloete 2000:6). Evidence, on the other hand, refers to any piece of information, be it qualitative or quantitative that supports an entity’s or individual’s course of action. Evidence may take a variety of forms, such as *research evidence* (derived from rigorously designed studies), *practice-based evidence* (derived from professional expertise), *experiential evidence* (derived from professional experience), or *contextual evidence* (derived from local data sources) (Maley 2014:1).

At the heart of this article is the question: Why does evidence matter in public sector reform?

In most countries around the world, the public sector is seen as the normal overseer of government business, and has the responsibility, amongst other things, of developing and implementing policies that are aimed at addressing a wide range of socio-economic needs. In terms of good policy decision-making, governments are expected to develop policies that address significant and factual issues in society, which in essence requires them to anchor their policies to some credible evidence. The use of evidence in policy making is one crucial aspect in public sector reform, which is aimed at improving ways in which governments are managed and services delivered, with emphasis on effectiveness, efficiency, and value for money (Economic Commission for Africa 2010: xi). This, then, requires a shift from what Marco Segone refers to as *opinion-based policy making*, “which relies heavily on either the selective use of evidence (e.g. on single survey irrespective of quality) or on the untested views of individuals or groups, often inspired by ideology standpoints, prejudices, or speculative conjecture” (Segone 2009:17), to a more systematic approach referred to as *evidence-based policy making*, which “helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation” (Davies in Segone 2009:17). More recently, vested

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in the acknowledgement of the complex interplay of variables affecting policy decisions, and in which evidence presents but one variable, the term evidence-informed policy making has emerged (Newman et al. 2013).

With specific reference to service delivery, public sector reform requires governments to promote the optimal allocation and the efficient use of limited resources to address the unlimited needs of people. To achieve this, governments need to concentrate resources on the most pressing problems or programmes in society, which are better identified and understood through the use of evidence. In addition, evidence-informed decision making provides a strong basis for promoting mutual accountability, including enhanced accountability of government to its citizens on the rationale, the objectives, outputs and results of public programmes. Evidence can further help to weigh the cost-effectiveness of policy options.

The significance of evidence in policy decision making and public sector reform can and has been affirmed by developments in many countries around the world and is increasingly taking hold in African states. For example, in Tanzania, the national government achieved a reduction of infant mortality rates by over 40 per cent between 2000 and 2003 in two pilot districts through health service reforms that were informed by evidence from household disease surveys (Sutcliffe & Court 2005:2). Conversely, in South Africa, the HIV/AIDS crisis had worsened under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki when government went against consensus scientific evidence that HIV causes AIDS. The South African government had argued that HIV did not cause AIDS, and that antiretroviral (ARV) drugs were not useful for patients. This rejection of credible scientific evidence resulted in about 343, 000 deaths and 171, 000 HIV infections in South Africa between 1999 and 2007. In addition, by 2007, almost one in every five adult South Africans was infected with HIV (Nattrass 2008:157). This clearly demonstrates the significant role that evidence plays in informing policy decisions, and that rejection or neglect of evidence may lead to policy failure and, ultimately, the worsening of socio-economic conditions. It can, thus, be argued that public sector reform, whose major objective is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government business, can rarely be implemented effectively if governments fail or refuse to acknowledge the role that evidence plays in policy decision-making.

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