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The Politics of “What Works”: Evidence Incentives and Entrepreneurship in Development Organisations

Pablo Yanguas



The politics of “what works”: evidence incentives and entrepreneurship in development organisations

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, national development agencies have committed to results-based approaches and to putting evidence at the centre of their decision-making. For evidence “optimists”, this is a much-needed corrective to past practice; in contrast, “pessimists” worry about ideology masquerading as science, and results-based approaches contributing to the further depoliticisation of development. This paper argues that reality falls somewhere in between these two extreme interpretations, and that the experiences of development organisations are varied enough to warrant further interrogation, not into whether evidence shapes policymaking, but into how it does so, and whose evidence matters most. The paper seeks to address these questions through an analytical framework that highlights the process of contestation between evidence agendas against a backdrop of policy complexity, professional barriers, and organisational incentives. A brief review of evidence from development cooperation agencies – with spotlight cases from Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom – reveals that institutionalisation and entrepreneurship play a critical role in enabling and shaping evidence-based policymaking. This leads to clear implications for practitioners, whose focus should be not only on getting the right kind of evidence, but on getting the politics of evidence right.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|--|
| AECID | Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo |
| BEIS | Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy |
| BMZ | Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development / Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung |
| CGD | Center for Global Development |
| DAC | Development Assistance Committee |
| DEval | German Institute for Development Evaluation |
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| ESRC | Economic and Social Research Council |
| FCDO | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office |
| FIAP | Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas |
| GCRF | Global Challenges Research Fund |
| GIZ | German Agency for International Cooperation / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit |
| ICAI | Independent Commission on Aid Impact |
| IDS | Institute for Development Studies |
| INGO | international non-governmental organisation |
| M&E | monitoring and evaluation |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| ODA | official development assistance |
| ODI | Overseas Development Institute |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| RBM | results-based management |
| RDI Network | Research for Development Impact Network |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, national development agencies have committed to results-based management, adopted indicators and performance metrics, launched public information campaigns, created evaluation departments, and funded academic and policy research, thereby gradually building a massive corpus of evidence products. For evidence “optimists”, this is a much-needed corrective to suspect practices of the past, a turn towards using the scientific method and data to solve some of the world’s most pressing challenges. And, indeed, over the last two decades, innovative health and social protection interventions have demonstrated what evidence-based policymaking can do to solve development problems.

Unfortunately, not many of the challenges tackled by development cooperation are as straightforward or testable as the use of bed nets or giving cash to the poor. The greater the complexity, the more uncertainty there is about what works. And uncertainty opens the door to contestation by competing evidence agendas seeking to shape development cooperation. Evidence “pessimists” worry about ideology masquerading as science, and the use of evidence-based imperatives and tools to limit critical discourse and silence alternative voices.

The debate on evidence is not unique to development cooperation. It acquired saliency and urgency during the contentious process of defining responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. It shaped conversations about the possible determinants of the high levels of inflation that many countries experienced in 2022, and which led to much political finger-pointing and scapegoating. Evidence-based policymaking can be seen as a cure for misinformation and disinformation, and yet appears to be losing ground to them. What the development community can contribute to these broader debates is a long trajectory of reflection and self-criticism, and an open recognition of the political implications of using (and abusing) evidence to justify policy choices.

This paper analyses the politics of evidence-based policymaking, with a focus on bilateral development agencies, and is guided by two main questions: How and when does evidence shape decision-making? And whose evidence is most likely to matter? To answer these questions, the paper adopts a framework of epistemic and symbolic contestation: evidence use is shaped by the intersection of agendas, professions and organisations, and is driven by the purposive choices of “evidence entrepreneurs”. This leads to two general hypotheses: first, evidence is more likely to shape development policymaking when its use has been institutionalised (in terms of processes and linkages) within development organisations; second, the bodies of evidence that are more likely to shape development policymaking are those advanced by evidence entrepreneurs.

Empirically, the paper combines broad perspectives on the role of evidence in cooperation with concrete experiences of development agencies, research programmes, evaluation agencies, and think tanks in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK). The findings are based on a literature review of academic studies, evaluations and policy documents. They are also informed by the author’s own experience as an evidence practitioner in development cooperation, having worked as a researcher, learning adviser and knowledge lead in donor-funded programmes.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the positive and negative cases for using evidence in development cooperation, as well as some of the criticisms they face – it sets out the “optimist” and “pessimist” ideal types as a foil for the analysis that follows. Section 3 introduces the analytical framework: competing agendas influencing the policy process, professions shaping evidence agendas, and organisational management as a site of evidence contestation. Section 4 presents a review of general patterns of practice by development agencies, focusing on four challenges: the incentives around evidence (with a spotlight case from the UK), the institutionalisation of results-based approaches (with a spotlight case from Spain), the institutionalisation of organisational knowledge exchange (with a spotlight case from

Germany), and the role of evidence entrepreneurs. Lastly, Section 5 presents a summary of findings, concluding reflections, and implications for practitioners.

2 The case for evidence in development cooperation

The case for evidence-based policymaking in development cooperation is almost too commonsensical to merit interrogation. It is only logical, one would argue, that cooperation should be based on actual need. It is equally logical that, in a context of resource scarcity, cooperation should prioritise what works best over what is not yet proven to work. And yet, “what works” is a surprisingly thorny topic in international development.

This section provides an overview of some of the main debates on evidence in the field of cooperation: the rationale for providing more and/or better evidence, the discourses and practices that have put evidence at the centre of the development enterprise, and the nuances about what qualifies as evidence.

2.1 The call for evidence in aid debates

The challenge of demonstrating the impact of foreign aid was put under the spotlight of policy debates in the early 2000s through the work of economists such as Bill Easterly and Dambisa Moyo (e.g. Easterly, 2001; Moyo, 2008). Critics accused the development sector of being unwilling to question itself and entertain the possibility that aid did more harm than good. Nobel Prize economist Angus Deaton argued that, beyond specific health gains, foreign aid had not had much of an impact on real development problems (Deaton, 2015). The paucity of evidence of impact, despite hundreds of billions of dollars spent on cooperation, prompted the Center for Global Development think tank to establish an “Evaluation Gap Working Group” that produced the influential report *When will we ever learn?* (CGD [Center for Global Development], 2006).

Instead of evidence, until then the sector appeared to have operated on the basis of good intentions and hypotheses, not necessarily fact: disseminating ideal policy models, postulating implausible transformations, and neglecting the politics of change. The economic and social transformations sought by the aid communities of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were inspired by economic generalisations and no small amount of ideological preference, resulting in the well-known mistakes of structural adjustment and neo-liberal orthodoxy (Nelson, 1990; van de Walle, 2001). Alternative models for state-building and economic policy were acknowledged but summarily discarded by Western policymakers (Wade, 1996). Academic and intellectual kinship between ministers and foreign advisers could override evidence considerations even in such significant choices as whether to bail out a country’s faltering economy (Nelson, 2014).

By the 1990s a new “good governance agenda” emerged in response to the so-called “Washington consensus”, but it too was revealed to be primarily an aspirational programme not based on a solid understanding of the context of reform (Grindle, 2004). Later studies of institutional reform programmes found a penchant for replicating policy prescriptions without evidence of impact, driven by a mechanism of isomorphic mimicry – copying the form of “good” institutions without building the necessary foundations for them to work (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Andrews, 2013). Foreign aid was often part of the problem, distorting local accountability structures, “poaching” partner country human capital, and undermining institutional development (Bräutigam & Knack, 2004).

Overall, the negative case for evidence-based policymaking appeared to be loud and clear: without good evidence, development cooperation had floundered. At best, it was irrelevant; at worst, it was counterproductive and even destructive.

2.2 The case made by optimists

The need to root development cooperation in tangible evidence of what works is a pillar of the aid effectiveness and sustainable development agendas that have come to frame international development policy in the last two decades. Managing for results was one of the pillars of the Paris Agenda (2005), a core principle that was continuously refined and updated by an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-coordinated Results Community, and gradually evolved into a set of Guiding Principles on Managing for Sustainable Development Results (2019). The latter asks donors to, among other things, develop manageable and reliable results systems, maximise the use of results for decision-making, and cultivate a culture of results and learning.

In parallel with the rise of results-based management and related approaches, international development discourse and practice came to be dominated by indicators, metrics and targets that can provide evidence of progress towards desirable goals. The Millennium Development Goals served as an initial crystallisation of broader and vaguer development aspirations, establishing a set of measurable indicators which donors and recipients alike could use to identify relative need, track gains over time and foster mutual accountability. The Sustainable Development Goals broadened the discursive and statistical reach of indicators beyond aid and poverty, asking governments around the world to demonstrate how their actions would contribute to sustainable development. At the national level, various countries have adopted similar indicator frameworks to anchor the aspirations of their development cooperation programmes.

Beyond statistical work, academic research on development has also stimulated conversations about evidence. In a direct sense, there has been a rise of evidence-centred research programmes and institutions that seek to apply experimental techniques to our understanding of basic development problems and their solutions. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), founded by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, is the exemplar of this agenda, using randomised impact evaluations to generate evidence on what works for the poor (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012). Their efforts earned them the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019.

Evidence-based policymaking is intrinsic to the “effective altruism” movement and similar principled approaches that have gained traction among philanthropists (Vollmer, Pulver, & Zimmer, 2018). With roots in both moral philosophy and cost-effectiveness analysis, effective altruism defines itself as “using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible, and taking action on that basis” (Centre for Effective Altruism, n.d.). Spearheaded by tech entrepreneurs and hedge-fund philanthropists who found themselves with too much money but too few causes, this small but vocal, and increasingly influential, movement gradually moved from short-term, evidence-based interventions (primarily focused on health outcomes in poor countries) to a longer-term perspective on the survival of the human species (Matthews, 2022). In a sense, effective altruism is the supersized version of the kind of approach pursued by philanthropic organisations like the Gates Foundation, with an engineering-like emphasis on problem-solving via science.

Indeed, there is a positive case for evidence-based development cooperation, though circumscribed to a few policy domains, primarily health and social policy. Evidence of the impact of bed nets on malaria prevention has bolstered global efforts against the deadly diseases. It is the kind of evidence-based intervention that can match the contribution of vaccines in tackling preventable diseases. Impact evaluation has also been used in social protection programmes around the world, documenting the gains that are derived from cash transfers (Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010).

2.3 The counterargument made by pessimists

With the question of whether evidence should be used apparently settled, debates have shifted to how evidence is used. But this discursive salience has not resulted from a unified effort, let alone a shared understanding of what constitutes evidence (Marschall, 2018). Politics and power relations still shape the prospects for evidence-based policymaking, and critics have often invoked them to contextualise the evidence discourse, and even question its basic premises.

The first and most obvious point of criticism is that evidence is only one among multiple factors that can influence cooperation choices. Researchers have documented the causal weight of diplomatic, ideological and instrumental considerations in motivating donor decisions (e.g. Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Even the policy domain most renowned for its use of evidence – health policy – exhibits a pattern of allocation decisions that can only partially be explained by patterns of diseases and therefore “objective need” (Esser & Keating Bench, 2011).

The second point of criticism is that development organisations are not built to respond to evidence. A longstanding critique of aid agencies is the depoliticisation of real-world change in programme design, implementation and evaluation, with a bureaucratic logic that not only obscures the reality of power but may in fact contribute to further disenfranchisement (Ferguson 1994). The stifling nature of development bureaucracies has been further documented at the micro-level of practitioners’ everyday experiences, with results-based approaches translating into “coercive” tools and systems that suppress choice (Eyben, 2013). Evidence-centric policies also tend to have a bias towards what is measurable, not what is transformational (Natsios, 2010).

A third – and related – point of criticism is that evidence-based approaches tend to smuggle into the conversation implicit or explicit hierarchies of evidence, with systematic reviews and meta-studies at the top, experimental methods somewhere in the middle, and case studies and expert views near the bottom.¹ The very concepts and categories used in systematic evidence reviews automatically filter what is considered as “evidence”, neglecting Southern evidence practitioners who may not have access to Northern research indexing and publications, as well as the experiences and wisdom of beneficiaries themselves (Cornish, 2015). As a group of UK-based policy researchers put it: “One might ask, whose evidence is seen to count?” (Leach, Sumner, & Walman, 2008).

In combination, these three criticisms call into question the feasibility and desirability of evidence-based policymaking, and undermine the assumption that development agencies can rely on some sort of objective truth when making their choices. Instead, they are more likely to choose forms of evidence that fit and perpetuate existing power relations, thereby delegitimising the entire cooperation enterprise.

1 See, for example, a guide on evidence-based practice in health produced by University of Canberra Library (2022); also the How to Note on assessing the strength of evidence published by DFID (2014).

3 Analytical framework: Agendas, professions, and organisations

There is a clear disconnect between evidence “optimists” and “pessimists”: the former aiming to ensure the closest possible link between evidence and policy, and the latter warning against the use of evidence to control or displace alternative voices. While these two stylised arguments are helpful catalysts for debate and growth in the development cooperation field, they fail to capture the variation and nuance that exists across and even within organisations. Instead of focusing on the ideal types of evidence as intrinsically “good” or instrumentally “bad”, we can instead ask questions about what the spectrum in between may look like, and why. For the purposes of this paper, two questions are particularly relevant:

- How and when does evidence shape decision-making?
- Whose evidence is most likely to matter?

In order to address these questions, an analytical framework is presented here that centres on evidence agendas, development professions, and organisational incentives.

3.1 The role of agendas in the policy process

In the cooperation context, the “optimist” model of evidence-based policymaking would consider the best available research, existing reports on past results and related analysis, and impact evaluations, before making a decision that aims to move the needle on the relevant outcome indicator one seeks to impact. At its core, this ideal rests on an antiquated and naïve understanding of public policy, harking back to theories of policymaking as a rational process moving from information to decision to implementation (Jenkins, 1978). The so-called “stages” model was an understandable heuristic in the context of public administration theory and teaching, but it is an ideal type that fails to account for non-linearity, uncertainty, and complexity in policymaking – it is, at its core, apolitical (Turner, Hulme, & McCourt, 2015, pp. 100–101). Therefore, the model is not a good fit for politics of foreign aid, which are often contentious, very frequently incoherent, and ultimately shaped by administrative dynamics, policy agendas and political incentives (Yanguas, 2018).

In contrast to the ideal type of the stages heuristic, which begins with problems and then searches for solutions, many policy processes begin with ready-made solutions eagerly searching for a problem they can latch on to. This is due to the limits inherent to organisational decision-making. The “garbage can model” of organisational choice posits that, at any given time, many different problems and solutions are “dumped” into a “messy, chaotic mix”; it considers problems, solutions and decision-makers as relatively independent “streams” that only intersect at key decision-making junctures (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). Consider structural adjustment and economic liberalisation in the 1980s, rooted in a particular set of policy preferences dominant in Western donor countries and only loosely coupled with the severe institutional challenges facing many African countries at the time. Or the successive sets of panaceas – good governance, effective altruism, or even blockchain – that have taken hold of a global development community faced with a relatively constant set of problems.

The problem and policy streams are populated by experts, researchers, planners, lobbyists – all of them contributing to a kind of “policy primeval soup” where competing ideas await their window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1995). It is up to policy entrepreneurs to seize such windows – whether due to a political opening or a salient policy problem – to advance their preferred solution. Evidence plays a role in this process, of course. But it is more likely to feature as a supporting factor rather than as the main driver for decision-making. This kind of policymaking is more accurately described as evidence-supported, not evidence-based (Marschall, 2018,

p. 44). And it places the definition, selection and promotion of evidence at the mercy of power and politics: advocacy coalitions, institutional norms and even timing (Jones, Jones, Shaxson, & Walker, 2013; van Gestel, Denis, Ferlie, & McDermott, 2018). This is consistent with analyses of institutional change that see critical junctures as moment of ideational contestation (e.g. Blyth, 2002).

The multiple-streams heuristic sets the stage for a more complex understanding of the role of evidence in development policymaking, with a particular emphasis on evidence entrepreneurship. But entrepreneurs are not neutral brokers of knowledge. Instead, they are often members of particular professions who advance competing understandings of what counts as evidence.

3.2 How professions shape evidence agendas

The field of development cooperation comprises many different types of actors: bilateral donor agencies, recipient agencies, multilateral organisations, INGOs, local NGOs, implementing firms, think tanks and more. But across all these different organisations, certain professional profiles tend to recur – researcher, evaluator, issue expert, manager, and so on. Individual development professionals operate in unique contexts that are not always comparable – even within the same category of actors, such as bilateral agencies, there are wildly different sets of laws, regulations and practices. The day-to-day experience of being an expert for a small Southern NGO cannot compare with that of an expert for the World Bank. And yet, their participation in cross-national professional networks and communities of practice endows them with a shared language and set of practices and aspirations relating to evidence.

Professions matter in development cooperation. They socialise practitioners, legitimise their contributions and validate their expertise; the curriculum vitae of a researcher will not look the same as that of an evaluation specialist, even if both have spent decades working on the same policy problems. Professions also enable staff mobility across organisations and establish clear paths for career advancement; a competent manager in a donor agency can easily transition to managing an NGO or an individual development programme. Professions make communication possible between funders, grantees, contractors and advisers. In sum, if the various types of organisations provide the infrastructure of development cooperation, the professions generate the epistemic bonds that make the field comprehensible.

Professions are not mere descriptive categories. Durkheim described them as moral communities, a source of collective ethics beyond traditional regulatory structures. Parsons saw in them a model of technical competence, rooted in science and rationality. Weber highlighted the closed nature of professions as social groups, defined by the marriage of knowledge and authority. And Bourdieu sought to expose them as fields of power, with the very idea of “professionalism” subject to constant struggle and renegotiation. From this standpoint, professions are structures for control – over how members behave, and how much their practices may be shaped by external influences. Their main currency is not knowledge or technical competence, but symbolic capital (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011).

Symbolic capital is by no means the only significant currency of development professions – knowledge and technical competence still matter. But symbolic capital can easily shape the kinds of evidence and evidence tools that different professions find acceptable and advocate: their evidence agendas. These agendas are akin to what Lakatos termed “research programmes”: collections of theories surrounding an unfalsifiable “hard core” of central theses which proponents are loathe to give up (Lakatos, 1978). Thus, in a stylised fashion, the ideal-type manager values predictability, the evaluator needs good-quality data, the researcher prioritises analytical rigour, and the expert defaults to generalisable models. They may all be working on the same “problem”, but their professional norms, rules and tools force them to

gravitate towards different evidence agendas, shaped by such tools as the business case, best-practice toolkit, evaluation framework and research design.

Different evidence agendas can intersect, and they often do, but intersection cannot be assumed to happen automatically and seamlessly – instead, it is often a deliberate effort that forces different evidence streams together in support of a particular goal.

3.3 Evidence incentives in development organisations

Development agencies often operate primarily as managers of a cooperation budget that is ultimately spent by grantees or implementing contractors, whether at the organisation’s HQ or in partner countries. A donor country’s aid ecosystem comprises national and subnational agencies, NGOs, private firms, universities and advocacy movements – all of them dependent to some extent on the national budget, and subject to the scrutiny of parliament, watchdogs, and sometimes even a hostile media. Agencies are thus inevitably embedded in domestic political systems and debates, and are often used as proxies for partisan struggles that may have little to do with actual development goals (Yanguas, 2018). The need to be accountable to the aid “counter-bureaucracy” has forced agencies in countries like the United States to focus on results that can be easily evidenced (Natsios, 2010).

Beyond the donor’s own national context, agencies also belong to a broader field of international organisations and transnational communities that set standards for aid effectiveness and results-based management, such as the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee. Their professionals participate in communities of practice that foster cross-organisational learning and advance new agendas and practices (Yanguas, 2021). And, finally, donors’ operations in partner countries both require in-depth contextual understanding as well as a diplomatic sensitivity towards the potential (mis)use of evidence for political purposes (Yanguas, 2018).

In sum, development organisations face pressures to protect budgets, be transparent, demonstrate impact at all costs, adhere to evidence-based principles, be sensitive to context and retain a diplomatic outlook towards difficult truths.

This complicated web of organisational incentives may actually run counter to evidence-based policymaking, at least in the “optimist” sense, as the most efficient and effective use of evidence may be the one that helps to dispel or mitigate challenges to the organisation from outside hostility (whether actual or perceived). For example, evidence that confirms political preferences may be more “relevant” than evidence that supports contrasting views. Evidence that establishes success may be more “compelling” than evidence that documents failure. And evidence that feeds into indicators may be more “useful” than evidence that exists on its own.

At the centre of these countervailing incentives sit development planners and managers who must make and justify strategic and operational choices. We could imagine them as occupying the narrow neck of an hourglass with ever-growing bulbs of evidence above and below: a macro level of evidence encompassing what works in general terms, and a micro level encompassing what has worked in specific programmes. However, their ability to process this evidence is constrained by administrative barriers that sequester knowledge within well-defined organisational units (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015), as well as by a limited cognitive budget, overloaded as they are with protocol, procedure and compliance requirements. This makes them more likely to rely on associational thinking than careful deliberation, responding to difficult questions by using heuristics – what they have heard, whom they trust, what feels right (Kahneman, 2011). Planners and managers are prone to bias in determining which evidence is worth using, based on their academic training, career background and personal networks (Yanguas, 2021).

Whether the political-economy, organisational and cognitive constraints can be mitigated or overcome will depend on the specific ways in which development agencies institutionalise evidence-based policymaking, as well as the role of evidence entrepreneurs in advancing evidence agendas during critical junctures.

3.4 Hypotheses: Institutionalisation and entrepreneurship

Based on the concepts introduced above, we can posit two broad hypotheses.

First, evidence is more likely to shape development policymaking when its use has been institutionalised within development organisations. Institutionalisation can manifest through processes for incorporating evidence into decision-making, such as programme design requirements, review panels, or consultation mechanisms. These mechanisms create routine behaviours that stimulate associational thinking, incorporating some form of evidence consideration into organisational policymaking. In addition, institutionalisation can happen through mechanisms that link evidence producers (e.g. researchers, evaluators, experts) with evidence users (e.g. planners and managers), with an emphasis on lowering the symbolic barriers between professions for the sake of translation. Conferences, policy workshops, “brown bag” seminars and other types of forums bringing together producers and users of evidence further strengthen associational thinking, making key problem formulations and policy ideas available for practitioners to retrieve when they are planning or designing programmes and projects.

The institutionalisation hypothesis is a response to the first research question introduced in this paper: How and when does evidence shape decision-making? *Evidence-based development policy will be shaped primarily by the processes and professional linkages that are deliberately built into cooperation agencies.*

The second hypothesis is as follows: *The bodies of evidence that are more likely to shape development policymaking are those advanced by evidence entrepreneurs.* Without some form of entrepreneurship, organisational and cognitive constraints will lead planners and managers to default to some form of evidence heuristic, such as “what has supposedly worked before” or “what will make my life easier”. This will be to some extent based on the existing institutionalisation practices, as outlined in the first hypothesis. In the absence of translation and advocacy, however, evidence is likely to remain a “policy primeval soup” whose success will depend primarily on personal inclination and professional background. Entrepreneurs help managers make sense of this “primeval soup”, prioritising agendas and translating them into practical implications. They can operate at the strategic or operational level and engage with one or more of the professions that cut across development agencies. But it is their dedicated advocacy effort that is most likely to ensure the transfer of ideas through whatever institutionalisation mechanisms exist.

The entrepreneurship hypothesis is a response to this paper’s second research question: Whose evidence is most likely to matter? It provides an explanation for the rise and fall of theories and concepts in development agencies, which does not necessarily follow from systematic reflection or mere knowledge accumulation over time.

Taken together, these two hypotheses predict a world of epistemic contestation in which the “winners” get to determine the way out of policy uncertainty. However, it is important to acknowledge that evidence-based policymaking still happens under this framework. In the absence of institutionalisation and entrepreneurship, by contrast, policymaking is more likely to be shaped by considerations not necessarily founded on evidence, such as diplomatic imperatives, ideological preference and isomorphic mimicry.

4 General patterns of evidence use by development agencies

This section presents a structured review of documented practices of evidence use, following the analytical framework introduced above. Four patterns are highlighted: the barriers between evidence professions and development organisations, including the incentives for producing evidence; challenges to the institutionalisation of processes; challenges to building linkages; and the role of entrepreneurs. Summaries of comparative evidence are supplemented with spotlight cases from the UK, Spain and Germany.

4.1 The incentives surrounding evidence

Perhaps one of the most frequent observations about the challenge of research impact on development policy is the perceived disconnect between researchers and practitioners. There is, of course, variation across donors, with more potential for cross-pollination between the professions in countries where there has been substantial and continued investment in development research, such as in the UK. But the fact remains that, as the Danish Commission on Development-Related Research put it: “one group feels nobody listens, the other feels their opposite numbers have little to say” (Sørbø & Helland, 2001, p. 9, cited in Stone, 2009).

The misalignment of professional norms and incentives is partly to blame: the most rigorous research is often the most inaccessible for outsiders, and the standards of scientific publications don't necessarily emphasise brief and targeted practical implications. Conversely, managers at development organisations often draft terms of reference that demand answers to too many questions in too little time (Forss & Bandstein, 2008). In theory, evaluations can provide a bridging function between researchers and planners; however, they often fail to meet the criteria of either side of the divide. The *When will we ever learn?* report bemoaned the “evaluation gap” that had emerged due to the lack of prioritisation by political leaders and donor organisations; even when impact evaluations were commissioned, they were often found to be lacking in rigour and useful implications. The gap was attributed to technical, bureaucratic and political challenges – above all, there were few incentives to conduct rigorous evaluations (CGD, 2006).

Inadequate knowledge transfer and persistent understanding gaps are also invoked as barriers to the use of evidence (Greenhalgh & Montgomery, 2020). A 2006 evaluation of World Bank research identified challenges that have since been echoed in the community: lack of involvement by researchers in programme planning and design, weak execution of knowledge products, and unfettered proliferation of reports, which limit usability and divide attention (Banerjee, Deaton, Lustig, Rogoff & Hsu, 2006). There are entire subfields of academic development studies grappling with the lack of evidence of impact (Harris, 2015). For some in academia, this may not even be a bad thing: on the one hand, some academics dread the “projectisation” of research, which would steer it away from a pure intellectual pursuit; on the other hand, there is also a tendency in many academic programmes to view the production of research, regardless of uptake, as a form of impact (Baú, Burnside, Cook, Bartlett, & Ridley, 2020).

There is some evidence that research can have an impact on policymakers, by shaping their understanding of context or by backing up pre-existing ideas, but it is often difficult to prove impact on actual decisions, and studies that make such claims are prone to selection bias (Newman, 2014). A study seeking to determine the influence of the Australian Development Awards Research Scheme, running from 2007 to 2016 and totalling AUD 58 million in aid money, found that only 40% of projects had a verifiable and direct claim of impact (RDI [Research for Development Impact] Network, 2017).

The disconnect between development researchers and cooperation practitioners points to the persisting influence of professional norms and standards as a potential obstacle to evidence dissemination and use in development agencies. Organisational incentives may also play a role, making the production of evidence serve ends unrelated to policy impact, as illustrated by the UK's recent experience with large-scale funding of development research.

Spotlight case: The UK

The UK has invested significant resources over the years in research aimed at shaping development policy. One of the largest efforts was the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), launched by the UK government in 2015 to “harness the expertise of the UK's world-leading research base to strengthen resilience and response to crisis” in partner countries. It benefited from a total budget of £1.5 billion between 2015 and 2021, and it was supervised by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), which largely delegated the task of defining and measuring research impact to delivery partners.

A rapid review conducted by the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) in 2017 found that the participating academic institutions had little knowledge of the policy audiences they could influence with their evidence and were not provided with any significant strategic guidance on such topics as the aims of UK official development assistance (ODA) or the needs of developing country partners. GCRF did not have a governance structure that contributed to a strategically managed portfolio aimed at policy impact. Moreover, fifteen months into its implementation, it did not have tools to measure its results and value for money (ICAI [Independent Commission on Aid Impact], 2017). A follow-up review conducted two years later found stronger analytical capacity and oversight by BEIS of the GCRF portfolio, albeit this was mostly through an independent contractor to whom BEIS had delegated the development of a theory of change and monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. ICAI welcomed this positive development but warned that its usefulness would be limited given that the GCRF was already halfway through its period of execution and therefore it would be too late for a new impact model to shape research (ICAI, 2019).

Arguably, the GCRF was never really meant to bring evidence to development policymaking in the UK. Instead, it was a means for an aid-sceptic government to seize part of the ring-fenced ODA budget and redistribute it to national actors. The GCRF begins to make more sense when placed in the context of the UK's domestic political economy of aid, and particularly the long-held desire by government ministries to wrest the sizable aid budget out of the control of a second-tier department – the Department for International Development (DFID) – later absorbed into the Foreign Office (Yanguas, 2018). Organisational politics and incentives focused on the performative production of evidence may have overridden considerations of evidence-based policymaking.

4.2 Challenges institutionalising processes

The institutionalisation of new processes of evidence-based policymaking has advanced primarily via the diffusion of results-based management (RBM) approaches among donors, as advocated by actors such as the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), as well as context-sensitive and adaptive management approaches, as advocated by various communities of practice (Yanguas, 2018, ch. 6). This diffusion has not been without challenges.

Implementation of RBM approaches often suffers from insufficient guidance, structural obstacles to the results chain, capacity constraints, methodological challenges and limited integration with partner country data and systems (Vähämäki & Verger, 2019). As highlighted earlier, RBM may even lead to unintended consequences such as a fixation with measurability, bureaucratic rigidity and a prioritisation of accountability over learning (Natsios, 2010; Yanguas, 2018, ch. 2).

This has resulted in a “dual track system” which splits corporate reporting for accountability from project- and programme-level learning for adaptive management (Zwart, 2017). In other words, evidence is primarily deployed to justify rather than inform policy choices.

A recent survey of aid agencies committed to managing for sustainable results paints a picture of contradictions, with most OECD donors expressing satisfaction with their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, and yet continuing to report challenges in using results for learning and decision-making and creating an overall culture of results (Guerrero, Schnatz, & Verger, 2021). A previous study documented an increase over time in the execution of project/activity evaluations, but also a decrease in the use of policy/strategy evaluations (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2016), pointing to a growing disconnect between strategic and operational learning (Yanguas, 2021).

In a way, the challenges surrounding RBM practice alert us to the analytical distinction between the two hypotheses presented above. Arguably, the increase in prominence of the results agenda in the OECD-centric donor community is a testament to the dedicated efforts of results experts, and targeted advocacy by individual advocates, think tanks, consulting firms and multilateral policy units – entrepreneurship has been nothing if not persistent, tapping into widespread concerns about impact and accountability. However, results professionals within each agency are more likely to be connected to each other than to the broader organisations they inhabit. The growth and consolidation of the results profession has not been met by a similar process of institutionalisation. The outcome has been a sort of performative commitment to results, as illustrated by the experiences of a donor like Spain.

Spotlight case: Spain

Spanish development cooperation has repeatedly and openly committed to results-based management, as per OECD-DAC recommendations. However, the country’s main development agency has thus far failed to demonstrate how this commitment has been institutionalised in practice, and the most recent DAC peer review (OECD, 2022) of Spanish cooperation captures a slow pace of reform.

There have been efforts to adopt RBM functions, such as the establishment of a Programme for Transparency, Communication & Knowledge Management that seeks to coordinate monitoring and learning efforts across the main development cooperation organisations – primarily the cooperation agency Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID) (a subsidiary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Co-Operation), and implementers FIIAPP (Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas) and Fundación Carolina. Monitoring is stronger when conducted within established systems and requirements from partners, as with FIIAPP’s implementation of EU-funded projects. And the country partnership frameworks framing relationships between Spain and its development partners have results frameworks of their own.

However, the DAC review is explicit on some of the long-standing structural impediments to evidence-based cooperation. At the intersection of organisational and professional factors, the Spanish system distinguishes between generalist civil servants working for the national administration, career diplomats who work on setting policy and running missions, and development experts engaged abroad. While it is possible to find development experts who have been working in cooperation for decades, the system is not designed to produce them, let alone give them policymaking authority. This has led to the recurrent practice of development experts advocating results-based aspirations that cannot be implemented in practice by political appointees and generalist managers. There is no shared strategic vision for the systematic use

of evidence in learning and decision-making, nor an information system for capturing and disseminating results.²

There have been repeated yet isolated efforts to develop guidelines and recommendations on results-based management for the sector, as well as recurrent workshops and capacity-building opportunities for results-based management organised by the Coordinator of Development NGOs, the leading sectoral body, but they have not translated into institutionalisation (e.g. Gudiño, 2007; Cámara López & Cañadas, 2011). Networks with academic experts and think tanks remain largely ad hoc and personality based, and are immature when compared to similar efforts in countries such as the UK and Germany. This is partly due to the lack of a strong “demand” function – most public servants and diplomats are not connected to academic development experts, and so it may not even occur to them to build linkages, let alone cultivate academic and policy research. But it is also partly due to the lack of a “supply” function: the evidence professions are generally weak in Spanish cooperation (as they are in the broader public sector), and they don’t have the entrepreneurs to push for greater institutionalisation of evidence-based decision-making. It is perhaps indicative that the flagship independent report on Spanish cooperation, Oxfam Intermón’s *The reality of aid*, fails to include management for results and evidence-based policymaking in its otherwise comprehensive list of proposed reforms for the foreign aid system (Atienza & Macias, 2020).

4.3 Challenges institutionalising linkages

Evidence brokerage roles and functions have proliferated among development agencies in recent years. Explicit linkages have been established with research communities, with some development agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), appointing chief scientists who are meant to serve as mediators and enablers of evidence-based policymaking³; other countries have instituted advisory bodies staffed by leading researchers and university professors.⁴ These are meant to ensure a more steady exchange of knowledge between researchers and experts, on the one hand, and planners and managers, on the other. However, it is important to note that the selection of academic disciplines and background can bias the brokerage function. At the time of writing, the US and UK chief scientific advisors for aid are an epidemiologist and an engineer respectively – backgrounds that correlate with the “optimist” vision of evidence-based policymaking or at the very least the more technical approaches to defining and addressing development problems.

On the evaluation side, internal M&E functions have generally been strengthened, as documented in successive rounds of DAC peer reviews. In addition, independent evaluation agencies have been created to provide an objective impact assessment function – organisations such as ICAI in the UK, the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), and the Expert Group for Aid Studies in Sweden. These bodies have generated a new form of meta-evidence and they can be instrumental in deepening our understanding of the challenges of institutionalisation (for the case of ICAI, see Yanguas, 2021, p. 10). However, in some cases –

2 See also Novales and López Doriga (2015) for an insider’s perspective of the AECID’s transformation challenges.

3 For example, USAID’s new chief scientist (<https://medium.com/usaaid-2030/leader-in-science-64b11e6114aa>), and the FCDO’s Chief Scientific Adviser and Director of Research and Evidence (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/charlotte-watts>).

4 For example, the Development Cooperation Committee of the Advisory Council of International Affairs in the Netherlands (<https://www.advisorycouncilinternationalaffairs.nl/about-aiv/development-cooperation-committee>).

as in the origins of ICAI – their creation responded to upward accountability and counter-bureaucratic pressures and not necessarily to a desire to strengthen the evidence base for development choices. Their autonomy is also a double-edged weapon, insulating them from the bias that one may expect from practitioners themselves, but also further removing them from the day-to-day decision-making by planners and managers.

The limited policy impact of otherwise strong, independent evaluators alerts us to the need to invest in inter-organisational and inter-professional linkages, as indicated in the second mechanism of the institutionalisation hypothesis. In the absence of such linkages, whatever evidence is generated by independent watchdogs, institutes and expert groups will only contribute to the size of the “policy primeval soup”, without necessarily making it easier for policymakers to retrieve and deploy evidence. In the end, knowledge institutionalisation has two, mutually-reinforcing, mechanisms – process institutionalisation and linkage institutionalisation – which can unfold in parallel and without necessarily building upon one another. Recent experiences within German cooperation serve to illustrate the ways in which organisational pathologies can constrain the potential for evidence-based policymaking.

Spotlight case: Germany

The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) was established in 2012 by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) as an independent evaluator of the work of German development cooperation organisations. In many ways, DEval is a testament to the commitment by German cooperation to institutionalise the use of evidence, and to play a more prominent role in existing transnational knowledge networks. Indeed, the OECD-DAC’s 2021 peer review of Germany celebrates the continued organisational strengthening of DEval in the ensuing decade, and its proactive role in the DAC Network of Development Evaluation as well as European and international research and evaluation networks (OECD, 2021). This independent evaluation commitment is supplemented by significant internal capabilities within implementing agencies German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and KfW Development Bank, which carry out evaluations of projects, cross-section evaluations and corporate strategic evaluations. In addition, there have been efforts to develop sector-wide systems for setting and tracking priorities, such as the BMZ paper *Development policy 2030: New challenges, new solutions*, and the introduction of a new results approach with targets on three levels – country strategies, programmes and projects.

Significant gains in process institutionalisation, however, have not necessarily overcome persisting organisational obstacles to linkage institutionalisation. The same DAC peer review that recognises gains throughout the sector points to a clear institutional gap between evaluation functions and programming departments, both within GIZ and KfW, and between DEval and system-wide policymaking. There remain weaknesses in knowledge management that hinder the dissemination of results, evaluation findings and lessons learned beyond individual organisations. The introduction of overarching frameworks has thus far not led to a change of paradigm: the BMZ paper *Development policy 2030* has provided only tentative guidance on how priorities will be tracked, its impact yet to be systematically evaluated (BMZ [Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung], 2018); and the new multi-level results approach suffers from underspecified targets, incomplete assumptions and insufficient monitoring systems (DEval [German Institute for Development Evaluation], 2022).

The German experience showcases the difficulties of fully institutionalising evidence-based policymaking in a complex, multi-organisation, multi-profession aid ecosystem. It demonstrates that the use of evidence is not a simple on/off switch that can be toggled, but a multi-layered process of institutional evolution with parallel tracks and non-linear trajectories. The obstacles encountered by DEval are not unlike those faced by ICAI in the UK, or by the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group – external evaluators are always likely to be seen as outsiders, or even as a threat to organisational survival, airing an agency’s “dirty laundry” for all to see. It

is indisputable that Germany has managed to make significant advances in institutionalising evidence processes (especially compared to a case like Spain), but remaining challenges tentatively confirm the hypothesis that clear linkages are required for evidence to shape policymaking.

4.4 The role of entrepreneurs

Over the years, dedicated networks of impact-minded researchers have sought to bridge the divide between researchers and practitioners, coming up with practical recommendations on how to enhance the use of research findings in evidence-based policymaking (e.g. Jones et al., 2013; Georgeu & Hawksley, 2020).

An independent evaluation of a major UK research for impact programme, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)–DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, highlighted the critical role of “intermediaries” who could carry out ongoing engagement with policy stakeholders, understand and manage the timeliness and topicality of findings, and tailor outputs to different audiences (France et al., 2016). This enabled what the evaluation called “conceptual impacts” – increased policy understanding and a reframing of debates for policymakers who were otherwise subject to significant external influences. A study from the Australian RDI Network similarly highlighted five “facilitators” of research impact: familiarity and prior engagement with research contexts and users; a focus on impact; proactive engagement and co-production; tailored design of research products; and ongoing engagement and continuity of relationships (RDI Network, 2017).

In some countries, think tanks and other advisory organisations have emerged as evidence entrepreneurs able to mediate between more academic forms of research and the practical needs of programme design and implementation, with varying degrees of political influence and policy success. The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS, formerly German Development Institute) is explicitly committed to providing an “interface between theory and practice”,⁵ and regularly works to bring together researchers and practitioners to strengthen the use of evidence in German cooperation. In contrast, Spain’s think tanks (such as the Real Instituto Elcano, ISGlobal and Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) are smaller and less well connected to policymakers, though still plugged into transnational evidence professions (Orrico, Correa, LaFrance, & Sutton, 2022).

In the United States, the Center for Global Development (CGD) is the strongest evidence entrepreneur for Washington-based agencies, including USAID, but also for other national donors (it has an office in London), philanthropies and international organisations. Created as a “think and do tank”, CGD deploys a mixed approach of “analytical work, convenings, targeted outreach, and partnerships with like-minded and complementary organizations” (Soskis, 2022, p. 9). In the years since its founding, the think tank has leveraged the academic bona fides of its economists to pitch and promote policy proposals such as cash-on-delivery and clean-tech finance. It is a premier example of what a dedicated evidence entrepreneur can do to advance agendas in the development field.

The UK is perhaps the exemplar case of evidence entrepreneurship in development cooperation, with multiple think tanks, NGOs, academic departments and donor-funded research programme consortia aimed at providing better evidence for policymaking. Two of the better-known organisations are the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), affiliated with the University of Sussex, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London. IDS and ODI differ from CGD in that they not only seek to reconcile academic rigour and policy influencing,

5 See IDOS mission statement (IDOS, n.d.).

but they also work as implementing partners for programmes funded by the UK and other like-minded donors.

The close working relationship with the donor is key here. IDS, for example, has a dedicated Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development programme serving FCDO, which includes a rapid-response research helpdesk (IDS, n.d.). The case of ODI is particularly informative, as over the years it has focused explicitly on a diverse array of policy entrepreneurship styles, comprising “story-tellers”, “networkers”, “engineers” and even “political fixers” who recurrently work with donors (and particularly DFID/FCDO) whenever a new problem arises, or a preferred solution requires the trappings of rigorous research (Stone, 2009). In a sense, ODI does not just supply evidence (although it does, with more or less rigour), but networks of evidence entrepreneurs that donor agencies can tap into in order to strengthen the evidence base of their choices.

The fact that evidence tends to be taken most seriously in those cooperation ecosystems rich in think tanks and other policy advocates confirms the hypothesis on entrepreneurship and provides a partial answer to the question of whose evidence matters most. In a complex policy environment defined by ongoing contestation between professions and organisations, the agendas more likely to triumph are those advanced by dedicated advocacy by entrepreneurs and networks. It is unsurprising, in this context, that the evidence arising from beneficiary experiences or isolated critics consistently fails to shape policymaking, as they often lack champions who can lift their ideas above the noise and chaos of policy contestation. This does not legitimise the exclusion of marginalised voices – but it does help us explain it, to some extent.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Neither the “optimists” nor the “pessimists” of evidence in development policymaking can account for the variation that can be observed across and often within development agencies. The same concepts and proposals may take root in one organisation, only to fail in a different one. This variation can only really be explained by delving into the politics of “what works”: the contested nature of policymaking, the difficult relationships between professions and evidence agendas, the complex incentives facing donor organisations and the entrepreneurs that tie all the different policy streams together.

How and when does evidence shape development policymaking? When processes and linkages for doing so are institutionalised, overcoming organisational and professional barriers all too common in the sector.

Whose evidence is most likely to matter? Evidence that is deliberately advocated and translated for policy actors by evidence entrepreneurs who combine a reassuring academic respectability with the persuasive enthusiasm of a lobbying interest group.

5.1 Complex policies, contested evidence

This paper has focused on the politics of development cooperation agencies in OECD countries and highlighted how evidence discourses and agendas often operate in isolation from – even in competition with – one another, their eventual impact mediated by aid administrators subject to often oppressive incentives to spend and legitimise their budgets. National cooperation systems may not be compatible with evidence-based policymaking, at least not in a holistic sense – pockets of evidence will always prosper in academia, independent evaluators and within specific programme teams, but these have so far failed to aggregate, even in those country contexts where evidence generation is best resourced.

There is another possible constraint for evidence-based approaches: the fact that many development problems are complex and uncertain. Evidence-based policymaking is possible, under the right circumstances. The oft-referenced case of anti-malarial bed nets provides the best-case scenario: an agreed-upon problem, amenable to large-scale experimental investigation, rooted in widely shared professional norms of clinical research, and conducive to relatively straightforward technical fixes. Take any one of those preconditions away, however, and the politics of agendas, professions and organisations starts to overwhelm the policy process – confounding problem definitions, opening the door to peddlers of solutions and templates, and minimising the chances that credible evidence will be delivered in a timely manner to the right decision-makers.

There are positive cases of evidence influencing development policy and programmes, but they remind us of the centrality of evidence entrepreneurship, and not evidence production. In conditions of uncertainty, the mess of policy problems and proposals can be almost impossible for policymakers to disentangle. Under such circumstances, the solution most likely to prevail is not necessarily the most rigorous one, but the one with the most persuasive case.

5.2 Implications for development agencies

The review of general patterns and specific donor experiences in this paper should alert us to a number of practical implications for those seeking to advance evidence-based policymaking, some of which are negative, and others positive.

- **Policy-relevant research is an exercise in trade-offs.** While it is the natural inclination of academics and researchers to adhere to the standards of theoretical and methodological rigour expected by their peers, rigour does not entail policy relevance. When funding development research, additional resources and planning should be devoted to considering when and how to carry out uptake activities with target policy audiences, as well as to designing and disseminating knowledge products that suit different potential types of users. Attention must also be paid to including Southern researchers and institutions in partner countries to ensure context-sensitivity, even when they may not have the resources to achieve the same level of ostensible rigour as their Northern counterparts.
- **Evaluation must be reconciled with programming tasks and cycles.** It is common practice for evaluations to be commissioned at the end of a development programme, once medium- and long-term impacts can begin to be ascertained. What this may mean, however, is that by the time an evaluation is released the policy window for impact has already closed, and the donor may have moved on to a different set of issues altogether. This can be partly remedied by involving evaluators in the planning and design stages and deploying them to carry out smaller-scale implementation evaluations that stand a chance of informing policy choices.
- **Invest in evidence networks, not just evidence capacity.** While the creation of science officers, advisory bodies and policy units is a welcome stimulus to evidence-based policymaking, experience shows that networks can be even more powerful channels of knowledge exchange, particularly those that continuously engage both policymakers and evidence professionals. Development agencies should seek out available networks and develop processes that enable staff to participate in them. This will ensure a strengthening of evidence-use capabilities and, to some extent, overcome the risk of organisational silos.
- **Minimise performative reporting.** Not every development agency faces a threat of budget cuts or political de-legitimation, and yet, through a perverse form of isomorphic mimicry, many of them spend considerable staff time and attention on producing accountability-focused reporting that does not feed back into decision-making. It is an understandable

pathology, but a pathology nonetheless, and one that distracts professionals from actual evidence-based policymaking. This kind of reporting is not evidence, but performance.

- **Mitigate the risk of evidence silos.** All too often, development evaluators and researchers attend different meetings and belong to different networks. Even within the same organisations, there remain bureaucratic and cognitive barriers between economists and social development specialists. Donor agencies should adopt a more eclectic approach to evidence that reconciles the perceived hierarchy of knowledge or academic professions with the need to serve strategic and operational needs. This may require institutionalising cross-departmental and cross-professional exchanges.

Above all, development agencies should understand the inherent complexity of evidence-based policymaking, avoiding the worst excesses of unrealistic optimism and paralysing pessimism. Instead of looking for an evidence “silver bullet”, organisations should approach evidence with purpose and pragmatism, understanding that “what works” is a contested notion and that the real problem is not lack of evidence, but an inability to overcome individual bias and organisational path dependency.

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