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Article

Information literacy and its link to evidence-informed policymaking in Zimbabwe

Ronald Munatsi, Doctoral Researcher, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg. Email: ronaldmunatsi@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-7833-1633. Twitter: @ronald_263.

Abstract

This paper explored the link between information literacy (IL) and other factors that enable or inhibit the utilisation of research evidence in policymaking in Zimbabwe. The study assumes that if policymakers possess appropriate IL skills to access, assess, synthesise, and apply research evidence, they will naturally use the evidence to inform their policy decisions. Face-to-face interviews with 26 policymakers — technocrats selected from the Parliament of Zimbabwe and two ministries, Industry and Commerce, and Youth, Sport, and Recreation — produced evidence to inform the findings and conclusions. Data synthesis using thematic content analysis confirmed the findings. The results show that while IL skills are critical in enabling policymakers' use of research evidence, multiple other factors also influence the use of research evidence in policymaking due to the complexity of the process. The political and socioeconomic context plays a profound role because of the intricate and nonlinear nature of the policymaking process. Therefore, enhancing evidence use in policymaking revolves around strengthening IL skills at the individual level, including institutional and the broader policy ecosystem, by acknowledging and leveraging personal and institutional relationships. This insight illuminates the need to reorient IL programmes to link them to these other factors.

Keywords

information literacy; policymakers; policymaking; research evidence; Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction

Zimbabwe's socioeconomic challenges that include high poverty levels and a continuously hyperinflationary environment are mainly due to political polarisation and related governance structural weaknesses (World Bank, 2022). Still, widespread failure to develop and implement effective policy interventions is partly due to the limited use of research evidence in policymaking (Craig et al., 2008). Masuku and Macheka (2021) highlighted that the policymaking space in Zimbabwe is dominated by gerontocrats who form the bulk of senior technocrats and the executive. Most of these individuals in these high positions of power belong to the Zanu PF party which is more like the de-facto ruling party since the attainment of independence in 1980. As a result, the policymaking process is largely a political and not a rational process, where research evidence is rarely considered in making policy decisions. Oxman et al. (2009) view evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) as using the best available research evidence in making policy decisions. Craig et al. (2008) point out that studies have shown that the best available research evidence does not inform interventions in around 25%–40% of Zimbabwe's policies. Another study conducted in Zimbabwe by Gutsa (2014) examining Zimbabwean policymakers' capacity to search and utilise research evidence in making policy decisions on climate change further supports this observation. Stores et al. (2020) and Uneke et al. (2015) cited information literacy (IL) as one of the major factors inhibiting the use of research evidence in policy and practice in most low- to middle-income countries due to a lack of

sufficient skills on how to evaluate information sources for authenticity, thus relying primarily on non-scientific information sources such as newspapers, internet blogs, or colleagues.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013, p.29) has defined IL as "a set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, to create as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities." A critical analysis of Foster's (2020) article aligns IL to this study, where IL is viewed as an experiential learning process from a task or decision-oriented information need and its realisation through effectual information engagement, thus facilitating reflective thought and recognition of potential sources and stakeholders in a dynamic information and technology-driven environment. IL is integral in the current technology and knowledge-driven environment characterised by an infodemic, as decision-makers grapple with a proliferation of information choices in every facet of their lives. The glut of information from diverse sources requires skills to search and evaluate the information for authenticity, validity, and reliability (Fosmire, 2017). The importance of IL in the workplace, particularly its link to EIPM, is receiving a lot of attention in the library and information science discourse (Partridge et al., 2010; Ahmad & Widén, 2018).

1.1. Why EIPM?

Proponents of EIPM assert that policy decisions directly contribute to human development and well-being and that the quality of evidence informing policy decisions influences these policies' effectiveness (Sohn, 2018). Adopting research evidence in the policymaking process is now a 'big thing' in the global discourse on approaches and strategies for development. International development organisations like UKAID, the European Union (EU), USAID and other development partners emphasise the need to strengthen IL skills to promote EIPM, resulting in a flurry of activities to support IL programmes. For instance, enhancing IL was one of the main strands of the "Building Capacity to Use Evidence" (BCURE) project, funded by UKAID from 2013-2016 aimed at strengthening policymakers' individual and institutional capacities to use evidence in low- to middle-income countries (Punton et al., 2016). Governments can be more efficient if research informs policies relating to development programs instead of personal opinions, political ideologies, or some other basis that is not scientific (Boswell & Smith, 2017). Much research indicates that evidence-informed policies yield better results and are more likely to impact people's lives positively. Fedorowicz and Aron (2021) point out that EIPM effectively ensures responsive policy interventions by systematically using rigorously generated research and knowledge. They further assert that research evidence in policymaking ensures judicious use of limited resources, policy consistency, and avoidance of unnecessary policy reversals.

Historically, the experiences and opinions of those involved influence policymaking (Puttick, 2011). Whitty and Wisby (2020) point out that EIPM is a shift among policymakers from the traditional emphasis on authoritative opinion to a focus on evidence extracted from the current and latest research. The use of evidence in policy is even more essential and urgent in the post-truth dispensation where objectivity is increasingly less significant in determining public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Pilerot and Lindberg's (2011) study confirms that without IL skills, policymakers face challenges when searching for and using available research evidence, and that strengthening these skills contributes to EIPM. The same study suggests that IL skills among researchers and policymakers increase research evidence uptake and use in policymaking. Munatsi (2011) affirms that EIPM is hinged on ready access to usable information and that IL plays an integral role especially in accessing and using online information sources. The cited studies assume that having IL skills results in the use of research evidence by policymakers in the policymaking process.

Thus, this study was conducted against this milieu in three Zimbabwean government institutions and sought to explore whether possession of IL skills among policymakers results in the use of

research evidence in policymaking. The study targeted technocrats from government institutions in Zimbabwe consisting of the Parliament of Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Recreation. It is important to note that study participants included technocrats whose role is also to support policymakers with research and other evidence, and policymakers involved in making the actual policy decisions, whilst some performed both roles. For this study, they are all being referred to as policymakers.

2. Aims and Objectives of the Study

The study sought to explore the assertion that possession of IL skills among policymakers results in the use of research evidence by examining the factors that enable or inhibit policymakers from using research evidence in policymaking.

2.1 Assumption of the study

The study's assumption was that if policymakers possess the right IL skills to access, assess, and synthesise the evidence, they will use this research evidence to inform their policy decisions.

2.2 Objectives of the Study

- To ascertain government policymakers' knowledge and understanding of EIPM,
- To determine the policymakers' use of evidence to inform their policy decisions,
- To establish the contexts where policymakers turn to evidence in policy decision-making,
- To establish the factors that influence the use or non-use of research evidence in policymaking.

2.3 Theoretical framework: understanding user context

The understanding user context theoretical framework suggested by Jacobson et al. (2003) was used to inform this study. The choice of this framework was motivated by the need for guidance in exploring factors that either enable or inhibit research evidence use in policymaking. These can also be incentives or disincentives. As a framework for knowledge translation or research adoption, the understanding user context framework is an appropriate theory. Its components are consistent with the objectives and assumptions of this study. As in this study, the framework focuses on understanding the user context, that is the policymaker. It is equally relevant in understanding factors that enable or inhibit policymakers to use evidence in policymaking.

The understanding user context framework has five purviews to consider in understanding the factors affecting the use of research evidence in policymaking and developing strategies to support the process. These purviews are as follows:

i. **The user group** (Policymakers),
ii. **The issue** (Policy issue),
iii. **The research** (research evidence and the sources),
iv. **The researcher–user relationship** (researcher/research intermediary - policymaker relationship),
v. **The dissemination strategies** (Research Communication Strategies).

The framework has a sequence of questions for each purview or domain. The questions were used to systematically organise the researcher's knowledge about policymakers (user group) and the research translation or uptake process, distinguish what may be unknown, and highlight what is critical. These questions were adapted in developing the interview guide, for instance. The user group questions covered the attributes of the information users. The attributes include the context in which

the information users operate, decision-making systems, access to sources of information and IL skills, and attitudes towards research and its utilisation in decision making. The issue domain questions addressed the attributes and context of the policy issue for which evidence must be used to ultimately inform the policy position. The research domain considered the characteristics of the supply side of the EIPM value chain, the policymakers' opinions towards evidence and evidence producers, including research intermediaries, the significance of the evidence and its suitability to policymakers. The research-user relationship domain concentrated on the links between evidence producers and evidence intermediaries, other stakeholders, and policymakers. Lastly, the dissemination strategies domain considered pragmatic approaches for communicating research evidence to policymakers. Jacobson et al. (2003) argue that interrogating these domains helps in identifying the users' (policy makers') evidence requirements and obtaining vital information about users (policymakers) and the ecosystem that is essential to aid the research uptake and knowledge translation process. This framework brings a broader perspective to directing collaboration among evidence producers, intermediaries, and policymakers. It informed the research by highlighting enabling and inhibiting factors to research evidence use in policymaking. The same framework also informed data analysis and reporting of findings.

3. Information Literacy and Evidence-informed Policymaking: A Rapid Review of Related Literature

Partridge et al. (2010) observed that IL is an integral component of evidence-informed policymaking and that it epitomises the policymakers' portrayal of IL in the place of work. The EIPM concept has its background in medicine where it is generally referred to as evidence-based practice (EBP) or evidence-based decision-making (EBDM). Although some authors use these three terms interchangeably, they are somewhat different. Kumah et al. (2019) regards EBP or EBDM as a systems-oriented approach of ensuring that clinical practice or health systems decision making is based on some form of research that can be a systematic review or randomised control trial. On the other hand, the same author treats evidence-informed policy- or decision-making as more encompassing and transcends the confines of EBP or EBDM by recognising policymakers and practitioners as critical, independent thinkers who can view, integrate, and utilise research and various other types of evidence such as practice informed knowledge, administrative data, citizen knowledge and values. The author treats EBP or EBDM as a subset of EIPM, so in the context of this study, EIPM is used to refer to the same or a similar process. This contextual definition is mainly because the study is targeting policymaking institutions.

Policymakers require timely access to current, correct and context-specific research evidence to develop positive policy options and prioritise effort and resources (Cronin & Sadan, 2015). As pointed out earlier and according to Gutsa (2014), some challenges for EIPM result from the lack of IL skills to access, assess and use robust evidence. The specific capacity gaps include inability to search, evaluate, and apply evidence, and inadequate skills to physically access online databases and e-resources due to paywalls or lack of awareness of open access resources. Despite research and academic institutions constantly generating research, there is little evidence to suggest that public policymaking institutions in Zimbabwe utilise the generated evidence (Gutsa, 2014).

The literature review for this study revealed dominant coverage of EIPM concepts in the health sector. However, the findings align with other socioeconomic sectors like industry, commerce, and education. Likewise, the barriers and opportunities for creating meaningful ecosystems for EIPM are not unique to health policy but exist in other sectors. Instances of IL practices in the workplace focused on challenges and opportunities for evidence use in legislation, executive decisions, and public service delivery. However, most authors converged on the complex nature of the policymaking process. Nutley et al. (2003) define the policymaking process as complicated, multifactorial, and nonlinear. The inherently political nature of the process and the need to select options from multiple and often contending socio-political imperatives, in a dynamic and sometimes volatile socio-political

micro- and macro-contexts, enhance this complexity. In Zimbabwe, acute political polarisation adds an extra layer to this intricacy.

Policymaking is not a neutral and independent socio-political process. It does not take place in a vacuum. As indicated earlier, citing authors like Partridge et al. (2010), Pilerot and Lindberg, (2011) and Munatsi (2011), there is a significant link between IL and its profound role in policymaking departments. However, these departments, as public institutions, also interplay with the broader national ecosystem. The institutional or country's socio-political and economic context produces many variables connected to policymaking. Draman et al. (2017) provide examples of socioeconomic variables of this broader context, including power dynamics, political polarisation, links between state organs, civil society, shrinking or widening political space, citizen activism, and the global environment. Draman et al. (2017) state that these micro- and macro-level factors include democracy or political freedom, media and academic freedom, and political stability or volatility linked to a country's socio-political and economic context. The contextual variables affect day-to-day politics, hence the relationship to the policymaking process.

Weyrauch et al. (2016) suggested that context is the complex environment that influences policy decisions due to simultaneous interactions between various stakeholders. Against this backdrop, it is essential to acknowledge the role of politics in the policymaking process. EIPM is not simply about technocratic or bureaucratic processes. The politics involved is equally important to consider. Bowen and Zwi (2005) point out that the socio-political context, including the various micro and macro policy ecosystem forces, provides challenges and opportunities to embed evidence into policy and practice. In most cases, the socio-political, ideological, economic, and other factors take precedence in informing policymaking over research evidence. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccine hesitancy and resistance by many countries to immunise was not informed by evidence but was as a result of other factors that include religious and various ideologies and conspiracy theories (Umakanthan et al., 2021). Researchers and academics often do not appreciate this fact. Jones et al. (2013) believe that values, norms, principles, power dynamics, and organisational and broader ecosystem factors including donor funding, influence policy decisions more than research evidence. Policymakers make decisions in environmental contexts where they face numerous, often contending factors, and evidence is just one of the factors influencing the policy decisions (Nutley et al., 2007).

4. Methodology

I used a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research involves a systematic investigation of social phenomena conducted in natural settings (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006). The qualitative approach was ideal, as it opened the window for participant narratives considered as real-world measures that are appropriate when investigating real-life problems, thus obtaining insights through personal and human dimensions of experience over time. The qualitative approach aimed to understand feelings, values, and perceptions that underlie and influence behaviour. An exploratory strategy and interpretive philosophy guided the definition of the objectives and design of instruments, including data analysis and interpretation. The rationale for the philosophy is that we understand reality through subjective and varied interpretations and intervention. People proceed from different cultures, values, and different contexts. The theoretical base and conceptual framework for analysing results were inductively developed based on the questions adapted from Jacobson et al.'s (2003) understanding user context framework as explained above. Saunders et al. (2009) support that the small sample used in this study is suitable for the indicated methodology and approach.

4.1   Population

The population is the total of all the study subjects from which the sample is drawn. It is the group from which I wanted to be able to conclude the research problem (Berg, 2004). The research target population for this study was approximately 100 and included all senior technocrats in the Ministries of Industry and Commerce and Youth, Sport, and Recreation, including senior technocrats from the

Administration of Parliament. The study focused on the Parliament of Zimbabwe as the supreme policymaking organ. Although the two ministries were chosen on the basis of accessibility and convenience, they also reflect the general policymaking structures and functionalities of other government ministries in Zimbabwe.

4.2   Sampling

The sample comprised 26 key informants (all senior technocrats or civil servants) from the Parliament and the two indicated ministries. Sampling is an exercise in which a researcher carefully draws representative study subjects from a predetermined population through an apt method, so that the sample subjects can represent the attributes of the population (Palinkas et al., 2015). Policymakers are generally busy people. Therefore, the purposive selection sampling process enabled the convenience and accessibility of the key informants. Besides proximity and accessibility, I also chose study subjects based on their unique qualities or experiences with the subject under investigation to obtain insights into policymakers' nuances around evidence use (Cooper and Schindler, 2011).

Another factor considered in the choice of critical informants was seniority. The selection included positions such as permanent secretaries, the Clerk of Parliament and the most senior technocrats who included principal directors, directors, and principal officers. These are senior career civil servants and were ideal as their term of office is beyond the duration of the ruling government. The selected positions are professional civil servants or technocrats whose views and experience with research evidence in policymaking would not be "contaminated" by the idiosyncrasy of partisan political prejudice (Owakah and Aswani, 2009). Moreover, most of these individuals had worked in their various portfolios for more than ten years. Thus, they had authentic and experiential views on past and current use of research evidence for policymaking in government. The chosen departments included those more aligned to evidence gathering and dissemination, for example, library, research, and information service departments.

4.3 Research Instruments

4.3.1   Key informant interviews (KIIs)

A key informant interview is a qualitative research technique that involves intensive individual questioning and in-depth qualitative discussions to gather perspectives, attitudes, opinions, or reactions to a particular phenomenon from people who may know much about the phenomenon under study (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The two permanent secretaries from the two government ministries and the Clerk of Parliament, including senior technocrats in the three institutions were purposively and conveniently selected as key informants. Therefore, I organised interviews at a time most convenient to them. The nature of the problem also required getting narratives from the respondents emanating from their experiences, feelings, and views; thus, the interviews provided a window to gain insights into that information following questions adapted from Jacobson et al.'s (2003) understanding user context framework.

4.4   Data Analysis

A pragmatic process of thematic content analysis was used to synthesise the data obtained from the KIIs. Transcriptions of the interviews were paraphrased, analysed, and divided into thematic clusters outlined in the results and correspond to the research objectives and research questions following the cited theoretical framework. The literature review also provided direction in developing the clusters.

5. Results

26 policymakers (technocrats) participated in the study and were interviewed. Nine key informants

were from the Parliament of Zimbabwe, whilst nine were from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and eight from the Ministry of Youth, Sport, and Recreation. Of the 26 key informants, 17 were male, and nine were female.

5.1 The knowledge and understanding of policymakers regarding EIPM

The key informant interviews revealed that policymakers acknowledge that research and other types of evidence are essential in policymaking processes.

> *For Zimbabwe to prevent policy failures, policy inconsistencies and misplaced development priorities, there is need to base policy decisions on sound scientific research evidence.*

> *To develop good policies that will have desirable outcomes and positively impact people's lives, the policy decisions must be informed by knowledge of what works where and how, including why.*

> *There is nothing new about evidence-informed policymaking. I think the concept is being overrated because we all grew up talking about applied research that in essence means using research and knowledge gained in specific practical situations like decision or policymaking or to produce tangible products.*

Although the respondents acknowledged the importance of research evidence in policymaking, deliberate and routine usage in policy decisions is often impossible because mostly political, personal, and other ideological considerations take precedence over evidence.

> *When the President goes to a political rally and announces a 10-point national plan or a couple of ministers, ahead of an election, cobble up ideas from a party manifesto and baptise it Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation, you question what informed these blueprints. Zimbabwe's legislative agenda and policymaking process have been very much on a gut feel, on a hunch, on a common sense basis rather than on evidence.*

5.2 Situations in which policymakers turn to research evidence

The respondents revealed various organisational and personal contexts in which they turn to the evidence. For example, when they may want to understand or obtain more profound insight into scientific or technical issues that have a policy bearing. Such scientific sectors include climate change, genetically modified products, nanotechnology, and other emerging technologies among other scientific issues with a policy bearing. Some turn to evidence when they want to substantiate or support their arguments using research data and statistics. Different contexts that emerged include socio-political and economic crises; for example, civil strife in response to food shortages, disease epidemics, or other natural disasters may spur policymakers to seek research evidence to provide answers and militate against these. Policymakers may also turn to evidence following calls from the president or other superior technocrats in response to a policy problem.

> *We turn to research evidence in response to different crisis situations, and this is especially in hid of a call by the Head of State or those with a presidential prerogative, for example, a highly placed technocrat or superior.*

The international community may also spur policymakers to turn to research evidence, for example, global objectives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policymakers look for evidence to ensure that their policies are in sync with these global developments.

> *The need to be seen in auspicious standing by international actors as a result of good policies, particularly when compared to counterpart countries or during international conventions, is cause for policymakers to turn to research evidence.*

Parliament or cabinet members may be motivated to use evidence to reinforce opinions or legitimise certain positions on policies, including the need to demonstrate their legality to advance, for example, their capacity to stand for their constituencies. Other cited contexts were policymakers using evidence because of selfish motivation. One respondent pointed out that some policymakers might seek research evidence to obtain recognition by the media and by the general populace because of pursuing populist policies.

> *The need for power and authority over other policymakers sometimes forces policymakers to use research evidence to wield pressure on others. Some even go to the extent of uncovering their counterparts' shortcomings.*

Similarly, the desire to increase one's integrity and improve career prospects in the civil service by creating reliability and credibility among peers in the party and government may incentivise the use of evidence. Closely connected to this is the need for economic or monetary advantages.

> *Most policy decisions are spurred by endeavours to either protect existing power or gain power.*

The interviews show that very little of the proffered evidence finds its way into influencing policy and practice due to mainly political polarisation and the autocratic nature of the Zimbabwe government system.

> *Legislators and policymakers in Zimbabwe seem reactionary and not evidence-informed Most policy positions have no direct bearing on reality and evidence on the ground. For instance, this big agenda for the continent for the next 40 years or so… Instead of the existing disconnect between research and policy, our policies should be looking at that horizon with research designed to look at where we want to see the country at that point to be proactive in addressing issues.*

> *I am not in any way against the government, but what is real in this country is that even if the data or information is coming from a modern-day Albert Einstein, it will never influence any policy decisions as long as it is not consistent with what the politicians want to achieve. For our ministers, the party comes first before country and kin.*

> *Off the cuff, I would say research evidence rarely shapes or informs any policy here because most policy decisions are predetermined, and evidence is used to legitimise politically motivated policy positions; otherwise, if the research points elsewhere, it's thrown out.*

However, some respondents cited some instances where policies have been influenced by research evidence with positive outcomes.

> *Although there could have been other factors, I would attribute the success of Zimbabwe's manpower development over the years to some research that was done in the early '80s when we gained our independence.*

> *Most instances where research evidence has been earnestly used and even produced positive results is in the health sector, for example, research that informed*

the rolling out of the circumcision and several maternal health programs to prevent HIV/AIDS, including maternal and infant mortality.

5.3   Role of IL in EIPM and the existing capacities

Respondents were asked questions around the role of IL in evidence informed policymaking and existing individual IL skills. All the respondents (26 out of 26, or 100%) regard IL as an integral component in facilitating the use of research evidence in policymaking. This perception revolved around the fact that the ability to search, sift through and assess available evidence enables policymakers to obtain relevant and more contextualised evidence to inform their decision-making. Other respondents in this category noted that as much as IL is critical, the IL skillsets they possess, and the training offered are not enough to effectively address the skills needed in evidence-informed decision-making.

> *I do not think most of the MPs and technocrats in this country have enough skills to identify relevant information for policy. A lot of them rely on unauthentic sources when doing government business.*

> *During the orientation of new legislators, we always discover that many Parliamentarians are ignorant and cannot even do basic literature searches. Although they hide behind the fact that they are too busy to look for data and evidence they cannot search and filter information that is relevant to what they want, let alone articulate some of the information. Remember, sometimes we have MPs who have not passed Ordinary Level.*

> *It is not enough to be just able to search and assess information regarding policymaking. You need an extra layer of information literacy skills to navigate the policymaking landscape and make sure the information is not just addressing specific policy needs but other environmental factors that influence the process.*

> *There is a need to review the information literacy curriculum that is being used to train policymakers because it is too basic and assumes a very linear approach to policymaking.*

5.4   Factors affecting the use (or non-use) of research evidence in policymaking

The results on factors that facilitate or inhibit evidence use ranged from individual skills and attributes to other institutional and more prominent ecosystem factors. These factors touched on both the supply and demand side. The policymakers interviewed felt that there was limited appreciation or knowledge of the other actors on the supply side about the intricacy or complexities of the policymaking process, especially the politics and multidisciplinary research generally required in policy and practice. Linked to this factor are issues around the disconnect in the timing of a research project duration so that findings are real-time to inform policy. A research project can take several years, whilst policymakers generally work on shorter time scales to agree on and implement a proposed policy. However, a respondent argued that both parties should appreciate either process so that the research and policy processes become a continuous loop feeding each other. Policymakers' lack of individual skills to access, assess and articulate research evidence was a significant barrier. Policymakers also require research evidence searching, evaluation, and synthesis skills, even if the skills are also imperative for researchers. Inadequate ICT infrastructure, lack of access to quality online scientific journals and databases and limited awareness of free and open access resources worsens the situation. Sometimes the policymakers failed to get the information they wanted. They either retrieved millions of items, the majority of which may be irrelevant, or sometimes got no results. Policymakers stated they have limited time to search and use the research

evidence. The format in which the research evidence is presented or communicated to them by researchers makes it cumbersome for them to pick the critical implications and recommendations.

> *There is a lack of capacity among policymakers and implementers. As a nation, we have not sufficiently invested in our human capital and equipped ourselves at the government level with skills, technology and facilities to develop and implement good policies using research evidence.*

> *Most members of Parliament are always crying over the non-availability of scientific journals and data to assist them in performing their parliamentary duties whilst plenty of resources are available online, e.g. open a cess. Their challenge is a lack of technical skills to use computers and the Internet to access these resources. We also have the mandate to promote and raise awareness among these legislators. They also need hands-on training.*

A significant barrier to evidence use is the lack of opportunities and platforms for researchers and policymakers to engage and collaboratively identify evidence gaps, build personal relationships, and develop mutual trust and understanding. The lack of synergies reduces the engagement and consultation between policymakers and researchers during policy formulation. Poor networks also lead to poor feedback regarding scientific sway or effect on policy, which means that researchers will not be able to determine the impact of their research on policy and practice.

> *It would be ideal to have opportunities as policymakers to interact with think tanks and academics to consult on technical issues, but, alas! These things just do not happen. Besides access to colleagues and friends who may be experts, we do not have formal platforms to access experts when we need them, which is not a good thing in policy development.*

Policymakers felt they did not have enough time to perform, particularly given the demands and pressure from the public and the media. Because policymakers felt forced to make decisions and roll out policies very fast, this often lacked sufficient evidence and research synthesis.

> *In theory, we know we have to use research in policymaking. That is a truism, but practically it is not possible. Policy decisions need to be made quickly and, in most cases, we do not have the luxury to wait for research to be done. After all, research may take several years whilst we have to have answers for the public.*

One common barrier to using evidence was that as much as policymakers could obtain research evidence and are willing to use it, they may not have sufficient power to influence the ultimate policy decisions. The lack of control demotivates them from looking for the evidence in the first place. It is frustrating for policymakers to spend time accessing and even synthesising evidence when they may not have the authority to act on the knowledge to influence the final policy decisions. Connected to this is the issue of power politics and protection of the status quo, particularly in an autocratic state like Zimbabwe.

> *As researchers working in policy institutions, we go to great lengths to gather good quality evidence and sharing with our directors or principal directors, but often we do not see our recommendations or implications for policy or legislation being taken up or reflected in the final pieces of legislation, policies or budgets. As much as we have a critical role in the process, our hands are tied to final decisions because this prerogative lies with other people, especially those in the*

executive."

It was also reflected that evidence might point to a change or shift from current practices when those in power want to continue benefiting from the status quo.

> *Talk of evidence! It has no place in Zimbabwean politics because the main motivation of the legislative and policymaking process in Zimbabwe is reactionary. It is mostly to protect the interests of those in power, in terms of resources they have gained or opportunities they continue to enjoy.*

6. Discussion

The results show that IL skills play a vital role in facilitating policymakers' evidence use in decision making. However, other equally critical factors enable or inhibit evidence use among policymakers. The indicated factors from the KIIs focus mainly on the political economy and complexities of policymaking processes. Other factors include the engagement of various stakeholders in improving research evidence use, particularly researchers and policymakers. Other imperatives to enable evidence use by policymakers were the need for research to be easily accessible and presented in readily usable form, hence the important role of IL skills. In light of these findings, this paper discusses the factors that facilitate the use or non-use of research evidence as a product of three main analytical dimensions below.

6.1 The Complexity of the policymaking process and influence of the socio-political micro- and macro-context

The study assumed that if research evidence is accessible, of good quality, relevant, usable, and policymakers possess the requisite IL skills, they will naturally use this evidence to inform policy decisions. However, Knill and Tosun (2008) argue that policymaking occurs in the presence of multiple constraints, that is, shortage of time and resources, various and sometimes contending policy options, public opinion, and of course the constitution. Secondly, policymaking involves the existence of various policy processes. Governments are not unitary actors but consist of different departments that overlap and compete. Thirdly, these policy processes form an infinite cycle of decisions and policies. Current policy decisions are not independent of decisions taken before, and policies under discussion today may have 'knock-on effects' on future policies.

The findings show that the process is not simple and linear, which links to the earlier assertion by Nutley, et al. (2003) that the policymaking process is highly political and sometimes messy. As expressed by some respondents in the interviews, the politically volatile and autocratic political context in Zimbabwe, coupled with the economic meltdown, does not permit policymakers to interrogate the status quo. This political context is fertile ground for strong incentives to make political rather than evidence-informed policy decisions. However, windows of opportunity for evidence use exist in less politicised sectors such as health, and through targeted high-level reforms that encourage consideration of evidence in policy decision making. IL skills play a role in enabling or inhibiting policymakers from using research evidence in policymaking. Still, other equally critical contextual factors have to be taken into account. The policymaking process is multi-dimensional and has lots of inputs. Factors that prevent policymakers from using evidence in the process are multifaceted. No one-size-fits-all framework exists to explain enabling and restraining factors to research evidence use. Hicks et al. (2022) avers that good IL skills, including adequate appreciation and engagement with the whole research-to-policy ecosystem, are critical elements to consider in developing EIPM frameworks. Shaxson (2005) aptly avers that even very good evidence aligning with the policy landscape and synthesised using rigorous methodologies is useless to policymakers if it is not provided timely. Porter and Kramer (2011) reckon that IL to support EIPM must not focus on a particular approach. It should be about constantly looking into ways to engage and use available evidence in decision making. The specific approach to IL and its role in EIPM departments will depend on particular policy contexts.

6.2 The role of IL and access to research evidence in EIPM

The term evidence-informed policymaking can be deceptive because it entices us to see IL and its role in supporting the process as wholly influencing. At the same time, it plays a pivotal role in selecting an option between competing or conflicting options. These findings have implications for IL practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and other groups working to interface research and policy. According to Bowen and Zwi (2005), studies of policy iteratively show that research evidence is not used in such a linear and instrumental way. Research evidence primarily filters into policy debates in more indirect ways, such as influencing or determining a problem, undermining current or customary framings of the problem set, or contesting conformist or conventional approaches to addressing policy challenges. Such a scenario means that IL training to promote EIDM should be structured to address these various components.

The Evidence Pyramid, reproduced by Ho et al. (2008) demonstrates the quality and usefulness of different sources of evidence to policy makers. As one goes up the hierarchy, the more valuable the categorised sources become, because information becomes more filtered and synthesised. As one goes down the scale, the evidence is primarily unfiltered, for instance, primary research such as cohort studies, randomised control trials (RCTs) including other non-scientific sources like background information or expert opinion pieces. At the top, one obtains critically appraised and synthesised sources like systematic reviews and policy briefs. Many policymakers may not be experts in specific scientific areas. They may come from varied backgrounds and may not even have outstanding academic credentials. Such policymakers are not likely to articulate esoteric, winding scientific explanations. Policymakers often receive different viewpoints on policy issues and information that may be conflicting. For these reasons, evidence sources for policymakers need to be filtered, adequately packaged, and made clear and concise.

Findings from the key informants concur with the findings from the literature review. Policymakers as busy people require summarised, highly filtered, and synthesised evidence sources. The respondents indicated that most evidence sources currently available for policymakers in Zimbabwe are not in this category. As in most other low- to middle-income countries, policymakers in Zimbabwe rely on evidence mostly from reports, central statistical offices, the media and colleagues from state-supported think tanks and state universities. In most cases, this evidence is mostly unfiltered and summarised so that it is easily used to make policy decisions. This scenario can be attributed mainly to two factors:

- Lack of policymakers' technical capacity to access, assess, synthesise, and apply existing research evidence.
- Lack of capacity to access online electronic information resources like e-journals and databases due to connectivity and other socioeconomic and technological challenges.

Policymakers' physical and cognitive capacity to access timely, relevant, and filtered knowledge products is a prerequisite. Policymakers in Zimbabwe and other low- to middle-income countries face challenges in having physical access to evidence sources, mainly because their governments do not have sufficient resources to subscribe to high-quality e-journal databases like EBSCO and Emerald. Institutions like universities and other research institutes have formed consortia to afford such subscriptions, and this is why there must be engagement and alliances between policymaking and research-based institutions. The situation is exacerbated by poor ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity, including a severe lack of awareness of free and open access online electronic information resources.

Assuming there is physical access, policymakers have limited cognitive capacity. Cognitive capacity, in this instance, refers to technical skills to access, evaluate, synthesise, communicate, and apply available research evidence, including awareness of the existence of these resources. Bundy (2004) avers that information or evidence literate individuals recognise when the need for information or knowledge arises. They also have limited capacity to search, assess, analyse, and use the accessed

information and expertise to solve a wide range of practical socioeconomic challenges. Such characteristics are essential if policymakers are to use research evidence in policymaking. Historically, IL has been a purview of librarians in their bid to promote access to good quality literature by academics. It is now being proactively promoted in policymaking and other workplace decision-making, to foster routine use of evidence in day-to-day decisions. This development has created an added layer of complexity that existing IL skills and approaches cannot address.

6.3 Existing links and engagement between policymaking and research-based institutions

Findings from the study show that links and engagement between policymakers and producers of research evidence are a significant motivator for evidence used by policymakers. Although the reasons for this are varied and wide, they revolve around the fact that this engagement promotes co-creation and co-production of knowledge, including fostering more personal relationships to promote EIPM. Greenhalgh et al. (2016) view co-creation as a creative approach to research, focusing on developing human experience and personal contact in extending careful attention to governance and policy processes through collaborative knowledge generation by academics working alongside other stakeholders to increase research impact.

Kickbusch and Gleicher (2012) have described co-production as working together to improve policymaking and public service delivery. Voorberg et al. (2015) assert that collaboration creates positive outcomes that tackle societal challenges through a transparent process of engagement, exchange, and interaction with pertinent stakeholders crossing institutional restrictions and controls. Interaction between policymakers and researchers is critical because both parties often have limited reciprocal appreciation or understanding of scientific research and policy processes. Stakeholder interaction is also linked to the scheduling of both processes to feed into each other. In most cases, research typically accentuates academic impact whilst policymakers' main goal is social impact. The former generally does not offer a real-time contribution to socioeconomic change, while at the same time long-term societal change is not possible when there is no reasonable access to relevant evidence of what works.

Deliberate, organised engagement between the two parties enables them to collaboratively identify evidence gaps, build personal relationships and develop mutual trust and understanding. Mutual trust improves interaction and consultation between the parties in interfacing research and policy. In one of the articles to bridge the research-policy gap, van Der Arend (2014) noted that the critical facilitators for research evidence to be valued by policymakers are networks (individual and organisational) and relationships between policymakers and researchers. The two parties must have a recognised track record, professional integrity, and credibility, including knowledge of the intricate nature of the policymaking process.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the interface between research and policy is intricate, multifactorial, nonlinear, and context specific. Although IL skills are critical in enabling policymakers to use evidence in policymaking, other factors in the research-to-policy ecosystem also play a profound role in ensuring ultimate use or non-use of research evidence. These equally essential factors revolve around political context, the policy and policymaking process's political economy, and personal motivations of reinforcing one's position and managing political relationships. Other peripheral motivational variables include financial and other resource factors. The findings from the study also illuminate that the skillsets currently being addressed by existing approaches to IL are insufficient, as focus is mainly on individual level skills and not the institutional and systemic level. A systemic level approach will draw on a wider institutional evidence landscape that draws on personal relationships, inclusive stakeholder participation and responsiveness to current and future demands.

Bearing that research evidence can influence policy directly or indirectly, formally, or informally, it is essential to ensure that IL programmes are versatile enough to actively respond to the dynamics of policymaking processes. This way, the latency of government control and manipulation of research evidence for political or other personal reasons becomes restricted. There is an urgent need to shift from the linear view of IL and to focus more on what results IL skills could achieve within broader institutions and systems, and most importantly, their role in ensuring that they are used to enable policy decisions that make a positive difference for ordinary people. This determination led to the conclusion that IL skills are vital in supporting EIPM but require an inclusive conceptual framework that supports evidence utilisation through a systemic approach. Such an approach considers both technical and other soft skills that recognise the intricacy of the policymaking process.

As such, this study contributes to the existing literature on IL in many ways, but most importantly, in bringing different originally marginalised approaches to IL in the workplace. Bowen and Zwi (2005) point out that this multifaceted and sometimes understated IL skillset to support EIPM pulls from a broad spectrum of research. Basic knowledge, understanding of societal constructs, and the nature of social problems, including social programme implementation, are all forms of IL essential to EIDM. Bowen and Zwi (2005) call this "what works" IL.

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- **Data availability:** The data that support the findings are openly available.
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