

DEVELOPMENT ADVOCATE

# Pakistan

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## DATA FOR DEVELOPMENT



# Evidence-integrated Data for Development

Not conceptualising an evidence-based policy design leads us to a 'black box' of development, where public policy failures happen all the time in the shape of program logic not producing outcomes as expected, and where there is no explanation for why things happen.



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The world we live in is complex, where we have to navigate strategically to find tangible solutions to stern policy problems. When we talk about the developing world, it is even more complex, volatile, and mercurial in terms of finding solutions. This is where the role of evidence-based policymaking comes in.

Some myth-busting at first regarding the distinction between data and evidence. A classic case is that of education in Pakistan, where the focus has essentially been on enrolment over time.

- Pakistan has high primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment rates over the decades, numbers that tell us that we are doing well in terms of education.
- However, enrolment does not

guarantee learning.

- It is all about learning outcomes from the lens of evidence, and we are currently facing the crisis of 'learning poverty' in Pakistan, where 43 million children in school are not learning adequately and only 23 percent of students aged 10 can read and understand an age-appropriate text.

What is evidence-based policymaking? It is an ideology or mindset where evidence is integrated with data - where it permeates the entire policy design and standalone data is not the decisive element in determining policy.

Evidence-based policymaking design for development comes with a certain protocol. It first asks the policymakers to think through theory to gain theoretical insights. The theory is at the very heart of the evidence design.

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## Evidence-based policymaking is not only holistic but intensively systematic in nature.

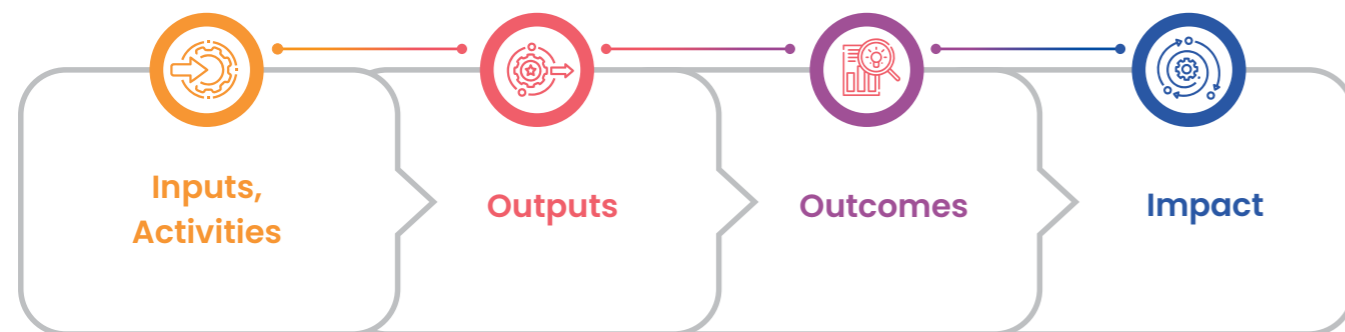
Following this, the emphasis is on developing, evaluating, and refining the theory of change - the detailed chains of causal pathways or mechanisms of change - from policy intervention to impact.

After setting up a concrete theory of change around the policy problem, the next step is to take a deep dive into data and understand what it tells us and what it does not. What is the data trying to reveal and what is it trying to conceal? How can we know the source and the quality of the aggregated data?

The next step is to contextualise the development policy problem. Evidence design is always deeply embedded in the context, into the primary and secondary root causes of the problem. It is important to note that imported models have no place in this type of policy design! It then further asks to factor in the political economy comprising of underlying assumptions, risks, and environmental factors that may potentially influence policy results.

The process does not end here. It then further moves to considering the 'counterfactual' - an alternate reality of what

### Evidence-based Policymaking Design



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would have been the outcome if the policy had not been introduced. Constructing the counterfactual in evidence-based policymaking lays the foundation for evaluating the impact. Comparing the 'treated' ones versus the 'controlled' ones under a particular development intervention, and identifying any statistically significant differences between them, depicts the eventual quantified impact of the policy intervention.

Hence, evidence-based policymaking is not only holistic but intensively systematic in nature. Another glorious aspect is its 'problem-driven bottom-up' approach, where jumping to conclusions and solutions is prohibited. Instead, problem identification and navigation by default leads to a solution.

In the context of Pakistan, the chronic issue we are facing in our development paradigm is that we lack the mindset of evidence. We do not have time for evidence. In fact, we like our data sitting up on the shelves! For us, impact evaluations are cumbersome, time consuming, and come with a cost. We prefer employing reverse engineering, where we think of a solution first and then take it to the population of interest, instead of mapping the population first for a tailored needs assessment. We have precedence for scaling up of development innovations without pilot testing them. More ironic is that in our result-based matrix (RBM) of planning and development, we have been confusing the 'outcome' for the

eventual 'impact' for decades. We are inclined towards celebrating numbers and success stories, and committing the folly of not recognising the distinction between 'noise' and the quantified 'impact'.

Not conceptualising an evidence-based policy design leads us to a 'black box' of development, where public policy failures happen all the time in the shape of program logic not producing outcomes as expected, and where there is no explanation for why things happen. If some development design works, no information is available about why it worked, and conversely, if it fails, there is no information about why it failed.

Hence, the big idea is to get policymakers, researchers, academia, and people to think carefully and systematically about how policies and programs impact the development process. A true evidence-based policy considers what has worked and what has not worked in the past, and can be evaluated for its impact. This requires us to define the causal chain and the counterfactual, identify and evaluate the evidence to demonstrate impact, and account for alternative explanations and unintended consequences of our policy decisions. Policymakers and researchers must be equipped with the tools to truly detect evidence of policy impact and use these tools for better policies for development.



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