



POLICY BRIEF

EVIDENCE BASED POLICY-MAKING IN THE CARIBBEAN

There is much advocacy in the Caribbean regarding the need for evidence-based policy making, that is – policy making that is based on timely and reliable data regarding a particular economic and/or social problem, to promote good governance and facilitate enhanced policy and programme outcomes. However, the reality remains an elusive one for many Caribbean policy makers, who implement policies based on ideas, as well as ad hoc or outdated data.

Outside of the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America are countries where policymakers and managers have adopted a policy of developing and implementation of intervention programmes designed to improve domestic social problems based on scientific evidence, which have been shown to produce positive results. Within the developing world, Singapore adopted an evidence based approach to policy making, particularly in the area of education and training.

Proponents of evidence based policy making advocate for the incorporation of rigorous research and data gathering into public policy discussions and public sector processes for policy planning, development, implementation and evaluation. Among the critical issues required for evidence based policy making are a focus on framing of key problems to be addressed, identification of the methodology for gathering and assessing reliable evidence, communicating and transferring knowledge into decision making, and monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of programme delivery.

Issue 1: DECEMBER 2012

Quarterly Publication of Social Development Unit (SDU) of ECLAC/POS

“Policy design and policy evaluation should be driven by analysis of all the available options, and not by ideology We are interested in facts not fads.”

Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, 2008

“Without good governance, countries’ achievement and maintenance of short and long term sustainable economic, social and political development is limited.”

UNDP –Subregional Office for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean

RATIONAL POLICYMAKING

Policy making can be described as a process by which Governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver outcomes or desired changes. Promoting good practice in policy making is essential to the delivery of quality outcomes for citizens and to the realization of public sector reform.

- A policy is a framework/ logical structure – used in the planning and development process
- Uses evidence to clarify issues and or existing problems
- Explores available options and advocates for solutions;
- Policy guides decision-making, resource allocation and implementation guidelines to achieve agreed outcomes

A critical component of evidence-based policy making is not only the systematic collection of data and use of research findings to inform policy making but also the need for strong evidence from evaluations/assessments to support the effectiveness of policies in addressing the social problems they were designed to address. While evidence from the effectiveness of previous policy intervention is also useful in the policy process, it is often not the major factor driving the policy process.

Initiatives to support and strengthen evidence based policy making are already underway in Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean States through a project¹ managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in support of good governance. The project is designed to strengthen capacities of Caribbean decision-makers in the use of data generated from democratic governance assessments and indicators to support policy formulation, monitoring and implementation.

Among the project activities is support for “a mix of global research methodologies, including public/poll surveys to generate comprehensive, comparable, country specific, disaggregated, accurate, useful and user-friendly data for use by national, regional and international governance stakeholders.”

Further support for Caribbean governments is being provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), given its proven strengths in evidence-based research, through its Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean. ECLAC implemented a Development Account project “Strengthening the capacity of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in the Caribbean Small Island Developing States to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other Internationally Agreed Development Goals (IADGs)”, which sought to build and strengthen institutional capabilities for generating and compiling reliable social, economic and environmental statistics in the Caribbean subregion, through the provision of technical support, as well as the conduct of training workshops for statisticians and policy makers. One of the key objectives of this project was the promotion of evidence based policy making and programming within the Caribbean.

DATA NEEDS

The policy process begins the identification of a problem/issue and identification of population groups who are in need of a specific programme and/or policy. This is often followed by information gathering – this is where available data to analyse the problem/issue is critical.

Evidence based policy making relies on pertinent data, which is a basic requirement for any form of planning, and policy formulation. Data/statistics are needed at all stages of the planning process including the initial identification of a problem or objective. Without evidence, policy makers must rely on intuition/conviction, their ideology or conventional wisdom or at best theory alone.

The unavailability of timely and reliable data results in policy decisions that can go seriously wrong or astray and are likely to be abandoned – leading to costly mistakes.

Statistics are also needed for monitoring the implementation process and for the evaluation of impact. It is important to establish system for the systematic collection of data to monitor the implementation process. Deficiencies in the collection of accurate can seriously undermine the development of public policies designed to achieve targeted outcomes.

One of the most critical but difficult tasks in any form of planning is to decide what data to collect. A great deal of time can be wasted collecting data which is never used and sometimes essential data is ignored.

The key is to decide upfront what data is needed in order to achieve a particular objective of the planning exercise. Good evidence or data requires capable persons skilled in quantitative methods and other analysis. In the Caribbean we are struggling with these skills especially within the public service. In order to facilitate an environment conducive to evidence based policy making, there is need to seriously address these challenges. Alternatives can be considered in the interim; More fundamentally however is the acceptance of the need for evidence based policy making; The best evidence is of little value if it is ignored or not available when needed;

WHAT DATA

Evidence based policy making requires good data, analytical skills and political support. Hence there are inherent limitations, even where government officials are able to draw on the results of reliable information and sound analytical skills. The politics of decision making inherently involves a mixing of science, value preferences, and practical judgements about feasibility and legitimacy.

Source: Brian Head. Evidence-based policy: principles and requirements. University of Queensland.

ESTABLISHING THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

The policy process involves a number of steps including the identification of the overall policy goal and objectives., Policy makers, particularly politicians often focus on the feasibility of the policy, in terms of whether the costs justifies implementation of the policy, its affordability and whether it will make a difference in addressing the needs and desires of the intended beneficiaries.

Public opinion can also be a determining factor in the policy process therefore it is important that some thought be given to identification of the arguments for and against possible policy options as well, through processes such as stakeholder consultations, which is also a good way to garner legitimacy for the policy and for placing it in the public domain. (Sometimes a funding agency may carry out an assessment to consider options either for or against an option).

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Policies should be reviewed on a regular basis – since it is often necessary to amend or make revisions. The general lack of reliable statistics in the Caribbean on a wide range of social and economic issues represents a serious challenge to evidence based assessments.

For policies to be effective they must be well known by the public or beneficiaries of that policy. Communication and sensitization should be therefore become a strategic component of the policy development and implementation process.

THE WAY FORWARD

Evidence-based policy making is fundamentally about assessing whether a policy improves the wellbeing of population group/s in a given community. Since the role of government is to improve the wellbeing of the community, it is important that an evidence-based approach to policymaking is adopted as one of the key strategies for improving not only policy development but good governance.