

policy cultures in Nigeria

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Executive Summary

Nigeria is one of the leading economies in Africa. However, the country still faces challenges related to governance inefficiencies, which undermine its development and contribute to poverty. In addition, patronage politics, corruption, and ethnic divisions contribute to degraded performance in key sectors such as infrastructure, health, and education. This study examined policy cultures in Nigeria to uncover their role in shaping the use of data and evidence in decision-making. Studying policy cultures can explain why certain policies emerge, why others fail, and why local innovations often struggle to gain traction.

The goal of this study was to examine how policies in Nigeria are identified, debated, and institutionalized, and how policy cultures shape the use of data and evidence in decision-making.



Research Summary

Policy Culture – “shared norms, values, beliefs, and institutional practices that shape how decisions are made, how evidence is interpreted, and whose voices are considered legitimate in the policy arena. It encompasses how decisions are made, who is included, how knowledge is utilized, and what values dominate the policy process”

Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach comprising qualitative and quantitative methods. Data was collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), a questionnaire-based survey, and a review of literature. The study covered 398 survey respondents and 40 key informants who included policymakers, researchers, civil society actors and community representatives. The review of literature covered policy documents, institutional reports, legislative frameworks, grey literature and academic publications relevant to Nigeria. The study also applied the Utafiti Sera House model to assess how structured knowledge-policy communities influence agenda setting and policy translation.

Key Findings

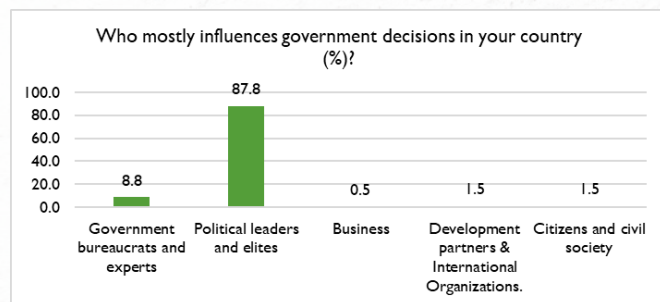
Predominant policy cultures in Nigeria

The findings suggest that policymaking in Nigeria is centralized and elite-driven, with elite consensus and political considerations frequently outweighing evidence in decision-making, and sentiments rooted in ethics, religion, or elite preferences often steering the policy direction.

Political leaders have the most influence on policy decisions: Majority of the study participants reported that political leaders—rather than technical experts or citizens—had the most influence over government decisions (Fig 1). In contrast, only 1.5% thought citizens hold the most influence. While Nigeria has formal documents that outline its long-term development agenda, in many cases action still leans more toward political pragmatism than empirical grounding.

Donors gain influence policy through global frameworks and commitments, such as the sustainable development goals, and health targets set by the World Health Organization etc. In Nigeria, these priorities are integrated into national plans and strategies in hybrid policy models that combine global guidelines with local adaptations, but which are rarely shaped by grassroots innovations.

Figure 1: Participants' perceptions on policymaking influence



Citizens have limited input in shaping policy decisions: The research established that while Nigeria has legal provisions to enable citizen participation in policy processes, implementation still favours the elite as public hearings are highly technical and dominated by elites. Policy feedback loops are also weak, and there are long intervals (7–10 years) before policy revisions, while public trust in government intentions is low. Both policymakers and policy users reported that they relied the least on citizen voices to inform decision-making.

Policy making process is not inclusive: Policymakers and end users widely perceived the policymaking process as lacking in transparency and inclusivity – nearly half of respondents (47%) rated policymaking as “not transparent.”

Evidence and other considerations in policy formulation

The findings show that the use of evidence in policymaking in Nigeria is influenced by a mix of political and institutional conditions, which include:

- Political calculations, consideration of donor priorities or urgent social pressures, which override the evidence presented by data.
- Reliance on tacit knowledge: Policymakers also largely rely on tacit knowledge—drawn from lived experience, informal networks and context-specific insights —rather than empirical evidence.
- Influence by a combination of stakeholder consultations, emerging national priorities, public interest, and technological changes, especially at the broader national level, including at the National Assembly.

“The removal of oil subsidies [in 2023] was guided by extensive economic analysis and sustainability concerns, reflecting strong evidence-informed analysis” (Policymaker)

Respondents also felt that research-based evidence is also more appreciated by policymakers (30%) than policy end users (19%), suggesting a stronger

Study participants cited some instances where organized, sustained citizen pressure influenced policy. These include the Not Too Young to Run campaign in 2016, which led to a constitutional amendment of the minimum age requirements to run for political office from 30 years to 25 years. Another example cited was the 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality in Nigeria. However, such cases remain rare.

Evidence vs Tacit Knowledge: When the Government of Nigeria was implementing the National Health Insurance Scheme reforms in the late 2000s and early 2010s, evidence from official evaluations showed low enrolment among the rural population, and suggested solutions such as better public sensitization and infrastructure upgrade. However, senior bureaucrats in the government and local political leaders knew that mistrust of government projects was a greater barrier than awareness. Due to their experience working with communities in other schemes, they advocated for working with traditional rulers, religious leaders, and local health volunteers to promote enrolment, even though this was not what the evidence had suggested.

Institutional emphasis on academic or formal research within policymaking circles.

Institutional structure and governance to enhance uptake of evidence in Nigeria

The study established the institutional factors and structures that enhance the uptake of evidence in policymaking. These include the following:

- Having access to evidence: Some participants reported that ‘many organizations use survey data from communities and external sources like Afrobarometer and Freedom House’ to inform their decisions. Research is more likely to be used when emerging evidence brings critical policy issues to light. For instance, participants cited recent policy decisions, such as the suspension of some election policies and the controversial Naira redesign as examples of how emerging evidence, coupled with strong public opinion, led to re-evaluation or reversal of key policy decisions.
- Institutional partnerships and collaboration with advisory bodies allow the legislature to access technical input from think tanks and research units. For instance, these collaborations enable the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), universities, and similar organizations to contribute expertise, analysis, and perspectives that inform legislative decisions. In the study, 34% of participants said they used evidence from external think tanks and 32% relied on internal research units.

- **Collaboration and coordination between government agencies:** The study found that collaboration and coordination across ministries and departments, also supports research uptake, as the resultant policies are also grounded in shared evidence and national priorities.

Embedding evidence into policy: The National Evaluation System has a structured mechanism for generating, analysing, and applying data across ministries and agencies. This system institutionalizes evidence use, ensures consistent evaluation of government programs, and supports accountability. This system is guided by a National Evaluation Policy (NEP)

Best practices and strategies that enhance the policy culture in Nigeria

The study identified the following as best practices and strategies that can be adopted in Nigeria to enhance the policy culture and the use of evidence:

- **Institutional incentives:** Policy makers suggested having performance-based incentives (38%), increased funding (31%), and legal mandates (30%) would incentive them to apply evidence in decision-making.
- **Capacity building:** Equipping leaders with the tools to understand and use evidence was seen as a major cornerstone, to ensure they can interpret and apply evidence.
- **Enhanced regulation and governance:** Having effective governance mechanisms such as the National Assembly's policy review process, and NITDA's Data Protection Scheme, can ensure that policy decisions are grounded in credible data and are reflective of national needs.
- **Integrating real-world learning:** Institutions like NIPSS integrate real world issues through research tours, while social dialogue with trade unions ensures inclusive, grounded policies. These mechanisms help to generate grounded, actionable policy recommendations.

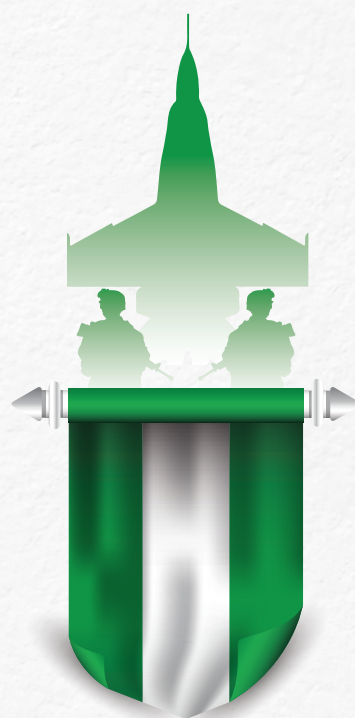
To strengthen the research-policy engagement, respondents suggested more inclusive stakeholder involvement (35%) in the research process, regular policy-research dialogues (34%), and strengthened dissemination strategies (30%). In addition, to support use of evidence, participants suggested that the legislative oversight of government programmes needed to be strengthened through funding, expertise, and dedicated research units.

Strengthening mechanisms for public participation and citizen engagement in policymaking can help to align policies with real-world needs and enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness. Participants reported that knowing their opinion matters (42.4%) would encourage them to participate in policy

Leveraging the Utafiti Sera House model to support integration of evidence into policymaking in Nigeria. The findings show that the awareness of the Utafiti Sera House model is very low among policy actors and the public in Nigeria, and its current impact is therefore very limited. Very few respondents knew about it (7.6%) and even fewer reported that their organization frequently engaged with it. In addition, participants suggested that adoption of the model for policy decisions would face several obstacles, including political resistance (**Fig 2**).

The following strategic actions can help the Utafiti Sera approach to gain traction in Nigeria:

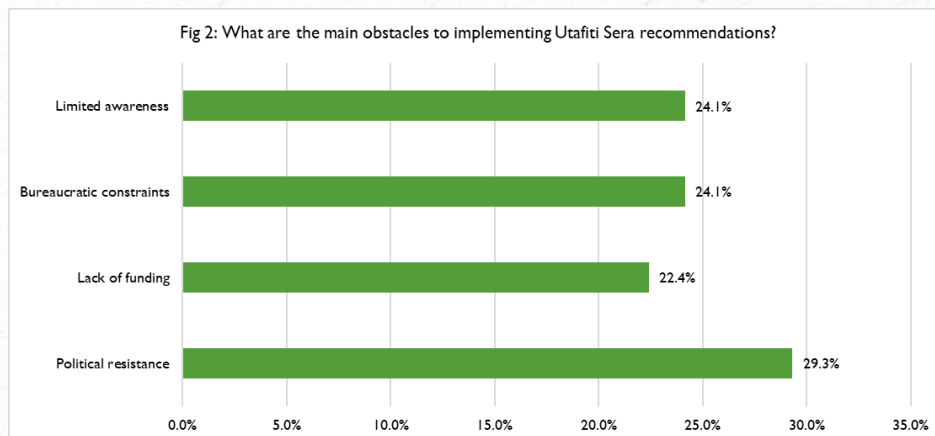
- **Boost visibility** of the model through targeted outreach, capacity building, and structured stakeholder engagement.
- **Institutionalize evidence-use norms** by linking research credibility checks (peer review, expert validation) to policy processes.
- **Reduce political interference** and strengthen governance systems to safeguard evidence from elite capture.
- **Leverage local decision-making models** that reflect Nigerian realities.
- **Harness technology** (such as digital data platforms, AI, big data) for transparent, inclusive policymaking.



Recommendations

This study recommends the following actions for implementation by policymakers and other actors in Nigeria, to institutionalize and strengthen the use of research and evidence in the policy process, and to build a policy culture that is participatory, inclusive, and sensitive to the needs of the larger population:

- **Design and adopt a structured model for sustained public participation** to support frequent dialogue with citizens and transparency, to help align policies with public priorities.
- **Foster a culture where evidence is valued** and systematically applied in the policy process.
- **Reduce political influence in the policy process** and embrace wide stakeholder engagement.



- **Implement reforms to strengthen governance systems** and institutional frameworks that support evidence-based, citizen-driven policymaking that is aligned to law, rules and principles of governance
- **Improve inter-agency collaboration to support sharing of information** within government institutions and between organizations that influence public policymaking.
- **Embrace successful local models of decision-making**, which support the inclusion of local realities and needs, and ensure policy decisions respond to local challenges.
- **Adopt the Utafiti sera model**, to improve evidence-based decision-making and to strengthen linkages between researchers and policymakers.

This Research Summary was developed by Jim Kaketch and Samwel Oando from PASGR. It was produced in the context of the Utafiti Sera projects under policy cultures study in Africa. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of PASGR, their staff or Board of Directors.



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