

Executive Summary

“Evidence is crucial to successful policymaking. However, in many low and middle-income countries, policy makers lack the capacity to effectively access, appraise and apply research when making decisions. ”

This was the starting assumption behind the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme – a £15.7 million initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) from 2013–17. This report presents the findings of the three-year realist evaluation of BCURE.



Headline Findings

Working with governments to build capacity for evidence use requires a politically informed and multidimensional approach. Capacity gaps should be viewed as just one element of a tapestry of factors that block or disincentivise evidence-informed policymaking.

First, evidence use is inherently political. It is often constrained in low and middle-income countries by authoritarian, politicised and fragmented institutions, which are hobbled by financial constraints, low technical or policy experience among civil servants and high levels of corruption. Despite these challenges, many countries are embarking on reforms that create momentum for evidence-informed policy. Building capacity for evidence use means thinking and working politically to harness these windows of opportunity, and effectively navigating political economy constraints that can undermine meaningful

reform. Second, changing ways of working requires thinking beyond ‘skills’ to build capacity at multiple levels of complex government systems. Individual capacity (in terms of knowledge, skills, confidence and commitment) is the bedrock of effective evidence use, but programmes also need to harness organisational processes, management support and wider incentives for people to change ways of working, and make sure interventions join up to have a system-wide effect. Finally, external partners should accompany change, not impose it. Government reform processes are unpredictable and highly context-specific, meaning that it is rarely clear at the outset what will work. Success is more likely when programmes accompany government partners through a process of change in a flexible, tailored and collaborative way, rather than providing ad hoc support through one-off activities.

About BCURE

BCURE consisted of six linked capacity building projects across 12 low and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia. Each used different interventions to build capacity for evidence use, designed and combined in different ways – including training, mentoring, technical support to develop evidence tools and guidelines, learning exchanges and policy dialogues. Projects ranged in scope and scale, from working in single ministries to working across whole government systems. The evaluation focused on BCURE’s work in six countries: Bangladesh, Kenya, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and South Africa.

About the evaluation

The evaluation used a realist approach to explore how and why capacity building for evidence-informed policymaking works and does not work, for whom, to what extent, in what respects and in what circumstances. It encompassed annual internal programme evaluations of the six BCURE projects, a literature review, an impact case study of a non-BCURE capacity building initiative, and annual synthesis reports. This final report summarises insights from across these components. Findings are based largely on qualitative interviews with more than 500 stakeholders over three years, including BCURE programme staff, participants in BCURE activities, non-participating colleagues and managers, high-level government officials, and civil society stakeholders. The evaluation also draws on BCURE monitoring data and programme documentation, and where possible government documents such as policy products.

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Evaluation key facts

3
years



3
stages of data collection and analysis



6
countries

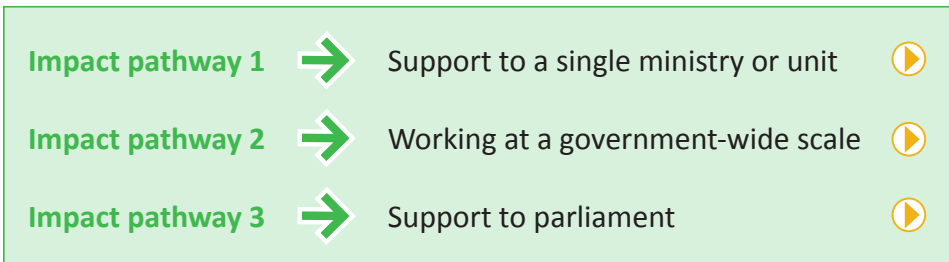
15 
country reports



567
stakeholders consulted

What did BCURE achieve?

BCURE took three main routes to promoting evidence-informed policy making, at different levels of government. We have termed these ‘impact pathways’, which tell the story of how and why BCURE projects influenced a sequence of outcomes towards the desired impact. We hope these can provide a broad, non-prescriptive road map for future programmes working to build capacity for evidence use in government settings.



It is too early to judge whether any impact pathway is ‘better’ than others.

BCURE was only four years long – a very short time to observe change in government behaviour and processes, and too early to assess how far BCURE contributed to a step change in the use of evidence. The key lessons below suggest that the choice of approach should be based on an assessment of where political dynamics offer potential to catalyse change, and where existing relationships and networks can give an external partner a ‘way in.’

The evaluation noted three different levels of success across the impact pathways:

- **Significant progress towards catalysing change at scale: Bangladesh and Sierra Leone (cross-government) and Kenya (Parliament).** These projects involved ‘top down’ activities to establish procedures and incentives for evidence use at an organisational level, combined with ‘bottom up’ capacity building for technical staff – a model that appears to have significant potential to catalyse long-term progress towards improved evidence use. However, the findings are tentative across all three settings, and although there is strong evidence of senior-level ownership it is too early to tell whether early progress will continue. This depends on continued political leadership, high-level incentives and resource mobilisation – all potentially fragile and subject to change.

- **Pockets of success around specific policy processes and capacitated units in single ministry settings: Kenya, Zimbabwe, Pakistan and South Africa.** Across most BCURE projects, there are examples of improved capacity at an organisational level, or good quality policy pilots or tools that have showcased the value of evidence use and have been adopted by a government unit. This happened where projects identified clear windows of opportunity and provided collaborative support within settings where there were existing incentives for change. However, these examples did not add up to system-level change to embed evidence use, which may impede their long-term influence.
- **Ad hoc and ‘one dimensional’ change: all six projects and all three impact pathways.** Across the BCURE portfolio, there are many examples of individuals applying new knowledge and skills within specific policy processes as a result of capacity support from BCURE – but while these are important demonstrations of individual behaviour change, they are ad hoc and unlikely to add up to a step change. At an institutional level, in Pakistan, training on evidence-informed policymaking was adopted into national civil service training – but while this was a significant achievement, it was not joined up to other activities or broader reforms so has limited chance of contributing to a step change on its own.

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How and why can capacity building improve evidence-informed policy making?

Programmes aiming to build capacity for evidence use are often designed around specific activities, such as training or technical support. Our findings suggest the need to instead begin by considering the key ways of working and mechanisms (or change processes) that underpin success – and then think through how best to catalyse these in a particular context. We have identified six lessons on how and why capacity building can improve evidence-informed policymaking:

Lesson 1: BCURE highlights the importance of thinking and working politically

All six BCURE projects were superficially a good fit with government agendas around evidence-informed policy making, with some level of demand from senior leaders, and were tailored to align with ministry requirements through needs assessments. However, scoping activities should have looked beyond ‘face value’ statements of interest, and considered deeper internal political economy dynamics within ministries which shaped the potential for catalysing change.

BCURE had greater success in catalysing the key mechanisms where partners located an entry point in a sector or government institution where there was existing interest in evidence, clear incentives for reform, and a mandate for promoting evidence use; took advantage of a window of opportunity for partnership and reform, often building on existing institutional credibility and relationships to gain a foot in the door; and nurtured relationships with individual champions who acted as ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘cheerleaders’ for the programme.

Mechanisms underpinning success in BCURE



Accompaniment: where an external partner provides tailored, flexible and responsive support to a government institution through a process of reform, characterised by a high level of trust.



Self-efficacy: where providing information, opportunities to practise skills, coaching or technical support builds individuals’ confidence in their ability to do their jobs or achieve a particular goal.



Facilitation: where an evidence tool, system or process facilitates government officials to do their jobs or undertake a task more easily or efficiently.



Reinforcement: where rewards or other forms of control create incentives that motivate officials to work in a particular way. Positive reinforcement includes rewards and encouragement, while negative reinforcement includes reminders, audits and mandatory requirements.



Showcasing: where good examples of evidence tools or processes demonstrate the value of an evidence-informed approach, which leads to them being adopted elsewhere.



Adoption: where senior government stakeholders decide to adopt a new evidence tool, system or process to help standardise evidence-informed policymaking within a government institution. This can be on a small or a large scale.



Critical mass: where changes in practice among a sufficient number of government officials diffuse out to influence colleagues’ behaviour, and the rate of adoption of new behaviours becomes self-sustaining.

Lesson 2: Programmes should accompany change, not impose it

BCURE had most success where projects ‘accompanied’ government partners in a flexible, tailored, collaborative way that promoted ownership, and strengthened partner capacity through ‘learning-by-doing’. This was possible where government partners already had a mandate to promote evidence use, or where BCURE had built up relationships and trust through previous activities that led to an invitation to accompany policy processes.

Accompaniment is not straightforward, and projects are likely to face numerous blockages that need to be navigated, including frequent staff rotations, corruption scandals, and changes in government priorities. In order for programmes to work in this way, there needs to be sufficient flexibility in the contracting model, to allow partners to respond nimbly to challenges and opportunities.

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Lesson 3: Changing behaviour requires more than building skills through training

All six BCURE projects used training as a key intervention, but there were marked differences in the extent to which trainees were able to apply their learning. Where BCURE led to more routine changes in evidence access, appraisal and use, this was often because projects succeeded in catalysing multiple mechanisms together: building self-efficacy, providing tools that facilitated staff to do their jobs more easily, and tapping into or generating organisational incentives to reinforce behaviour change. In many cases, training did not lead to change in practice as a result of a broader environment uncondusive to evidence-informed ways of working, and issues with training design and implementation.

The evaluation highlights the importance of following good practice in adult learning theory. Behaviour change is more likely where activities are closely targeted to individuals who can apply their learning because it is directly relevant to their day-to-day work, where follow-up support helps embed learning, and where training is practical and participatory, uses local case studies or live policy examples, and is delivered by good quality facilitators who understand the specific sector as well as the broader national context.

Lesson 4: Catalysing a ‘critical mass’ of evidence users requires specific and targeted strategies

A common assumption in BCURE was that training a ‘critical mass’ of individuals would diffuse out to influence broader change. However, even where BCURE succeeded in changing behaviour, there is limited suggestion that this influenced people’s colleagues or managers. The evidence relating to this mechanism is therefore limited, although some tentative lessons can be inferred.

First, if training is not directly relevant or there are missing incentives and organisational structures to support evidence use, then individuals may be unable to apply their learning in the first place, and so there is little prospect of them influencing others. Second, if individuals are too scattered across siloed units and divisions then this dilutes their opportunity to influence. Third, if officials are based in a unit that has limited power and resources, or if the programme works only with technical staff but not their managers or senior decision makers, this limits the possibility of influencing senior-level attitudes or behaviours.

Building in an explicit ‘training of trainers’ strategy, supported by a ‘clustering’ approach where individuals from the same unit are targeted, may help trainees develop social connections to provide mutual support, or act as a ‘focal point’ for promoting new ways of working.

Lesson 5: Supporting practical tools or policy pilots can showcase the value of evidence

Several BCURE partners provided practical support to policy processes, or helped develop tools that enabled officials to engage with evidence more easily. This proved one of the most successful interventions, leading to new tools and evidence-informed policies in Kenya, Bangladesh, Pakistan and South Africa. Success was due to BCURE partners identifying an entry point where there was a real need to solve a policy or service delivery problem, and the potential to build on existing work and partnerships and leverage external resources. It proved essential to secure high-level support for the process, and involve stakeholders at the right level of seniority and with the right technical and interpersonal skills, from within and outside government.

Where BCURE provided hands-on support to co-produce policies and tools (through a model of ‘accompaniment’), rather than developing the tools themselves, this helped ensure ownership and in turn made adoption of the resulting tool or process more likely – and it also supported ‘learning-by-doing,’ helping participants embed skills gained through training.

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Lesson 6: Promoting ‘genuine’ adoption of reforms is essential for sustainable change

Where a programme aims to build capacity for evidence use, the goal should be to promote formal adoption of a new process, tool or practice, and ensure it is supported and resourced by senior managers – in order for this to continue incentivising behaviour change once the programme ends.

BCURE succeeded in catalysing ‘small-scale adoption’ of new tools or guidelines in specific units or sectors, including in South Africa and Pakistan. In these countries tools proved genuinely useful to officials’ work, senior managers could see their value, and there was a clear institutional home for the tools as well as resources for scale-up.

‘Large-scale adoption’ involved rolling out a new system or process on a government-wide scale. For example, courses on effective evidence use were adopted into training institutes in Bangladesh and Pakistan, through the support of high-level champions in contexts with an established culture of civil service training. However, embedding training in this way carries risks, as it dilutes the factors found to catalyse individual behaviour change through shortening training courses, watering down the targeting, and stripping out follow-up support.

BCURE also catalysed large-scale adoption of government-wide tools and procedures to support evidence use in Bangladesh and Sierra Leone. However, there is a real risk in both countries that adoption will happen on paper but not in practice. ‘Genuine’ adoption requires ongoing government ownership and access to resources beyond the project, as high-level incentives shift and new opportunities rise and fall in dynamic political environments.