

The Use of Evidence for Better Decision-Making by Local Governments

An analysis of the state of evidence production and its use in policymaking for food and nutrition security in Benin

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Dr. Rodrigue Castro Gbedomon
Donald Houessou
Frejus Thoto

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About ACED

Actions pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable (ACED) is a non-profit organisation based in Benin, active in the field of food and nutrition security, protection of nature and its services, and the production and use of evidence for better decision-making. ACED coordinates the Evidence-Policy-Action (EPA) network (<http://www.epanetwork.org>), which is a group of stakeholders and organisations that promote the use of evidence in the design and implementation of policies and interventions.

 @acedbenin
 www.linkedin.com/company/acedbenin
 www.facebook.com/acedong
 contact@aced-benin.org
 www.aced-benin.org

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One-minute overview

Almost all municipalities in Benin are aware of the importance of using evidence to support decision-making in all development sectors. Municipalities are unanimous on the importance of evidence, specifically in the health, and food and nutrition sectors. Specifically, in the latter sector, local governments have indicated that evidence is useful, but not always, especially in the event of an emergency response or when the available evidence is unusable. In practice, local governments use data, beliefs, traditional knowledge, opinions, and central government policy directives. In order to acquire evidence, local authorities turn to civil society organizations, hospitals, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis, and technical and financial partners, and rarely to the research community, even though researchers are theoretically known as the traditional source of evidence. This study recommends capacity building for the various stakeholders, brokering between evidence producers and users, and institutionalizing evidence use.

Summary

Main results

- There is an abundance of evidence on food and nutrition security (FNS) in Benin, mainly generated by universities and research institutes, specialized governmental agencies and sectorial ministries (health and agriculture), civil society organizations, and technical and financial partners¹.
- Research questions that fed into the available evidence on FNS were mainly designed to take advantage of foreign funding opportunities. Therefore, generated evidence is likely to be aligned with the research agenda of external (foreign) partners and less likely to meet the needs of local practitioners and policymakers.
- The FNS decision-making process in local municipalities involves multiple stakeholders, including local communities, deconcentrated government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector; all of these participating actors bring legitimacy, legality, relevance, and consistency to the decisions.
- Local policymakers are aware of the importance and usefulness of evidence use in policymaking, except in certain situations (i.e. urgent interventions, unusable evidence).
- Local policymakers rely on data (statistics), local beliefs, traditional knowledge, citizen opinions, and on general policy guidelines from the central government.
- Local policymakers source evidence by querying civil society organizations, hospitals, specialized governmental agencies (i.e. the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis), technical and financial partners, and citizens.
- Local policymakers indicated that they did not feel very connected to the research community (universities and research institutes).
- Routine use of evidence by local policymakers was hindered by a lack of qualified human resources, a disconnection between municipalities and the research community,

and limited access to evidence resources (*poor access to the internet, lack of computer equipment, and dispersal and quality of evidence*).

Key recommendations

- It is urgent to further align research questions with the interests and concerns of local policymakers and practitioners. For instance, it may be useful to design a research agenda that includes a 'top 100' research questions in the field of FNS for Benin. This roadmap for more inclusive and targeted research (research on demand) should be agreed upon jointly by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners active in FNS.
- It is urgent to design national mechanisms for research funding to support the research agenda on FNS and reduce dependence upon foreign funding opportunities that are insufficiently (or not at all) aligned with local priorities.

¹ The technical and financial partners are operational agencies of foreign countries, in charge of implementing their intervention agendas. These partners include Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ, Germany), SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, Agence Française de Développement (AFD, France), Enabel (Belgium), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

- Capacities of municipalities should be reinforced so that they can source, access, assimilate, and routinely use evidence. For instance, policymakers and associated staff should be trained on querying databases, collecting and interpreting data, and extracting evidence, while also provided with resources such as computers and good internet connections.
- Capacities of civil society organizations and the central government's deconcentrated agencies should be reinforced so that they can become 'brokering agents' between municipalities and researchers.
- There is a need to set up a digital platform that synthesizes and stores evidence into formats easily exploitable by local policymakers.
- There is a need to set up a helpdesk to guide and support local policymakers and other stakeholders in searching for, understanding, and using FNS evidence.
- It is urgent to connect research communities with local policymakers so that more inclusive and tailored evidence is collected.
- There is a need to empower communities to ensure greater citizen control in policymaking. By providing their opinions, local beliefs, and traditional knowledge, local communities will also become a source of evidence for local policymakers.

1.

Introduction





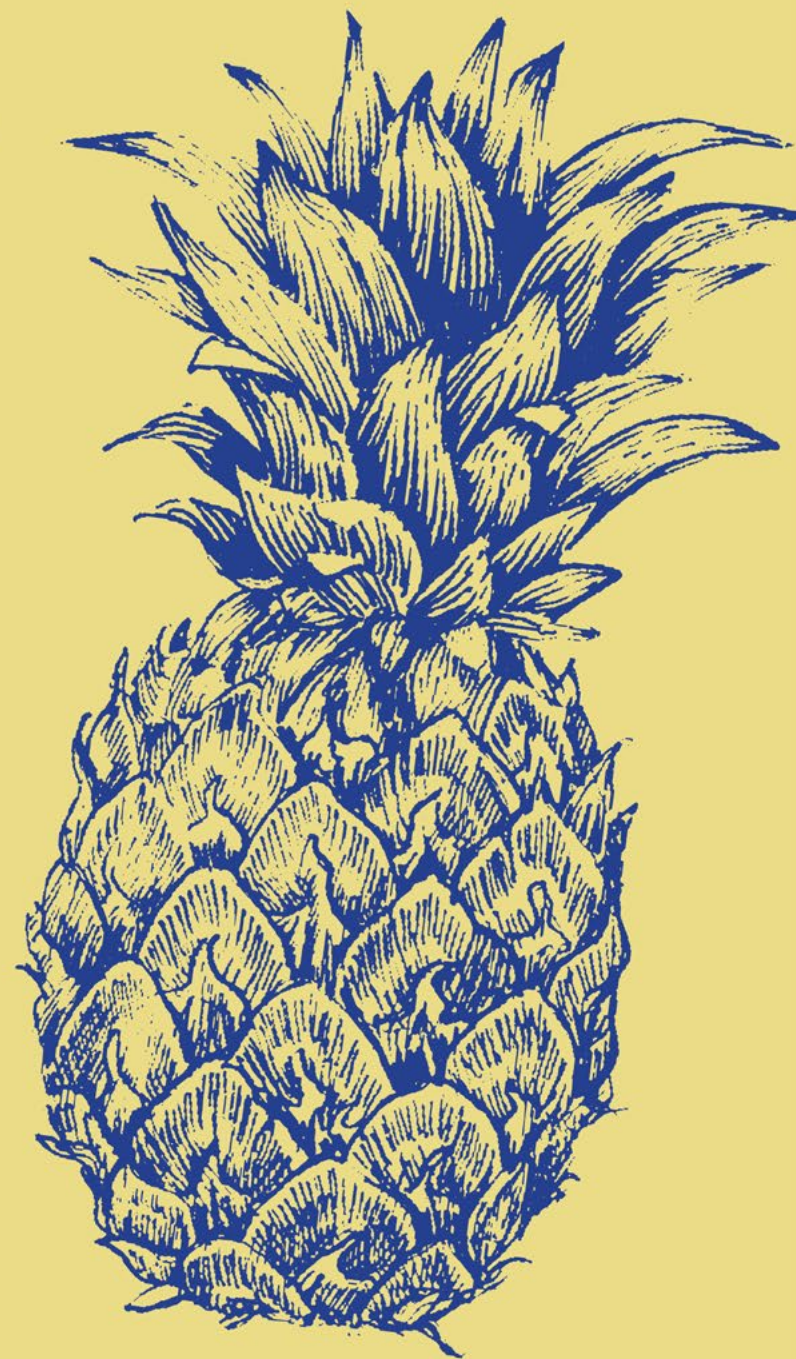
Evidence is essential to inform, frame, and guide interventions (policies, plans, programmes, and projects) that structure community development. At the local level in Africa, local authorities are experimenting with decentralization in a context of poverty and social inequality, resulting in important trade-offs being made between vital daily needs, scarce resources, and political considerations. In such a context, evidence represents an essential asset to help policymakers make fairer, coherent, cost-effective and informed decisions in all sectors of the community. Food and nutrition security (FNS) is a challenge shared by all local communities in Benin, and one that local policymakers must

navigate. Unfortunately, there is an absence of debate on how policymaking at the local level is made, particularly regarding the use of evidence in policymaking at a local level, which creates a knowledge gap that is detrimental to any action taken by local governance structures. This study aims to fill this gap, with an ultimate goal to better understand the interactions between the actors who operate in the field of FNS. This study involves 27 municipalities (out of 77 in Benin) and 100 informants, including members of municipal councils, researchers from national universities and research institutes, professionals from sectoral ministries and specialized governmental agencies, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

“Evidence” refers to any body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. It includes both research results, evaluation results, data, citizen opinions, beliefs, and traditional knowledge.

2.

Landscape of evidence production on FNS issues in Benin



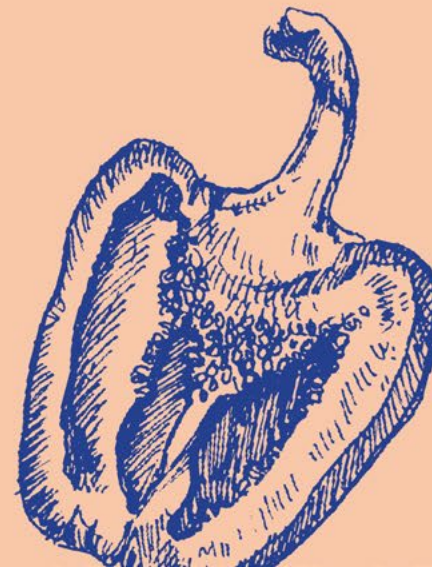
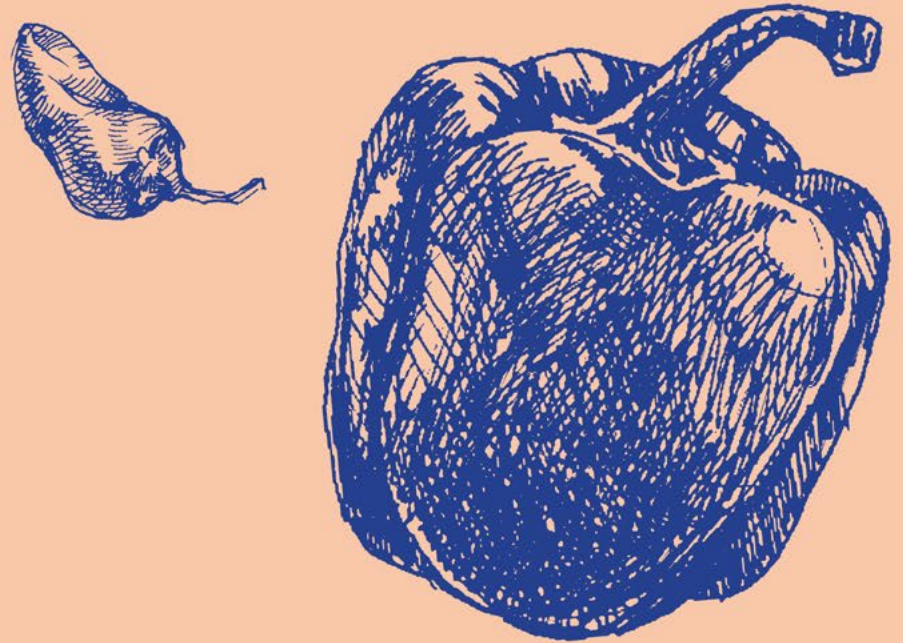
The production of evidence (scientific results, data, evaluation results, citizens' opinions, traditional beliefs, and knowledge) is an act of capitalization, enabling policymakers and practitioners to have baseline information to develop and implement interventions. In Benin, the production of evidence in FNS is led by several stakeholders, including universities, research institutes, consultancy firms, specialized governmental agencies, ministries, CSOs, and technical and financial partners. Evidence is therefore being generated, so the question is *why available evidence is rarely valued*. The stakeholders indicated that gathered evidence often remains in the hands of the research centers, institutes and universities, and therefore is of very little use or value for policymakers,

development actors or the private sector working on FNS. When evidence is available, stakeholders pointed to the quality and relevance of the evidence which is intrinsically linked to the initial underpinning research questions and its funders. Unfortunately, research questions are generally framed in a way to gain access to foreign funding opportunities. As a result, evidence gathered rarely fits the interests and concerns of local policymakers and practitioners. According to participating stakeholders, this situation has arisen because of an absence of a national FNS agenda. Such an agenda could suggest the 100 most relevant research questions on the issue of FNS in Benin, for example.

In Benin, evidence production on FNS involves both researchers, practitioners and policymakers communities.

3.

Decision-making chain in the field of FNS in Benin's municipalities



The decision-making chain is a succession of actions led by a network of stakeholders that result in strategic or spontaneous interventions. The structure and composition (Figure 1) of the decision-making chain determines the relevance and quality of the final decisions taken downstream.

In their different roles, each stakeholder participating in the decision-making chain brings added

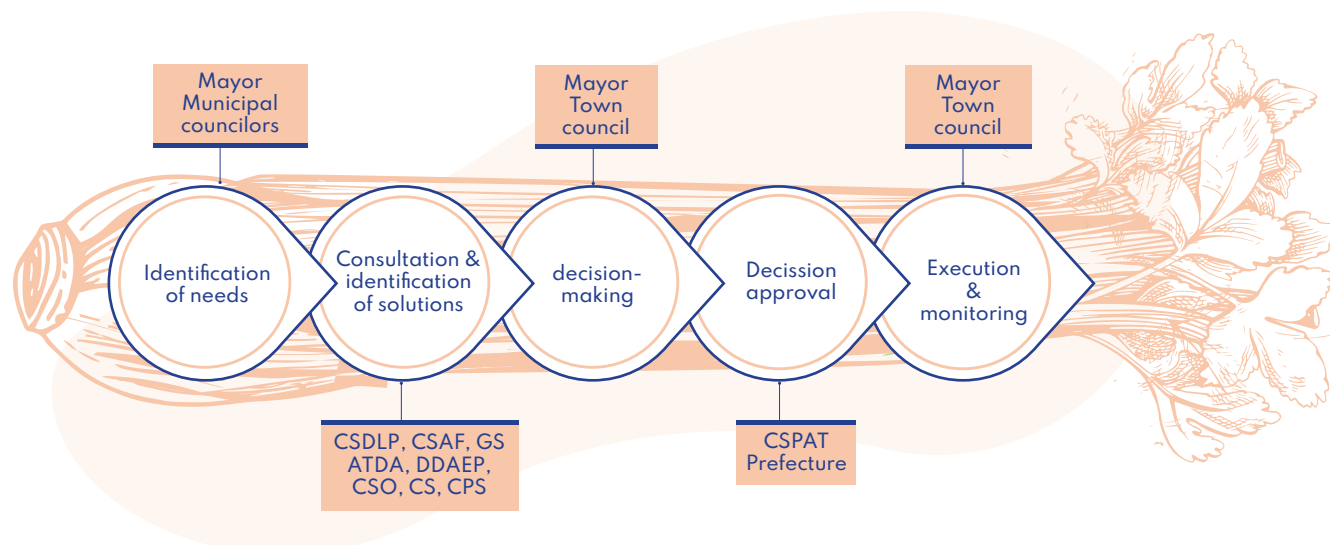


Figure 1 Chain of decision-making in the field of FNS in Benin

CSDLP = Head of the Local Development and Planning Department; CSAF = Head of the Administration and Finance Department; GS = General Secretary; ATDA = Territorial Agency for Agricultural Development; DDAEP = Departmental Directorate of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries; CSO = Civil Society Organization; CS = School District; CPS = Centre for Social Promotion; CSPAT = Head of Planning and Land Use Planning

value to the downstream decision. As illustrated by Figure 1, while legality and policy coherence is ensured by the mayor and the prefect (and associated staff), the technical relevance of the decision (appropriateness and usefulness) is essentially ensured by CSDLP, ATDA, DDAEP, and CSOs. The latter are the ones who provide the necessary evidence to support the process and the resulting decision.

All participating stakeholders agreed on the following as key values of the current institutional decision-making system which:

- guarantees the legality, acceptance and consistency of decisions taken downstream;

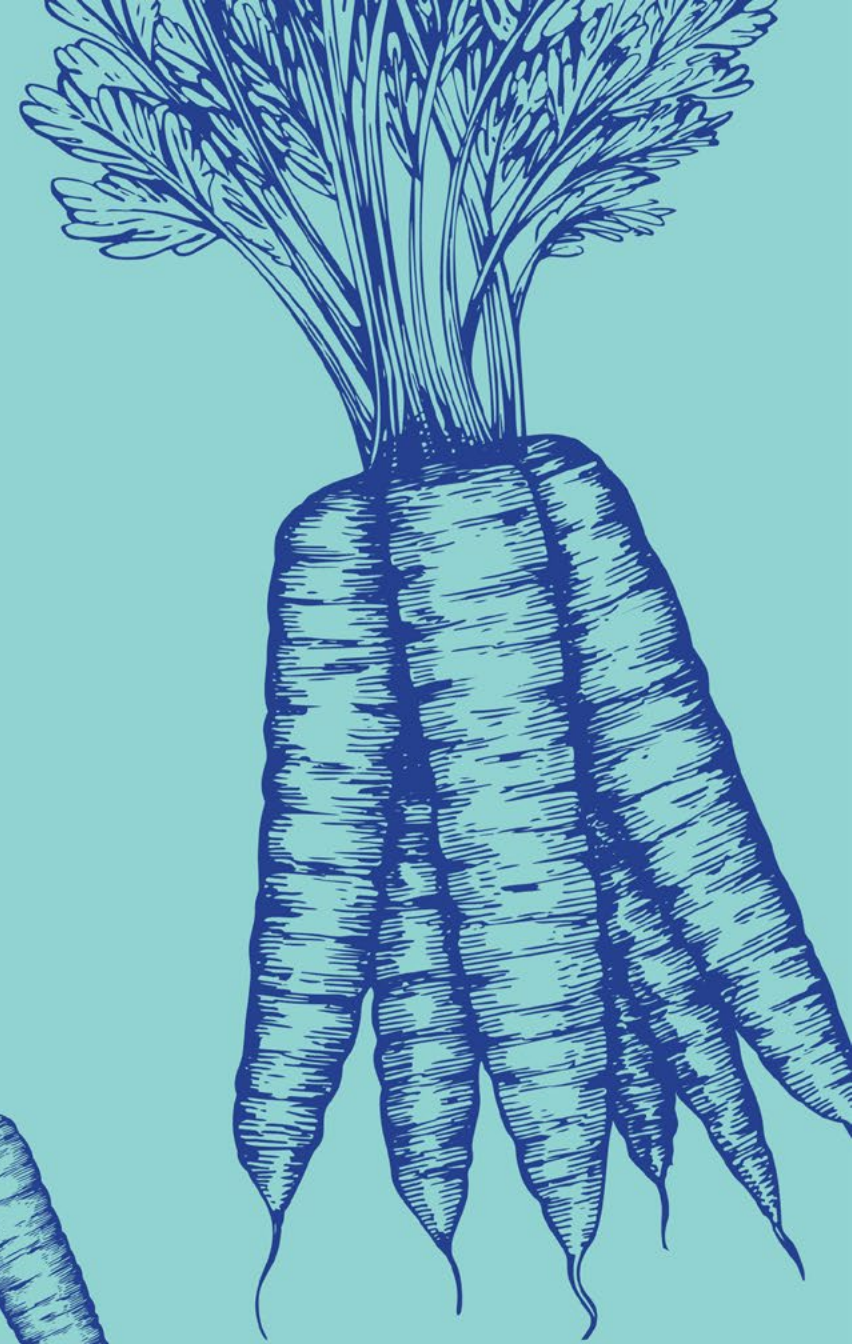
- allows for collaboration and cooperation among several services and stakeholders concerned with the issue of FNS, and thus ensures co-learning; and
- ensures that informed decisions are made.

Although indicated as effective by local policymakers, the current FNS decision-making chain at the local level is beset by unclear decision-making authority, political blockades, high costs of planning processes, the slowness of the process, and the reliance on external expertise which prevents local policymakers and their staff from gaining knowledge and capacities in these areas.

The FNS decision-making process in local municipalities promotes cooperation and collaboration of multiple stakeholders, bringing more legitimacy, legality, relevance, and consistency to downstream decisions.

4.

Culture of evidence use in policymaking



In the current context of scarcity of qualified human resources and lack of financial resources, it was assumed that local elected officials made decisions that were not based on evidence. However, most of the municipalities surveyed were aware of the importance of evidence to support decision in all development sectors. All of them agreed on its importance, specifically for decision-making processes in health and FNS.

Regarding FNS, almost all municipalities (93%) recognized the usefulness of evidence for better decision-making. According to local policymakers, evidence is useful at all stages of developing an intervention, including the scoping and screening stage, the design of policy options, as well as the elaboration of mitigation measures. Despite recognizing its usefulness, about one-third of the municipalities considered that evidence is not necessary in all situations, especially when the intervention is urgent or when the available evidence is fragmented or unusable.

In practice, during decision-making processes, local policymakers indicated that they relied on statistics (81%), general guidelines from central government (78%), the opinions of members of the municipal council (74%), citizens' opinions, local beliefs and traditional knowledge (70%), the orientations of technical and financial partners (63%), and the economic and financial impacts of decisions (59%). None of the municipalities had a staff member with the skills to investigate,

capitalize, and make evidence available to policymakers. Therefore, almost all of the municipalities relied on external expertise to assist them in sourcing evidence during the development of policy interventions in FNS. The most important sources of evidence were deemed to be CSOs, followed by hospitals, National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis databases, technical and financial partners, ministry departments, and, to a lesser extent, consultants from development associations, and citizens.

In theory, researchers and experts are assumed to be the most credible and important sources of evidence, so the expectation was that this source would be the most consulted by municipalities. Curiously, none of the 27 municipalities participating in this study reported asking the scientific community (researchers) for evidence. Only one-sixth of investigated municipalities were informed of the results of studies carried out in their territory. Similarly, very few municipalities interacted with researchers to commission studies on issues of interests for local communities. Policymakers indicated that the cost of accessing the services of researchers was too speculative and unsupportable for the local community budget. Other important reasons were communication problems, the quality of the services, and, to a lesser extent, the confidential and sensitive nature of some political decisions.

Local policymakers routinely rely on local beliefs, traditional knowledge, citizen opinions, in addition to formal evidence (data, research findings, etc.)

5.

Constraints for routine evidence use



Lack of qualified human resources in the municipal administration. Local administrations often rely on the capacities of locally-elected officials and a small technical team. About four-fifths of investigated municipalities do not have researchers or policy officers in their team to ensure the production or synthesis of evidence.

Difficulty in accessing evidence is characterized by a lack of computer equipment and poor internet access to reach online resources. About 74% of municipalities indicated that their internet connection system did not allow them to access available evidence. About 61% also highlighted a lack of computer equipment. Besides, there is also a lack of brokering agents to facilitate the handling and understanding of evidence. According to 74% of the municipalities, the absence of such brokers further increases the gap between the end-users of evidence and the evidence production spheres.

Availability and quality of evidence. First, the evidence is scattered across many sources. Most municipalities (58%) indicated that the dispersal of evidence hinders its use. Going through several sources to get evidence wastes time, with the added risk of missing essential evidence that is not always publicly accessible. Second, the evidence is often not complete and is outdated.

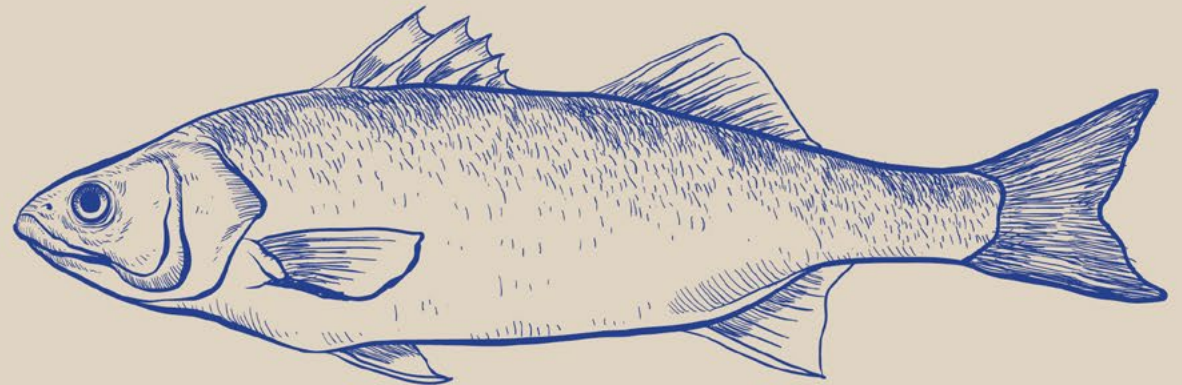
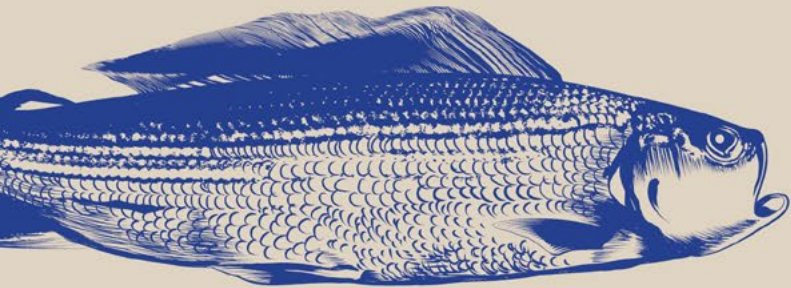
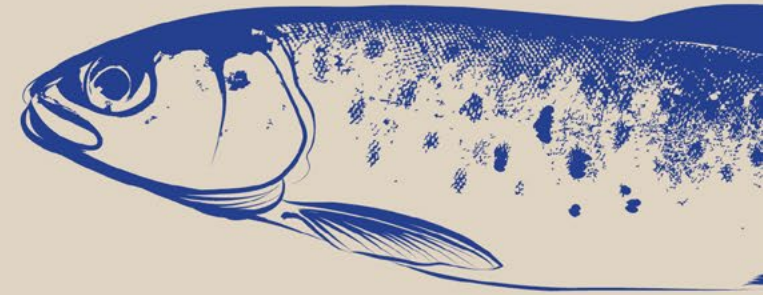
About 71% of municipalities mentioned the age of the evidence as a factor preventing them from using it. The municipalities stated that most of the evidence they could access, particularly scientific data, is very localized, difficult to generalize, and is not updated. Third, evidence takes little or no account of social facts. For most municipalities (57%), the evidence is sometimes not relevant because it is based on scientific reasoning and methodologies which simplify social realities. For example, reducing the distance between households and water points is assumed to decrease the amount of time women devote to fetching water, yet social realities mean that distance is not the only factor that determines the times it takes. In practice, therefore, the evidence does not always fit the realities of the daily life of local communities.

Socio-political burdens affect decisions at the municipalities' level and limit or pervert the use of evidence. Although very few municipalities have officially recognized that they take electoral considerations into account when developing interventions, evidence can be ignored in favour of socio-political considerations or even intentionally misused.

Local policymakers in Benin rarely collaborate with the research community.

6.

Solutions to facilitate evidence use by municipalities



It is clear that local policymakers are aware of the need of evidence to inform decision-making. However, the routine use of evidence in decision-making is constrained by many factors. Below are some potential solutions to improve the use of evidence:

Strengthening the technical and material capacities of municipal administrations. Almost all municipalities (95%) indicated that this action would foster their culture of evidence use.

Designing a platform that gathers relevant evidence. About 89% of municipalities recommended setting up a digital platform that synthesizes and displays evidence on FNS in formats and language easily usable by policymakers.

Designing a framework to connect local policymakers and researchers. There was overwhelming support for the idea of linking municipalities with researchers. This could take several forms, including open days, conferences, and debates, or the offer of internships or research stays in municipalities so that research questions that fit the needs of local policymakers can be developed.

Setting up a helpdesk for evidence-based advice and support. Most municipalities (63%) saw the benefits of establishing an advisory support service that could guide and support local policymakers in the search for, and understanding and use of, evidence. Municipalities would be able to formulate specific questions that the helpdesk could then provide answers to through short briefs.

Lightening of the institutional decision-making system. Most municipalities (52%) wanted the current decision-making system to be streamlined, to speed up the development of interventions and their implementation. Implementing this solution does not depend solely on local authorities, but also requires policy interventions at the central governmental level.

Having access to brokers to boost evidence use in municipalities. Most municipalities indicated that CSOs and technical and financial partners would be appropriate brokering agents to bridge the gap between municipalities and researchers. These stakeholders are positioned as natural brokers, are already established in local communities, and could more effectively bridge the gap between local authorities and evidence producers.

For routine use of evidence in decision-making, there is need to reinforce capacities of policymakers while improving their access to evidence sources.



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