

Background

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) refers to the consideration of multiple sources of information, including the best available evidence before making a decision to plan, implement, and (where relevant) alter policies, programmes, and other services (Langer et al 2016). It includes the premise that the systematic synthesis of evidence is preferable to a single study (Lavis 2009; Impellizeri and Bizzini 2012). It is ideally underpinned by a process of identifying, collecting, critiquing and synthesising evidence in a structured way (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005; Gough et al. 2012).

This article reports the lessons learned from a three-year capacity-building programme that aimed to support EIDM at a national government level in [ANON] and at a local government level in [ANON]. African government administrations have actively supported the use of evidence by officials driven by the desire to demonstrate that policies, on balance, do more good than harm (Stevens 2010; Uneke et al. 2011; Mijumbi et al. 2014). To this end, EIDM supports a transparent process of weighing up benefits and disbenefits of public policies and programmes increasing government accountability (Dayal 2016; Goldman et al. 2015). From an economic perspective, the use of evidence further mitigates against wasting scarce public resources allowing for the scale up of effective policies and termination and alteration of unsuccessful ones (ANON), making it particularly applicable to government settings.

For evidence to inform decision-making—and to achieve the above-stated positive outcomes—decision-makers need to possess adequate capacity to effectively use and apply evidence. The technical skills necessary to use evidence are rarely included in government officials' training (Breckon and Dodson 2016) and a well-established range of personal, organisational, and institutional barriers to evidence-use exists (Oliver et al. 2014; Clar et al. 2011; Uneke et al. 2011). In order to support officials' use of evidence, governments have introduced EIDM capacity-building programmes specifically targeting decision-makers. These differ in approach, content, duration, ownership, sector, and level of decision-maker targeted.

Given the small but growing number of different EIDM capacity-building programmes, it is important to understand the theories of change and effects of different programmes. While overall EIDM capacity-building has been found by systematic reviews to have a positive impact on evidence use (e.g. Langer et al. 2016), there is little knowledge on what programme features drive impact in which contexts. Unresolved questions exist around the level of ownership among participants; how to support application of learning in practice contexts; whether professional development should take place in government or externally; and making assumptions about so-called 'capacity deficits' in government (ANON; Dayal 2016).

This article reflects on the experiences of a team that conducted a three-year-long EIDM capacity-building programme in [ANON]. In this context 'EIDM capacity' refers to decision-makers' skills to use evidence, motivation to use evidence, practical tools that support evidence use, and organisational and institutional opportunities to use evidence. Evidence,

too, was in our programme understood broadly as including research studies of any design; M&E data; experiential evidence and contextual evidence. To account for contextual differences, our programme adopted an approach in which the decision-making need and question defined the most appropriate evidence to use. As we explain below, the content of our workshops and mentorships varied with each engagement to ensure we were responsive to participants' needs and priorities. For this reason we do not focus on the content of our offerings, but rather the nature and structure of the support that we offered.

How the ANON programme has been working to increase the use of evidence in decision-making

The ANON programme followed an explicit theory of change that informed the design of the EIDM capacity-building programme (ANON). The overall scope of the work and focus on capacity-building were set by the funder and the programme was therefore designed within this preset frame. In Box 1, we list key components of our broad approach within this funder-determined requirement for programmes to provide capacity building, in our cases working with the governments of (ANON) and (ANON). From the onset, the programme was conceived as combination of workshop-based capacity-building and mentoring activities. This approach aimed to divert from a traditional training model that might be defined as skills transfer delivered through classroom teaching with a 'facilitator-knows-best' approach. Instead we focussed on the application of EIDM skills in the practice context through the mentoring activities.

Both the EIDM workshops and mentoring were underpinned by a pragmatic approach to what constitutes best available evidence as explained above, but aimed to engage critical thinking of what would ideally constitute fit-for-purpose evidence in the decision-makers' respective contexts. We followed the same approach when it came to defining evidence use, which was deliberately understood broadly as a continuum and context-bound (REF REMOVED). ANON's approach to EIDM capacity-building rests on a foundation of systematic review methodology, and the principles of the method (i.e. transparency and rigour) heavily informed our approach. Lastly in terms of programme implementation, we used a year-long inception period to conduct needs assessments and EIDM landscape reviews in both countries. These served to ensure our programme activities reflected governments' priorities, learned from existing initiatives and expertise, integrated into existing networks and systems, avoided duplicating efforts, and directly informed country-specific implementation plans. We also subscribed to an embedded monitoring programme to allow rapid feedback on programme performance and subsequent design iteration (Refs REMOVED).

More specifically in terms of program design, the workshops were participatory, needs-driven, problem-based, and used local and international co-facilitators. So too were the mentoring activities – these aimed to support the application and implementation of EIDM capacities in practice contexts and to establish and embed relationships between users and producers of evidence in order to contribute to a wider EIDM network in the respective

countries. The content of both workshops and mentorships was tailored for each audience and for this reason we deduce that it was the nature of the delivery and not the content which is important. In (ANON) mentoring was offered initially to individuals only, but later included team mentoring too. The mentoring programme in particular was developed in iterative phases to include a face-to-face visit and enable support to teams as well as individuals. Further information on our programme of work can be accessed through detailed reports and other outputs [not yet linked due to requirement for anonymity].

[INSERT BOX 1 HERE]

Over the last three years, ANON has documented over 100 cases of applied learning where there has been a reported increase in the use of evidence in decision-making on draft policies, implementation plans, white papers and capacity-building strategies. These are wide ranging in their scale and nature. In one example an individual was supported to access and make sense of a wide range of evidence sources to inform a report they were writing. In another a senior official was supported to increase the consideration of evidence within their team's process for drafting a white paper. In all cases, the outcomes were set by our government colleagues and we are reliant on their self-reported successes, described in post-workshop and post-mentoring reports. We acknowledge that this is not independent evidence of impact, and that in some cases the shifts in practice may be small and one-off. Data is not yet available on the potential longer term impacts of the majority of the reported cases of applied learning and we look forward to future evaluations which will seek to tease out these issues in more detail. One change that we can confirm is that, ANON has led to the creation of the ANONYMISED RESEARCH CENTRE which will be continuing the work which ANON has begun ensuring that evidence is useful and used across the continent.

Having illustrated the programme concept and output, in the following section we present our structured reflections and lessons-learned to unpack how the ANON programme was able to use these activities to influence the use of evidence in decision-making through capacity-building.

Methods

We set out to address the question as to how the ANON programme was able to start to influence the use of evidence in decision-making by using data from three different sources: the routine collection of programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data; formal feedback from stakeholders about our work (Refs removed); and team reflection meetings where we engaged with programme performance data and asked questions about the influence of our work.

Routine programme M&E data are obtained from attendees to our workshops and individuals who participate in our mentorship programmes. We have also used qualitative records of instances of small changes where we have attempted to record anecdotes of the programme's gradual influence on the work of the government officials with whom we work. Our engagement with stakeholders included feedback about our general approach to

capacity-building as well as our approach to the various mentorship programmes we provided between 2014 and 2016. We report our findings with a positive lens i.e. where these features were in place participants reported positively on their experiences and described greater use of evidence as a result. Our analyses suggest that where these features were not in place, the programme was less able to support the use of evidence successfully.

Findings

Our analysis suggests that the combination of workshops and mentorships has been key to our potential to facilitate change. Workshops exposed participants to a wide array of evidence tools, while our customised mentorships provided firmer and more in-depth grounding in the subject matter that defined the mentorships (see Box 2 for an example).

Furthermore, specific aspects of the nature of these combined interventions have been important.

[INSERT BOX 2 HERE]

We have combined workshops and mentorships in a single EIDM capacity-building approach

The main purpose of our capacity-building programme was to introduce participants to important concepts and practices in the evidence field (through workshops) and support the application of learning into their work (through mentorships). Our workshops combined an emphasis on thematic content (specifically research methods, the practices of systematic reviews, and evidence synthesis in general) with a focus on processes geared towards facilitating conversations about contextual factors that promote or impede the use of evidence in government settings. The introductory nature of the workshops was deliberate and often enticed participants to follow-up on and learn more about a specific aspect of the themes covered during the workshops.

We regarded workshops as a first step in a longer causal chain that aimed to build the capacities of decision-makers to use evidence in their decision-making. The application of learning in a work setting requires more targeted and in-depth support than just workshops, which underscores the need for more sustained relationships and support in the form of mentorships to start to apply learning. Workshops do appear to have been instrumental in starting this process. Of the fifty-two mentorship places we offered, only one mentee had not attended a workshop, but instead engaged with our work through our support to the ANON Network.

This combination of workshops and mentorships has been needs-driven

Both our workshop programme and the various mentorships we offered were driven by the needs of the government officials we worked with. Being needs-driven enabled both

interventions to maintain their relevance, both interventions were well-subscribed to throughout the duration of the ANON programme.

We used existing programme M&E tools to gauge participants' satisfaction with the topics at the workshops and provide the opportunity for participants to request additional workshops to receive support on topics not yet covered. This direct needs-driven approach ensured continued interest in the workshops and allowed us to increase the number of government officials who attended our workshops and took up mentorships.

Both the individual and team mentorships were structured around the needs of the individuals and the respective departmental teams we worked with. This required our programme to secure external expertise in instances where such expertise did not exist within our team. An example is where a mentee requested input from someone with experience of the education system in South Africa, and we brought in a mentor who had worked for many years in this area. All our mentorship interventions were guided by outcomes agreed between the mentors and mentees at the commencement of the mentorship. The outcomes functioned as a goal to which both the mentor and mentee worked towards, although – particularly in the individual mentorships – this goal would often evolve along with the mentorship. Allowing for this evolution ensured that our mentorship programme was following the lead of the government official and directly able to support their needs. Where outcomes were not clearly defined from the outset, the mentee was less engaged and less likely to renew the relationship or report achievement of their desired outcomes.

This combination of workshops and mentorships has been flexible and responsive

Working with government officials presents a unique set of challenges. For instance for both successful mentorship meetings and workshop attendance, scheduling was often a challenge because of the truncated government calendar that responds to important government business, usually at the start and at the end of a calendar year. This truncated calendar forced us to structure our interventions in such a way that they accommodated the demanding schedules of our government partners, which in turn brought us consistent support and loyalty from many of those officials we engaged with throughout the lifespan of the programme.

Another challenge we responded to specific to the workshops was the way in which the workshops were structured. We realised that to put together a workshop programme that strove to retain attendees, we needed to be flexible in how we arranged the workshops, what we offered in the workshop programmes, and how we went about securing expertise to help us execute the capacity-building programme. We responded to this challenge through the timing of workshops (discussed in the section below) and through the content. Our combination of content presentations with group discussions (including peer-learning) was popular with participants and helped them identify and engage with challenges in their workplaces in a non-critical environment. Where workshops contained too much facilitation from the front with elements of didactic teaching, this was reflected in participation in the

session and the feedback gathered in our evaluation forms. In some cases, we took steps to redesign the workshop content and delivery format during breaks or lunch time to ensure the remaining sessions met participants needs more directly.

Mentorships are inherently dynamic and our approach allowed for deviations in instances where this was warranted. Mentorship relationships that could not achieve the goals within a set time-frame were allowed to be renewed, depending on the time and availability of the mentors and the importance of the intervention to the individual and the government department. Furthermore, individual mentorships were allowed to morph into institutional ones, especially where the gains of involving more than one government colleague far outweighed the cost to the mentors and our programme. In line with the latter point, the introduction of team mentorships further enhanced the flexibility of our approach to capacity-building and intact teams (mostly smaller units) could now take advantage of structured input on an array of evidence issues relevant to that specific team.

This combination of workshops and mentorships has been carefully timed

We have already drawn attention to the fact that government colleagues who subscribed to our workshops enjoyed priority in their take-up of mentorship offers. In this regard, most mentorship relationships would have been preceded by a workshop intervention. This allowed us to position the workshops as raising awareness of various topics in the EIDM field and use the mentorships to deepen participants' understanding of a specific thematic issue. This combination afforded us time to secure the necessary expertise, because very often requests for mentorships were received after a capacity-building workshop.

In terms of the timing of our workshops and mentorships, we limited the length of our workshops to two days maximum and took care not to overrun beyond the scheduled time out of respect for participants' busy diaries. After some hit-and-miss attempts to define the length of mentorship arrangements, we set a fixed time of six weeks for our individual mentorship relationships. For some relationships this was adequate while for others it was too short. The success was in remaining flexible within this initial 6-week framework. While prescribing the length of mentorships provided structure and helped to manage the expectations of both the mentor and mentee, it was important to be flexible in this approach.

This combination of workshops and mentorships has been facilitated through careful selection of appropriate expertise

Our key programme activities, namely the workshops and mentorships, are critically dependent on locating and leveraging appropriate expertise. What is 'right' in terms of expertise is a function of content expertise and an overall fit for the context, whether individuals or teams are involved. Not all mentorship relationships in our piloting phase were successful 'matches' and we took this learning on board in the design of future relationships.

When the programme was officially launched in 2014, team members were able to bring an impressive array of individuals and institutions into the programme as a result of long-standing personal and professional relationships. This form of social and intellectual capital enabled the programme to establish a presence in the EIDM landscape at a much faster rate than would have been expected, given the novelty of the intervention. These relationships extend past the three-year term of the programme and reflect positively on its ability to keep relevant experts and their expertise within the reach of the programme; this is due to the quality of these connections.

Both workshops and mentorships benefited from the social, personal, and professional networks of the programme team. In our workshop programme, we combined our own in-house expertise with other national and international expertise, including those from within the government. An example includes our inclusion of an expert on multi-dimensional indices of poverty to guide a government official working on indicators of poverty in national data sets. Local facilitators of our workshops were better able to expound on local problems, while our international facilitators were able to introduce attendees to examples of EIDM within their contexts. Mentors, both from within the ANON team and externally-paid professionals, were all experts in their own right, thus lending credibility to our attempts to deepen the use of evidence. The appropriate matching of mentors' expertise with mentees's needs was vital in the context of the mentorship programme. This was a lesson that emerged from an initial three month piloting period: while methodological expertise was vital, participants often also require substantive expertise to make the mentorship experience more meaningful and relevant to their own working contexts. We believe that the extra layer of substantive expertise helped to sustain interest in the mentorship programme and caused some participants to extend their respective mentorship relationships.

This combination of workshops and mentorships has been founded on a strong investment in relationships

An important tenet of our programme has been our investment in and commitment to relationship-building. In the design of the programme, we created structured opportunities for extensive engagements with stakeholders in the form of our landscape reviews and needs assessments [details on the methodologies employed for both are provided in dedicated reports: ADD refs to these reports once able to deanonymise]. At the start of the programme, our landscape reviews and the needs assessment reviews enabled us to speak to a broad range of stakeholders and canvass their views about evidence use in government in ANON and ANON. During regular intervals, we scheduled time to meet with partners and stakeholders and brief them on a number of issues, e.g. about progress in the implementation of the programme or new initiatives intended to bring together a cross-section of stakeholders. Some of these meetings were informal while others, such as the stakeholder engagement meeting in October 2015 (Ref removed), marked a more formal reflection on our programme activities and drew direct feedback from targeted

stakeholders. These opportunities to engage with stakeholders both formally and informally were pivotal to building relationships with our partners.

The initial targeting of a small number of departments also meant that relationships could be built on in a focussed manner and that specific and realistic interventions could be developed with programme partners. Investing in a smaller number of departments has produced some lasting shifts: most of these relationships are ongoing even as we formally close the activities of the programme.¹

The influence of the strong relationships built is easily discernible in our work, with a significant number of repeat workshop attendees and mentees involved in our programme, key departmental contact persons often contributing formally to our work, and our programme staff regularly being invited to contribute to government departmental workshops and EIDM processes that addressed similar evidence themes.

The combination of workshops and mentorships presents an useful approach to building the capacity of decision-makers to engage with evidence in government settings. We have found that this combined approach is most influential when underpinned by a relationship-building theory of change, which remains flexible and responsive to meeting the needs of participants, and is delivered in a timely manner by partners who have been carefully paired with participants based on required expertise.

Discussion

We have found that a combination of EIDM workshops and mentorships is key when supporting EIDM capacity-building in departments across two African governments. However, this approach is not without limitations. First, relationship-building across and within public sector and research organisations is an intensive activity that defines both the quantity and the quality of the outcomes of the combined programme. This relationship-building work is often not reflected in the design nor the M&E frameworks of programmes; it is merely assumed that the programme will pursue relationships as part of its routine work. However, due to the excessive resource costs of this activity, programmes need to find a way of incorporating relationship-building into their M&E and broader outcome frameworks. With such a large investment in individuals, staff turnover can present a risk to success. In our programme, this actually presented few problems, but we may have been lucky. Second, the administration of combined workshop and mentoring programme requires investment in human resources. We appointed a dedicated manager for both programmes to co-ordinate activities and ensure genuine tailoring and transition of different programme component. Third, whilst we found the combination of workshops and mentorships to be a constructive capacity-building strategy, questions remain. These all

¹ Our work continues through the formation of a new centre dedicated to evidence-informed decision-making at our University [Website removed provided for anonymisation]. The new centre continues to deliver related content and use workshop and mentoring approaches. The formal programme of workshops and mentorships however, has now closed. It is as yet unclear as to whether or not further funding will be available, highlighting a weakness in externally-funded time-bound activities such as these.

represent important issues for consideration in future programme evaluations and research more generally. Specific questions include whether or when it would be appropriate to eliminate workshops in instances where the same individuals and organisations have participated consistently in programme activities. Can it be assumed that a focus on mentorships alone will deliver the desired capacity-building results? How would one know whether individuals and organisations have crossed a threshold that no longer requires interventions in the form of content workshops? More generally, when capacity is identified as an issue to be addressed by an external organisation, as was the case with this programme where the scope was set by the funder, how can the programme be nascent and responsive to other key issues of priority to the programme participants? How can an external programme sufficiently take into account the roles and responsibilities of public servants of relevance to research production and use that could facilitate or limit the impact of a programme such as this?

Conclusion

This article has argued that the combination of workshops and mentoring presents a valuable approach to build capacity of national decision-makers to use evidence. Based on three years of programme implementation and data, we reflect on the combined design of workshop and mentoring activities and what design features we believe to be associated with programme results. Important features include the need to invest in strong relationships with decision-makers as a basis to understand their needs and professional contexts. Tailoring the programme closely to these needs and remaining flexible and responsive throughout programme implementation to readjust design and activities to changing needs and context supported programme success. Timing of capacity-building activities and a carefully matching of participants, as well as providing a range of different EIDM capacities and expertise, emerged as an important design feature too. Further work is needed to investigate the relationship between workshops and mentoring in more detail as well as the role of different mentoring models (eg individual, group, and team mentoring) and whether our combined approach of workshops and mentoring works is equally applicable in more matured EIDM contexts.

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