

To improve the global evidence ecosystem we need to listen to the Global South.

Drawing on their recent [study](#) of South Africa's evidence ecosystem, Ruth Stewart, Harsha Dayal, Laurenz Langer and Carina van Rooyen, show how the global north has much to learn from evidence ecosystems in the global south. Outlining five lessons that can be learnt from the South African evidence ecosystem, they argue that if notions of a global evidence ecosystem are to be taken seriously, they would do well to start with the experience of the Global South.

Taking the global evidence ecosystem seriously

Evidence-informed decision-making is about better evidence for better decisions. It is about good stewardship of resources, avoiding harm and maximising good, and has among other core principles equity, equality, accountability and transparency. It has the potential to improve life for us all; arguably it is particularly important for those living in resource-poor settings in the Global South. How contradictory then, that the experiences of those working to support evidence-use in the Global South are often missing from global debates and discourses on how to support evidence-informed decision-making.

Despite the recent shift towards a holistic and systemic language of 'evidence ecosystems', there remains deeply problematic assumptions in evidence discourses: the South is merely adopting and adapting an approach developed in the North. The South is in 'deficit', the North is the 'saviour'. No one benefits from this assumption. It is in the interests of all working within the ecosystem that experiences and lessons from the Global South are documented and shared. For evidence-informed decision-making to be a reality, we need to work together on an even playing field.

Five lessons from South Africa's evidence ecosystem

South Africa's evidence ecosystem is founded on our Constitution and supported by national systems for research and for planning. The centre of government is interlinked with sector-specific institutional arrangements and responds to external dynamics including the Sustainable Development Goals. The evidence agenda is increasingly explicit and is progressively manifested within structures at all levels—and is maintained even across changes in administration. South Africa has put a system in place where all newly proposed policies, and revisions to existing policies, must go through a rigorous process of assessment and demonstrate clear pathways to change, using various types of relevant evidence. This Socio-Economic Impact Assessment System (SEIAS) requires all policies that go before Cabinet to build an evidence-informed argument for policy options that are put on the table. This is inspiring stuff, from which we draw five lessons.

Lesson 1: Strong evidence networks compensate for resource constraints by fostering collaboration and shared innovation

Evidence ecosystems in the South have fewer resources. The resulting culture of shared-learning, mutual support, and willingness to pool available capabilities and skills is reflected in southern evidence networks: a valued mechanism for cross-learning and collaboration in the Global South. Examples include the Twende Mbele programme and Africa Evidence Network. The drivers of poverty and inequality mean that evidence-informed approaches are needed quickly, and innovation therefore follows. Once innovative solutions to challenges of using evidence for decisions are identified, these are rapidly shared across the ecosystem's networks.

Lesson 2: Ownership, relevance, and legitimacy are as crucial as trustworthiness when it comes to the strength of the evidence-base

Policy-makers in South Africa are calling for locally-relevant and, ideally, locally-produced evidence. These characteristics greatly enhance the legitimacy of the evidence in policy arenas and need to be balanced with methodological trustworthiness. Rigid rules and evidence hierarchies are often not emphasised because there is an understanding of the need for ownership, innovation, and flexibility. This drives incentives to invest in local research capacity and build strong, locally-relevant evidence-use systems in Southern countries. These local capacities are crucial to transform available and accessible evidence into knowledge, using local experiences and interpretations of what works, for whom, and under what conditions.



Lesson 3: Government institutions drive the increase in evidence-informed decision-making

The South African government has committed to organising the public sector as a capable and ethical developmental state. This commitment underlines their mandate for and leadership of national development. Consequently, government institutions cannot afford to wait for the research sector to understand and subscribe to government's evidence needs. As a result, government in South Africa has taken an active role in leading and building the national evidence ecosystem, for example through establishing a national department tasked with fostering evidence-based policy-making, development of departmental evidence strategies, and provision of large-scale training for public servants.

Lesson 4: Evidence-informed decision-making can support institution building by enhancing state capability and public sector accountability

The transparent use of evidence to inform policy decisions increases trust in government institutions and has spill-over effects for public sector accountability. This is a major contribution of evidence-informed decision-making in low-trust and conflicted political settings. South Africa has an evidence ecosystem that is thriving and based on strong institutions, regardless of political changes. Building technical capacities for evidence-use in decision-making can spill over to strengthen the wider public sector management and governance capacities of civil servants and the state apparatus.

Lesson 5: Evidence ecosystems really are greater than the sum of their parts

Reflecting on all we have learnt from South Africa's evidence ecosystem, we observe that our collective body of organisations working to enhance the use of evidence in decision-making is one of our greatest strengths. We recognise how government is increasingly drawing on systematically collated bodies of evidence, something we know is stronger than relying on the findings of a single study. And we acknowledge how our interconnected collective capacities give strength beyond that which any specific evidence capacity can provide. These observations highlight how the global evidence ecosystem can be much stronger if, like the Global South, we are open to learning from one another.

Just the tip of the iceberg

South Africa is not unique. We know through our participation in the continent-wide [Africa Evidence Network](#) that other countries in the region – Burkina Faso, Kenya, Uganda, and Cameroon to name a few – are also working to build resilient evidence ecosystems, and we are learning from one another routinely. We also know that we have not captured the full extent of the South African evidence ecosystem, which is broad and varied, and expands to include currently neglected areas all the time. There is much more to learn from the implementation of policy decisions, and not just the decisions themselves, if evidence is to make a real difference in people's lives.

Evidence production and its use in decision-making is not a uniquely Northern endeavour: it neither needs to be 'translated' for the South, nor does it require 'decolonisation' in that translation. Lessons are available from across the world, North and South: what perhaps needs greatest adjustment is not the capacities of the South, but the culture that gives global prominence to Northern innovation and leadership and is silent on what is happening in the South. The lessons we have highlighted above are the tip of the iceberg. Just imagine how much stronger our global evidence ecosystem could be if we all learnt from the experiences and innovations in the Global South.

This post draws on the authors' co-authored paper, [The evidence ecosystem in South Africa: growing resilience and institutionalisation of evidence use](#), published in Palgrave Communications.

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