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CASE STUDY

Evidence-informed policy-making in Benin's agriculture, food security and nutrition ecosystem

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About this case study

This is one in a series of four case studies written by African think tanks, commissioned as part of a research project that aims to unpack and better understand the use of different types of scientific and expert evidence in policymaking.

Each case study explores how evidence is defined, understood, and used in different national and sectoral policy contexts. This case study looks at Benin's food security and nutrition sector. The other three case studies cover: (1) South Africa's professionalisation of the public service (2) South Sudan's national budgeting process (3) Tanzania's Urbanization Laboratory.

Case studies vary in length, style, and approach. Each offers valuable insights into the factors and actors influencing evidence use within specific national and sectoral policy contexts. The case studies will also contribute to a research paper written by Dr Jessica Espey and Gaida Casarin at the University of Bristol School of Geographical Sciences, which seeks to inform how evidence is used in international deliberations, particularly within the United Nations General Assembly.

The project is led by the University of Bristol, in collaboration with OTT Consulting, and four think tanks: ACED, African Centre for Cities, New South Institute, and Samahi Research. The project is led by the University of Bristol, in collaboration with OTT Consulting, and four think tanks: ACED, African Centre for Cities, New South Institute, and Samahi Research. It was generously supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The views presented in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the funding or partner organisations.

This case study was produced by the African Center for Equitable Development (ACED), a think-and-do tank driving equitable development across Africa. Based in Benin, West Africa, ACED's work focuses on four thematic areas: food systems, nature economy, digital economy and human development.

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Abstract

More than 40% of the Benin population is employed in the agricultural sector. It is central to the economy and to livelihoods in the country. As such, food security and nutrition (FSN) policies are critical to spurring Benin's development. The supply and use of evidence play important roles in improving the quality of these policies.

This case study looks at the FSN evidence and policy ecosystem in Benin and analyses its key components and drivers. It finds that a diversity of evidence types co-exist in the ecosystem. However, while there is healthy production of research, data is short in supply and poor in quality. Research data is not used significantly by decision-makers due to its lack of relevance, accessibility and quality. Faced with this, policy-makers often turn to citizen and expert knowledge, placing a premium on evidence coming from messengers they trust, rather than on the type or method of generation.

Intermediaries can help process research evidence into readily available products for policy-makers. They can also work to build trusted relationships with policy-makers to raise their awareness on evidence use, and create prospects for lasting demand. Institutional frameworks can also generate formal requirements for sustainable evidence use and production in policy formulation.

It is, however, important to look beyond formal institutional frameworks and consider the power dynamics that pressure key policy-makers into using evidence. The greater involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Benin agriculture policy ecosystem has led to higher accountability demands, cascading production, and use of evidence to legitimise policy choices.

Abbreviations

ACED	African Center for Equitable Development
B2A	Unit of Studies and Support to the Agricultural Sector
BEPPAAG	Bureau of Evaluation of Public Policy and Analysis of Government Action
CGIAR	Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers
CIRAD	Agricultural Research Centre for International Development
CSOs	Civil society organisations
DAS	Department of Agricultural Statistics
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FSN	Food security and nutrition
INRAB	National Institute of Agricultural Research of Benin
IRD	Research Institute for Development
MAEP	Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NISD	National Institute of Statistics and Demography
PAPA	Agricultural Policy Analysis Programme
PASCIB	National Platform of Civil Society Organizations in Benin
PNOPPA	National Platform of Agricultural Farmer and Producer Organizations
PSDSA	Strategic Plan for the Development of the Agricultural Sector
PSRSA	Strategic Plan for the Revitalization of the Agricultural Sector
PwC	Price water house Coopers
RENOVA	National network of NGOs active in sustainable agriculture in Benin
RRA	Rapid rural appraisal
SNRA	National Agricultural Research System

1. Introduction

In this case study, we explore the complex dynamics of evidence-informed policy processes within the food security and nutrition (FSN) ecosystem in Benin, a lower-middle-income country with a strong agricultural sector. 'Evidence' is defined here as statistical data, research findings, impact evaluation, and expert or citizen knowledge, that can be used as a source of information to guide the decision-making process. Understanding the use of evidence in policy-making is critical for effective decision-making and fostering sustainable development in Africa, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and food security that directly impact the livelihoods of millions of people. This case study delves into the challenges and opportunities that exist in the interplay between evidence production, communication, and utilisation, as well as the institutionalisation of evidence-informed policy processes in Benin.

This study explores the FSN system with a focus on its agriculture-related components. Its scope encompasses an analysis of the country's context, including its political landscape, socio-economic development, and the role of the agricultural sector. Furthermore, we investigate the key institutions and actors involved in managing the FSN policy domain (especially those active on its agriculture-related components) and the existing evidence and science-advisory mechanisms in place. The research methodology combines a literature review, key-informant interviews, and the authors' extensive experience in evidence-informed policy-making to provide a holistic understanding of the subject.

Key findings from the case study reveal that diverse types of evidence are utilised in the FSN ecosystem, including data, research, evaluation, and expert knowledge. However, challenges persist in data quality and evidence generation. Policy-makers tend to favour practical and socially-based evidence, while academic evidence often remains disconnected from their interests and concerns. Regarding evidence production and utilisation, practicality and accessibility play significant roles, leading to potential misalignment with policy-makers' needs. Practicality in evidence production and utilisation refers to the evidence's operational value for decision-makers; its ability to provide actionable guidance and context-specific information. 'Accessibility' pertains to the availability of evidence in a format that decision-makers can easily access and comprehend, ensuring its usability in policy-making processes. Communication of scientific evidence (defined in this context as outputs of academic research) faces barriers such as language, cost, and poor readability, with researchers lacking the capacity and motivation to produce policy-relevant content. Intermediaries, including civil society organisations (CSOs), consultancy firms, and brokering organisations, can help bridge the gap between evidence producers and policy-makers, fostering evidence-based decision-making and assisting policy-makers in effectively using evidence. To do so, they should be incentivised with adequate resources and supported by formal institutional rules that create spaces for their meaningful contribution to the promotion of evidence-based decision-making.

This case study offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of evidence-informed policy processes in Benin's FSN ecosystem, highlighting the importance of understanding the interplay between evidence production, communication, and utilisation, as well as the need for institutionalisation of evidence-informed policy processes. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of evidence-informed policy processes in Africa and can inform strategies to improve decision-making and promote sustainable development in the region.

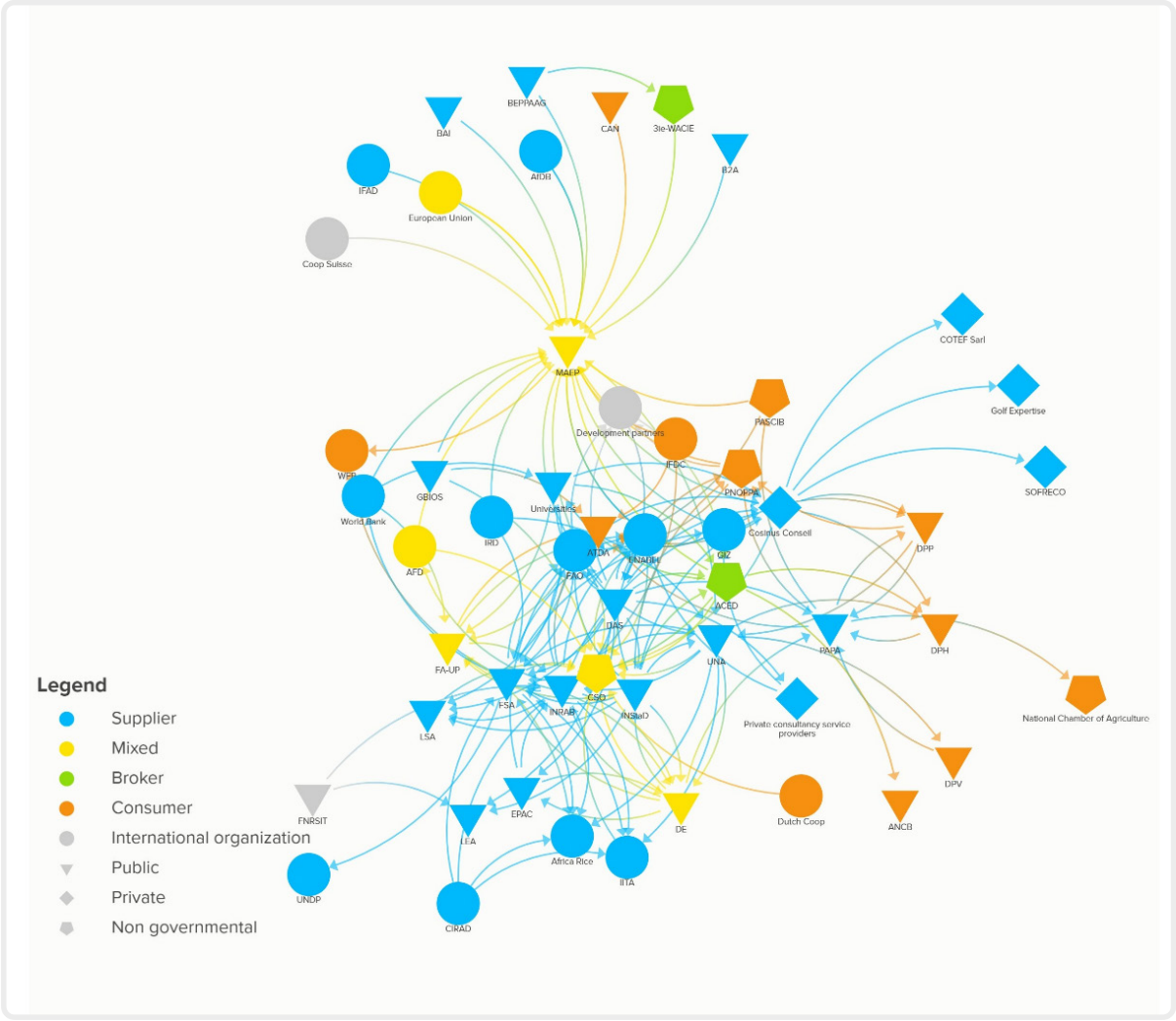
1.1. Country and policy context

Benin is a lower-middle-income country with a population of 11.5 million people and a per capita income estimated at USD 1,087 (World Bank, 2022). For over 30 years, the nation has maintained a stable democracy, with four presidents taking office over that period, despite some electoral tensions in 2019–2020. Generally, fundamental freedoms are respected and power is shared among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. Successive governments have fostered socio-economic development and improved governance, although poverty remains prevalent, with a 38.5% poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines in 2019. In 2019, the agricultural sector accounted for 41% of all employment (World Bank, 2022) and was dominated by small family farms, primarily focused on subsistence farming rather than commercial crops (Djohy et al., 2015). Given this context, the FSN ecosystem in Benin is shaped by the country's socio-economic conditions, the prominence of the agricultural sector, and the importance of good governance. Understanding the roles and interplay of various institutions and actors involved in managing the FSN policy area is crucial for fostering evidence-informed decision-making and improving policy management.

The policy process studied here is not a specific reform but, rather, the FSN policy ecosystem at large – the key organisations evolving in that policy domain and their interaction around the supply, brokering, and demand of evidence (Figure 1).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the ecosystem of evidence-informed policy-making in the agricultural sector of Benin. It illustrates the interactions among various organisations, including those from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, highlighting their roles in supplying, consuming, or brokering evidence, or a combination of these roles. The connections depicted indicate the two possible directions for the flow of evidence: from one organisation to another or vice versa. Some organisations have connections in both directions, indicating a reciprocal exchange of evidence and knowledge. Additionally, the figure identifies the 'hubs' within the ecosystem, which represent organisations that play a central and influential role in connecting multiple actors and facilitating the flow of evidence.

Figure 1. Evidence policy ecosystem in the FSN sector in Benin



Source: Thoto et al., 2023

The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries (MAEP) is the primary institution responsible for developing and implementing FSN policies and programmes in Benin. Within the MAEP, dedicated agencies support evidence production and use, such as the Department of Planning and the Department of Agricultural Statistics. The MAEP also coordinates with other ministries, like the Ministry of Health, for cross-cutting issues related to FSN. The National Agricultural Research System (SNRA) is an inter-institutional mechanism that includes research institutions, training institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in agricultural research. The SNRA is coordinated by the National Institute of Agricultural Research of Benin (INRAB), which has a dedicated programme on agricultural policy – the Agricultural Policy Analysis Programme (PAPA). CSOs and development partners also play a critical role in shaping the FSN policy landscape, providing technical assistance, financial support, and advocacy efforts. These actors act as intermediaries between evidence producers and policy-makers.

Other existing evidence/science-advisory mechanisms in the FSN policy context of Benin include formal institutional architecture and the intermediaries – such as CSOs, consultancy firms, and brokering organisations – that bridge the gap between evidence producers and policy-makers. These mechanisms play a crucial role in fostering evidence-based decision-making and supporting policy-makers in effectively using evidence.

1.2. Research methods

The research methodology for this case study incorporates a combination of literature review, key-informant interviews, and the authors' extensive experience in evidence-informed policy-making. This multifaceted approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the use of evidence in decision-making within Benin's FSN ecosystem.

A literature review examined relevant, existing research and publications, including an analysis of studies on evidence-informed policy processes, agricultural transformation, and FSN (Mongbo & Aguemon 2015, Kouakanou et al., 2020, Baborska et al., 2020, Thoto et al., 2023). The case study utilises findings from two main studies. The first, published in 2019 by ACED, focuses on the use of evidence in better decision-making at local government levels in the FSN. The second study, published in 2023 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and ACED, applies an ecosystemic framework for analysing evidence-informed policy systems for agricultural transformation in Benin.

Key-informant interviews were conducted with a range of organisations involved in evidence-informed policy-making in Benin. These organisations included academic institutions (the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi and the Faculty of Agronomy, University of Parakou); research organisations (National Institute for Agricultural Research in Benin); public institutions (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries); donors (Food and Agriculture Organization) and CSOs (National Platform of Civil Society Organizations in Benin and the National Platform of Agricultural Farmer and Producer Organizations).

The case study also draws upon the combined experience of the authors in the field of evidence-informed policy-making, enabling a deeper understanding of the context and nuances that shape the FSN ecosystem in Benin.

2. Evidence types and forms of curation

Finding 1: A wide array of evidence is utilised within the FSN ecosystem, but there are key challenges around the production of data and evidence that can be readily used by policy-makers.

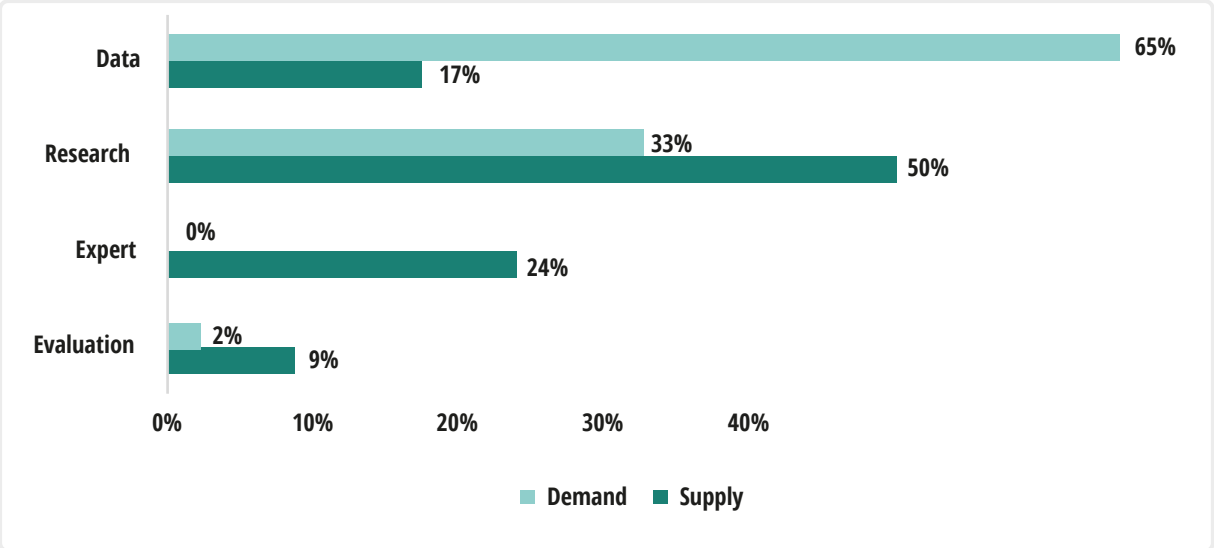
The key types of evidence produced and utilised in the Benin FSN ecosystem are data, research, evaluations, and expert knowledge. Data (e.g., production, land, and price data) is collected from various sources such as the MAEP's Department of Agricultural Statistics and technical departments, NGOs, development partners, and universities. Research is conducted predominantly by universities and the INRAB, focusing on various aspects of agricultural development. The agricultural sector in the country allocated only 0.6% of its agricultural GDP to research and development in 2016 (Domgho et al., 2018), which falls below the recommended minimum target of 1% set by the African Union and the United Nations. While final evaluations of projects and programmes are widespread, rigorous impact evaluations are rare. Expert knowledge is harnessed at different stages of the policy cycle, with 'experts' referring to individuals or organisations possessing specific knowledge that can inform the design and implementation of agricultural policies. Stakeholders in the ecosystem generally distinguish between different types of evidence and prioritise various sources. They tend to place more trust in statistics provided by international institutions or government statistical offices rather than those from non-governmental organisations.

Policy-makers in the FSN ecosystem favour practical and socially-based evidence such as citizens', leaders', or experts' knowledge and information obtained from a rapid appraisal. These types of evidence are appreciated because they are readily available or can be quickly mobilised with minimal time and resources. For example, within the FSN policy ecosystem, decision hubs consistently employ 'advisors' to guide decision-making processes. Technical assistance, a common feature in development projects, provides expert knowledge to support project formulation and implementation. However, due to nepotism, political influence, or project-scheduling considerations, such evidence may be superficial and biased, potentially defeating the expected value of mobilising evidence for decision-making.

Data is undersupplied. Over 65% of respondents in the evidence-policy ecosystem highlighted data as their preferred source of evidence (Figure 2). However, only 17% indicated that they prioritised data production – much of this is produced by the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (NISD) and the MAEP's Department of Agricultural Statistics (DAS). Responsibility for data collection is scattered across different stakeholders and the DAS is not consistently involved, although it should have a coordinating role. The quality of data in the ecosystem is also an issue, stemming from inappropriate sampling methods and data collection techniques. Through informal feedback, the actors of the FSN ecosystem suggested that as part of ongoing political and institutional reforms, the responsibilities of the DAS should be transferred to the NISD for better coordination of data production. Recently, the NISD has introduced the

'statistic visa' as a requirement for all research intended to generate socio-economic data, including in the agricultural field. Sampling methods and data collection and analyses methods are verified and validated before the statistic visa is granted. Although this mechanism may bear a risk of censorship, it may help to improve the quality of data supplied within the ecosystem.

Figure 2. Preferred evidence in the FSN ecosystem: Supply and demand, by type of evidence (% of respondents)



Source: Thoto et al., 2023

On the other hand, research is the most supplied type of evidence – although not the most preferred. In Benin, research is predominantly carried out by universities and the INRAB, with a focus on agricultural development, such as crops, agricultural processing, livestock, and fisheries. However, university-based researchers report that their work is not driven by a well-defined research agenda but rather by funding opportunities. These opportunities predominantly come from external funders (donors, foundations, etc.) and, as a result, Benin researchers tend to align their research areas with the interests of external partners. In response, there are ongoing efforts to facilitate a shift in the prevailing paradigm. For instance, in 2020, the Office of Scientific Research and Innovation was created with the mandate to design, coordinate, and evaluate research and innovation polices. Since then, research labs have received annual subsidies to foster research activities – although these funds are still insufficient to offset foreign research funds. In 2022, ACED supported the government in producing a research agenda on food security and nutrition that could be replicated in other development sectors.

Evaluation is the type of evidence that the ecosystem produces and demands the least. While final evaluations of projects and programmes are relatively common, rigorous impact evaluations are rare. A 2020 study by 3ie revealed that 83% of institutions surveyed in Benin had no evaluation experience in the last ten years (Amouzou et al., 2020). This is due to a weak institutional and individual capacity to conceptualise, design, and implement impact evaluations. Despite this, the few such evaluations conducted, such

as those for *Plan Stratégique pour la Relance du Secteur Agricole* (PSRSA), have proven instrumental in shaping important agricultural policies and strategies, including the *Plan Stratégique de Développement du Secteur Agricole (PSDSA)*.

Finding 2: Evidence production and utilisation are influenced by practicality and accessibility, leading to potential misalignment with policy-makers' needs.

The academic-based evidence supplied in the FSN policy ecosystem in Benin rarely fits the interests and concerns of policy-makers and practitioners. There is a disconnection and sometimes mistrust between policy-makers (especially those at the local government level) and the scientific communities. Consequently, the generated evidence may be neither in demand nor useful, and pertinent policy questions may remain ignored by research. Recent investigations by ACED (Gbedomon et al., 2021) and FAO (Thoto et al., 2023) on FSN policy ecosystems revealed that research questions are guided by foreign funding mechanisms and research agendas, not informed by local needs for evidence. Furthermore, policy-makers also question the reliability and practical utility of academic evidence due to the oversimplification of social realities in research and research practices in Benin. In fact, academic evidence is produced by institutions that are inadequately equipped and have limited human resources, thereby impacting the quality of the outcomes. Furthermore, these research processes often result in the oversimplification of complex social realities to fit within existing models and frameworks, limiting the scope of research questions to the perspective of a specific discipline. These tendencies can adversely affect both the quality and relevance of research outcomes.

The available evidence is often either insufficiently disaggregated for specific decisions or too localised for generalisation. It is common for national-level evidence to be applied to decision-making at lower administrative levels (department or municipality), which may overlook the specific needs or differences related to gender or geographical location. Decisions based on this type of evidence tend to homogenise issues in a socio-cultural context characterised by diversity, leading to potential mismatches between policy interventions and the unique needs of diverse communities. There is an increasing call for disaggregating and tailoring evidence for impactful policies. Recently, ACED and WACIE partnered to facilitate the downscaling of evidence at the local level in Benin. Nevertheless, there remains an immediate requirement for more comprehensive and methodical efforts, coupled with significant investments, to produce evidence that is customised to specific contexts.

Scientific knowledge comes from both domestic and international institutions. Agricultural data primarily comes from the DAS, which conducts the National Agricultural Census to collect, process, and disseminate quantitative and qualitative structural data on various agricultural sub-sectors. However, data from the FAO website, which is also derived from national sources – including the DAS – tends to be more

easily accessible and highly regarded. Agricultural research is mainly conducted by national researchers from institutions like the INRAB and universities, but various international research organisations also operate in Benin. These include foreign national research organisations like the Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD) and the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), from France, CGIAR centres, and other international non-profit research organisations. National research institutions collaborate with these foreign entities in their research, with specific institutions sometimes having a predominant role in evidence generation depending on funding sources. International consultancy firms also play a significant role in evidence architecture, either being brought in by development partners or recruited by the government to undertake specific studies. However, national consultancy firms carry out the majority of policy-orientated studies.

There is no clear hierarchy of knowledge, but some patterns are visible. In the FSN ecosystem of Benin, while there is no definitive hierarchy of knowledge, certain patterns can be observed regarding the value placed on different sources of information. This perceived hierarchy of knowledge in the FSN ecosystem appears to be more influenced by the identity of the messenger than the content of the evidence itself. Evidence coming from close advisors within the ministry is more accessible and yields greater influence for decision-makers, regardless of whether it is scientific or not. The close proximity of and personal relationships between decision-makers and their advisors likely contribute to the latter's elevated position in the decision-making process.

In contrast, evidence from external sources such as donors, academia, and consultancy firms holds a somewhat lower rank in the hierarchy. While decision-makers may consider this evidence, it may not carry the same weight as evidence coming from close advisors. This suggests that the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger plays a significant role in the decision-maker's perception of evidence. Despite being ranked lower in the hierarchy, evidence from CSOs still finds a way to influence policy-making in the agricultural sector. Prominent CSOs like the National Platform of Civil Society Organizations in Benin (PASCIB) and the National Platform of Agricultural Farmer and Producer Organizations (PNOPPA) are actively engaged in the decision-making process. Their ability to bring forth their concerns and evidence can be attributed to their strategic engagement with policy-makers and their efforts to build credibility and trust over time.

Finding 3: Scientific knowledge and evidence generation in the FSN ecosystem are shaped by both domestic and international institutions, with no clear hierarchy but with visible patterns.

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3. Evidence communication

Finding 1. Scientific evidence is out of reach for the policy audience.

Research-based evidence is hard to access. Evidence produced by researchers from local universities and the INRAB is mostly found in the form of scientific papers published in paywalled academic journals, and primarily in English, while almost all Benin policy-makers are French-speakers. For example, out of 381 papers on agriculture in Benin published in academic journals from January to November 2021, and available on the Web of Sciences, only 14 were in French. This makes the majority of research papers inaccessible due to both language barriers and cost. The typical research paper is also inaccessible to non-scientific audiences because of its poor readability.

Available scientific evidence documents are not tailored for policy-makers. In the absence of a policy-relevant research agenda, the research produced is inherently of poor relevance for policy-makers. This is a structural problem, as interviews with researchers reveal that their primary motivations for conducting agricultural research are career advancement and project funding rather than policy relevance and support to evidence-informed policy-making. As a result, policy briefs, which are often considered an appropriate format in which to share data and research findings with policy-makers, are not widely used by evidence producers. There is a lack of capacity and motivation among researchers to produce policy briefs and an absence of brokers who could step in to translate research findings into briefs. The content of these scientific documents is therefore often too technical, targeted towards academic readers, and not suitable for non-expert users like local policy-makers.

There is, however, an encouraging sign coming from the launch of an open-access platform. In early 2022, to present the latest national agricultural census, the Department of Agricultural Statistics launched a statistical platform, which is gradually becoming the first-choice platform for agricultural statistics in Benin. Although the platform currently lacks analytical capacities, it serves as an effective approach for communicating evidence to different stakeholders. The DAS has also begun to produce regular statistical briefs for policy-makers and practitioners.

Finding 2. Intermediaries can help better integrate evidence into policy-making processes.

Civil society organisations and consultancy firms can play a crucial role in fostering evidence-informed decision-making. Organisations like PASCIB and PNOPPA hold strong positions in the institutional architecture of the agricultural sector in Benin, making them valuable partners in promoting evidence-based decision-making. By collaborating with research organisations, CSOs can use evidence to advocate for policy changes and communicate research findings to policy-makers. Similarly, private consultancy service providers, who produce a large amount of evidence for decision-

makers, can be engaged in collaborative efforts to strengthen the culture and capacity for evidence use in their work.

Brokering organisations, such as ACED, are essential for bridging the gap between evidence producers and policy-makers in the FSN ecosystem. In its brokering role, ACED has developed an evidence platform that curates and displays accessible and useful evidence on FSN for political decision-makers and practitioners. This platform supports the design and implementation of high-impact development projects and programmes in agriculture, food security, nutrition, and the environment. Additionally, ACED offers a free support service (helpdesk) to assist policy-makers and practitioners in using evidence effectively.

4. Institutionalisation

Finding 1. There is a strong formal institutional architecture for evidence production and use.

A robust institutional setup drives evidence-informed policy in Benin. A solid foundation for evidence production and use in the policy cycle is provided through the Vision Bénin-2025 Alafia, which highlights good governance as a key aspiration. The National Development Plan (2018–2025) operationalises this aspiration by adopting concepts such as effectiveness, efficient use of resources, transparency, and management for development results as fundamental governance principles. The Methodological Guide for Developing Policies and Strategies standardises the development planning process and makes provisions for evidence use at different steps, such as requiring evaluations of past policies, strategies, and interventions before developing new ones. Institutions like the Bureau of Evaluation of Public Policy and Analysis of Government Action (BEPPAAG) and the Unit of Studies and Support to the Agricultural Sector (B2A) were established under successive governments, further supporting high-quality evaluation production and use. The MAEP's Department of Planning and DAS enable coordination and monitoring of interventions in the sector, with the latter being the only dedicated department for statistics within a ministry.

Effective institutional mechanisms support evidence uptake. In the Benin context, the SNRA is an inter-institutional mechanism comprising research institutions, training institutions, and NGOs active in agricultural research. Coordinated by the INRAB, it houses the dedicated PAPA that facilitates evidence uptake. Additionally, the Benin Parliamentary Institute, established in 2019, conducts policy research studies to support decision-making at the parliament. Ex-ante evaluation requirements for projects and programmes since 2014 further promote evidence generation and use at the parliamentary level.

Finding 2. It is critical to look beyond the formal evidence architecture in FSN, as there are complex power dynamics at play.

There are three profiles of decision-makers that can present complications. Our research highlights three distinct profiles of decision-makers that can complicate the institutionalisation process: (i) apparent decision-makers, who appear to have decision-making power but do not; (ii) constrained decision-makers, who possess power but face barriers to using it; and (iii) unwilling decision-makers, who have decision-making power but choose not to exercise it. It is important to note that these profiles are not mutually exclusive – a single authority may exhibit one or more of these traits depending on the context and specific issues involved.

Moreover, beyond policy-makers, other actors (e.g., civil society, development partners etc.) are involved in policy-making processes and might have more influence on the outcomes than formal policy-makers. The increased involvement of CSOs

(PNOPPA, PASCIB, RENOVA, etc.) and development partners in the policy-making process creates incentives for evidence use by reinforcing the accountability system and pushing policy-makers to demonstrate the impact of their interventions. CSOs' role in the policy process shifted around 2008–2009, with the revision of the PSRSA and the inclusion of stakeholders like PNOPPA. The adoption of decree 2013-47 in 2013 further reinforced CSO participation and accountability, which has continued to grow, as evidenced by the addition of RENOVA to the institutional framework in 2021. Development partners contribute to evidence use through accountability mechanisms and donor-reporting requirements, motivating policy-makers to generate data and evidence to support policy planning and demonstrate the impact of funded interventions.

Understanding these dynamics is critical and predetermines the success or failure of any effort to institutionalise evidence use. Without the identification of the relevant decision-making authorities, resources may be spent on the wrong person or institution. To avoid that, it is essential to go beyond formal decision-making attributes and engage in trusted relationships with key stakeholders. This can help uncover who the main actors of the power game are and how they interact with each other.

There is a tension between independent and policy-driven evidence. Academic research that is conducted independently of policy-driven agendas can earn greater credibility stemming from its perceived impartiality. Such research may come from public and private universities, local think tanks, or be commissioned by development and cooperation partners. However, it is less likely to shape policy change in the short-term as demonstrated above. On the other hand, evidence production tied to policy-making is more influential but bears the risk of being more politicised or biased and of lower quality. The Benin FSN evidence–policy ecosystem hosts both types of evidence-producing organisations, independent and policy-driven; this is a healthy balance, yet there is still scope for greater policy engagement by academia through better communication and inter-relation with the policy sphere.

Finding 3. Institutionalising the use of evidence in FSN policy requires playing the long game.

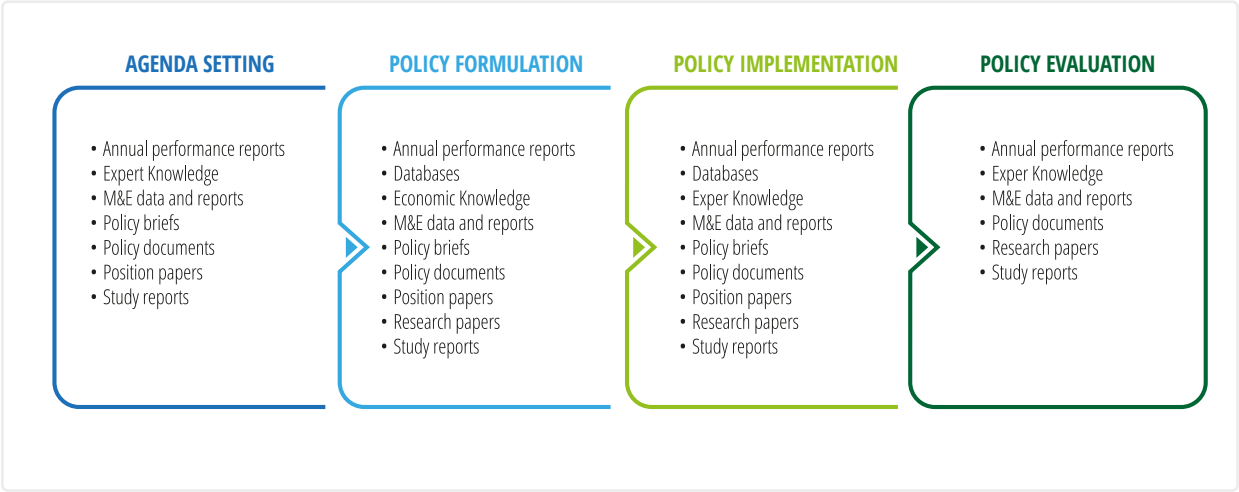
Investing in individual decision-makers can support the institutionalisation of evidence use. The level of evidence use in policy-making is often influenced by a decision-maker's awareness and understanding of evidence-informed practices. In some cases, decision-makers may initiate informal processes of evidence use by assembling a group of researchers and experts to support policy development, even without any formal rule requiring it. Therefore, investing in the capacity and awareness of individual decision-makers is crucial, as they can promote these informal practices of evidence use, which can later be translated into formal institutional rules. By fostering a culture of evidence-informed decision-making at an individual level, the institutionalisation of evidence use can be more effectively achieved and sustained over time.

Increasing the awareness and use of evidence by policy-makers requires continuous efforts to show the added value of evidence-informed policy-making. This also means understanding the needs of policy-makers, what they are trying to achieve, and how the wider context impacts this, and then identifying opportunities for evidence use. However, this process can be slowed down by staff turnover, as key champions who have been convinced of the value of evidence use may leave their positions. In such cases, the work must begin anew with incoming staff, which can result in delays and challenges in establishing a consistent culture of evidence-informed decision-making within the organisation.

It also requires an understanding of the constraints that bind policy-makers in using evidence. As indicated by local policy-makers in our interviews, current FSN decision-making chains at the local level are beset by unclear decision-making authority, political blockades, the high costs of planning processes, the slow process, and reliance on external expertise, all of which prevent local policy-makers and their staff from gaining knowledge and capacities.

Ultimately, this long-run approach can allow for the creation of appropriate institutional rules that anchor and stimulate a sustainable demand for evidence in policy processes, even beyond the decision-makers of the moment. For instance, there is no formal and functional mechanism through which the Ministry of Agriculture can access and leverage the research produced by university entities active in agricultural research. The government and donors should strive to institutionalise demand for evidence, through formal rules that require its use (e.g., evidence synthesis at the start of every policy process, and impact evaluations for every project) and by supporting CSOs that enhance government accountability for evidence-based policy.

Figure 3. Types of evidence used at different policy stages



Source: Thoto et al., 2023

5. Evidence impact

In the Benin agricultural sector, the instrumental use of evidence is driven by dedicated agencies within the MAEP that provide a solid foundation for evidence production and use in the policy cycle. The Department of Planning coordinates the development of sectoral strategies, programming, budgeting, and monitoring of interventions in the sector and prepares annual activity and performance reports. The DAS collects and disseminates agricultural data to various stakeholders, making the MAEP the only ministry with a dedicated statistics department. The country also has an SNRA, an inter-institutional mechanism comprising research institutions, training institutions, and NGOs active in agricultural research. The SNRA is coordinated by the INRAB, which has a dedicated programme on agricultural policy – the PAPA.

A specific example of the instrumental use of evidence is the development of the current agricultural development strategy: the *Plan Stratégique pour le Développement du Secteur Agricole (PSDSA) 2017–2025.* It was informed by evaluations of the previous strategy (PSRSA) and extensive consultation with CSOs and other stakeholders. This has led to more inclusive and evidence-based policy-making. Additionally, the progressive use of ACED's helpdesk, such as for informing the national agricultural extension strategy, demonstrates the instrumental use of evidence.

Furthermore, there is increased awareness about agricultural evidence among policy-makers as a result of continued actions from different stakeholders, even if no immediate action has been taken. For example, some municipalities in Benin have appointed evidence focal points following a series of awareness-raising activities and capacity-building initiatives. Although no specific policy process has been changed as a result of the evidence mobilised, local policy-makers have increased their awareness and started putting in place a system that may lead to the instrumental use of evidence in the future, potentially contributing to the 'process use' of evidence, which is in turn critical for the institutionalisation of evidence use. In some instances, evidence has been used symbolically, such as when evidence evaluations are conducted but have no clear connection to subsequent policy decisions or when evidence is used only to legitimise and justify pre-existing views. In one example of this, ACED presented findings from an evidence synthesis requested by a governmental department, but the policy-makers seemed dissatisfied with the results as they were expecting evidence to support their predetermined, opposite, direction.

6. Transferable insights for international policy processes

The case study of evidence-informed policy in Benin's FSN ecosystem offers several transferable insights for international policy processes and other contexts:

Robust institutional architecture: The establishment of a formal institutional architecture for evidence production and use, as observed in Benin, can serve as a model for other countries. This includes the creation of dedicated agencies within ministries, inter-institutional mechanisms, and mechanisms for evidence uptake. These arrangements can be tailored to fit the specific needs and contexts of other countries while emphasising good governance, transparency, and stakeholder participation.

Importance of intermediaries: The role of intermediaries, such as CSOs, consultancy firms, and brokering organisations, is crucial in bridging the gap between evidence producers and policy-makers. These intermediaries can facilitate better communication, capacity building, and engagement, fostering stronger connections and evidence-based decision-making in various settings.

Decision-makers prioritise messengers over types or methods of evidence: While academics may prioritise rigorous research designs, decision-makers value their internal advisors more, regardless of the type of evidence they present. This messenger hierarchy highlights the importance of building relationships with key decision-makers and their advisors to effectively communicate evidence and ensure its uptake in policy processes. Leveraging the messenger hierarchy can enhance the impact of evidence-informed policy efforts.

Long-term approach to institutionalisation: Institutionalising evidence use in policy processes requires a long-term approach that involves investing in individual decision-makers' capacity and awareness, understanding the constraints they face, and creating appropriate institutional rules. This approach, exemplified in Benin, can be adapted, and applied to other contexts to foster a culture of evidence-informed decision-making and promote sustainable demand for evidence in policy processes.

Engaging diverse stakeholders: The involvement of multiple stakeholders, such as CSOs, development partners, and experts, is essential for inclusive and evidence-based policy-making. The collaborative approach observed in Benin's agricultural sector can be replicated in other sectors, countries, and even multi-country deliberative processes to ensure a diverse range of perspectives are considered.

Addressing communication barriers: Improving the communication of scientific evidence to policy-makers is crucial for evidence-informed policy processes. Efforts should be made to develop policy-relevant content, translate complex information into accessible language, and reduce barriers like costs and poor readability.

This approach can be applied in various institutional settings to promote better understanding and use of evidence.

Understanding power dynamics: Recognising complex power dynamics and the influence of various actors in the policy process is critical for the successful institutionalisation of evidence use. Gaining insights into these dynamics and fostering trusted relationships with key stakeholders can improve the effectiveness of evidence-informed decision-making across different contexts and institutional settings.

7. Conclusions

The analysis of the FSN ecosystem in Benin reveals the production and utilisation of diverse types of evidence, including data, research, evaluations, and expert knowledge. While there is a 'glut' of research production far in excess of policy-makers' demand for it, data is undersupplied – unable to meet demand in either quantity or quality. One reason for the lack of demand for research despite the supply is that it is less readily available and accessible to policy-makers compared to practical, grounded, socially-based evidence such as citizen or expert knowledge.

In addition, the academic evidence supplied in the ecosystem rarely fits the interests and concerns of policy-makers and practitioners. It is often insufficiently disaggregated for specific decisions or too localised for generalisation, does not reflect the complexities of the social realities policy-makers are facing, and is aligned with the research agendas of the foreign organisations that fund it rather than local processes. There is no clear hierarchy of knowledge in the ecosystem, and the messenger often matters more than the evidence type or methodology. For instance, trusted advisors will be given greater consideration over CSOs, regardless of the evidence they mobilise.

This highlights the importance of communication in the ecosystem. Academic evidence, in particular, is not accessible enough to policy-makers. It is published in paywalled journals in English, when the vast majority of Benin policy-makers are francophone, and is difficult to interpret for a non-academic audience. Researchers are not incentivised to tailor their research for policy purposes – their career advancement is defined by their publication in academic journals rather than their contribution to policy. Intermediaries, such as CSOs, consultancy firms, and brokering organisations, can facilitate evidence-based decision-making by fostering stronger connections between evidence producers and policy-makers.

The experience of Benin in institutionalising evidence-informed policy in the agricultural sector has yielded three main lessons. Firstly, Benin's strong formal institutional architecture for evidence production and use has been beneficial. Effective mechanisms such as requirements for policy evaluations and involvement of CSOs in policy formulation can increase evidence use and more broadly contribute to better governance and policy transparency. Secondly, it is essential to look beyond the formal architecture of evidence suppliers and users in the FSN ecosystem. Decision-making power may not lie with those who are formally mandated for it, and the influence of actors like CSOs and development partners can significantly impact policy outcomes. Understanding these dynamics and fostering trusted relationships with key players can improve the institutionalisation of evidence use. Lastly, a long-term approach is necessary to institutionalise evidence use in FSN policy. This includes investing in raising awareness with individual decision-makers while pushing for lasting institutional change that anchors evidence supply and use in FSN policy.

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