

POLICY CULTURES IN KENYA

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Research Summary

INTRODUCTION

The history of policymaking in Kenya has been a gradual evolution from centralized and elite-driven governance towards a more participatory and decentralized system. In the years following independence, policy decisions were largely top-down, with minimal citizen participation. While national development plans guided policy, they were often more aspirational than evidence-informed, reflecting elite visions rather than empirical realities. Pressure by international financial institutions in later years reshaped Kenya's policy space but prioritised liberalization, privatization, and fiscal austerity, with little regard for local socio-economic dynamics. Evidence generated by local researchers and civil society was often ignored, as donor priorities dominated policy directions. The promulgation of a new constitution in 2010 and the introduction of devolution marked a critical turning point, as county governments became key players in policymaking, requiring evidence to guide localized planning and service delivery. Parliamentary oversight, judicial review, and independent commissions also created new spaces for evidence-informed debates. This study explored how evidence is generated, shared, and integrated into the policymaking process in Kenya, as well as the barriers and opportunities that exist for evidence-informed policymaking.

METHODS

The study used a mixed methods approach comprising of quantitative and qualitative methods to allow for a holistic understanding.

- **Desk Review and Stakeholder Mapping:**

A comprehensive review of the literature provided secondary data and context, while the stakeholder mapping helped to identify relevant actors in policy processes. A review of official documents, policy papers, legislative records, and media sources was also carried out to supplement findings and provide historical and comparative insights.

- **Sampling:** The researchers used non-probability (stratified) and purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of key stakeholders. Snowball sampling was also used for key informant interviews, to identify experts and active participants. In all, 369 participants took part in the study.
- **Survey:** Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed to a wide range
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Qualitative data was gathered via interviews with representatives from government agencies, research institutions, and other relevant organizations.

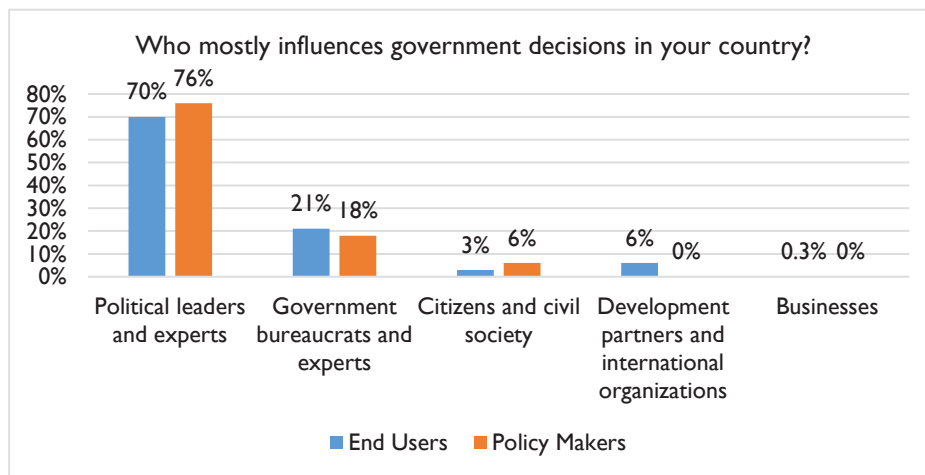
Stakeholder Category			Number Interviewed
Government Agencies & Policy Institutions			50
Research Institutions & Think Tanks			45
Civil Society Organizations			80
Private Sector and Industry			19
Development Organizations	Partners/	International	57
Academia (Universities)			40
Community Based Grassroots Groups	Organizations (CBOs)/		83
Total			369

Key Findings

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POLICY DECISIONS IN KENYA

- Political interests heavily influence government decisions and policy: The findings show that Kenya's policy formulation process is heavily influenced by political leaders and interests. Over 70% of the respondents reported that political leaders and experts mostly influence government decisions (Fig 1). Political interests and elite bargaining, often at the expense of structured, participatory, and evidence-based approaches, lead to policy decisions that secure political legitimacy, ensure electoral success, or maintain elite networks.

Figure 1: Respondents' perceptions on who mostly influences government decisions in Kenya (%)



- Donors also influence the policy agenda, particularly in health (e.g., HIV/AIDS programs), education, and governance, through funding for research, pilot programs, and sectoral reforms. Asked what role development partners should play in promoting evidence-based policies, 38% of policymakers suggested funding research initiatives, while nearly a third said providing technical support and building policymaker capacity. However, donor-driven priorities may not always align with national needs, creating tension between external influence and local ownership
- Citizen voices seen as influential in shaping policy decisions: Asked how most policy decisions are made in Kenya, a significant portion of policymakers (47%) said that citizen voices were the most influential in shaping policy decisions, followed by insights from procedure and practice in implementation (practice-informed evidence) and tacit knowledge held by policymakers and practitioners. Only six percent of the respondents

Perceptions on Kenya's policy-making process

Seventy-three percent of end users and policymakers (59%) suggested that Kenya uses a blended mix of foreign and local models in formulating policies.

Most policymakers (71%) thought that the policymaking process in Kenya is 'somewhat transparent,' while 18% believe it is not transparent, and only 12% consider it very transparent.

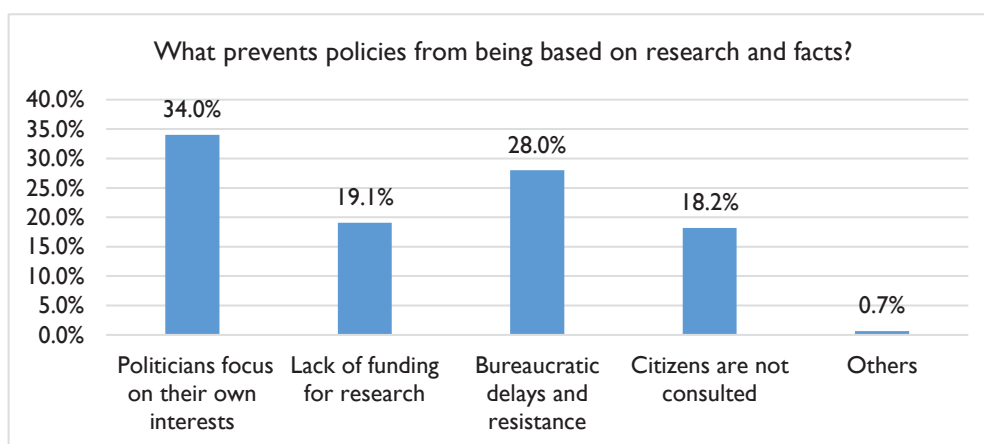
Majority of policymakers (71%) believe that most policies are revised within 3–5 years based on evidence or feedback, but 24% believed revisions happen every 7–10 years, and 6% said never.

The role of evidence in shaping dominant policies

The research found that the use of evidence in making policies and government decisions remains secondary to political considerations and donor interests, which limits the consistency, effectiveness, and sustainability of policy outcomes. For instance, some policies, such as the National Education Sector Strategic Plan and the Sexual Offences Act (2006) demonstrate strong use of evidence, but others such as the Hustler Fund and Huduma Namba initiatives reflect politically driven interests towards electoral goals

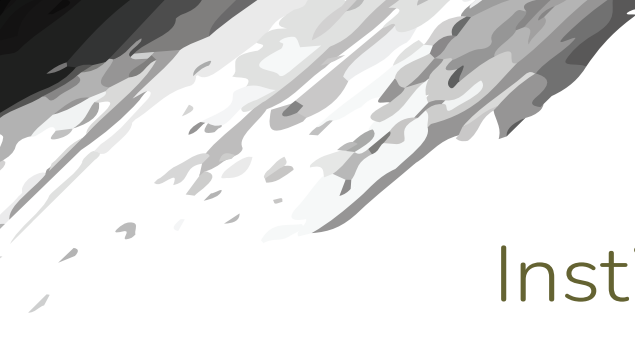
Most policymakers cited political self-interest (34%), and bureaucratic resistance (28%) as the key obstacles to the use of research and facts to inform policies (Fig 2). Other obstacles include lack of research funding (19.1%), and limited citizen consultation (18.2%). Lack of political goodwill (42%) was cited as a key factor hindering the integration of external research into government policymaking.

Fig 2: Factors that prevent policies from being based on research and facts



Half of policymakers who reported using evidence relied on internal research units within government, and 33% depended on external think tanks. To promote uptake of evidence into policymaking, the respondents suggested ensuring that the evidence is relevance to real-life problems (36.3%), fostering collaboration between researchers and government (36%), and simplifying research language (27%). About a third of the respondents (32.6%) also suggested that stronger use of evidence was one of the key improvements needed in policymaking in Kenya, along with increased public participation (35.2%), and reducing political interference (30.9%).





Institutional structures that support uptake of evidence

The study established that Kenya has existing structures that support the incorporation of evidence into policy and other decision-making. These include the following:

Structures to support advanced evidence-informed policymaking: Policy initiatives such as the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, Programme-Based Budgeting, and performance contracting promote use of evidence by linking spending to data. Institutions such as KNBS and KIPPRA generate and provide policy-relevant data, and there are digital platforms that support real-time monitoring across sectors. While these efforts have strengthened institutional capacity, sustaining momentum is challenged by political transitions and systemic limitations. The country also struggles with coordination challenges across ministries, duplication of efforts, and bureaucratic inertia as well as dependency on external actors.

Structures for public input and use of local-context evidence: The 2010 Constitution requires public participation, enhancing the legitimacy of decisions and creating room for evidence-informed engagement. The Constitution also

decentralized policymaking, providing opportunity for county governments to adopt evidence tailored to their local contexts in the development of policy guidelines and strategies, including the County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs). The government uses several mechanisms to obtain input from the public and other groups in policymaking, including public barazas, stakeholder forums, technical working groups, and sector-specific consultations, as well as online feedback platforms, and calls for written submissions. However, these consultations are often held late in the policy cycle or without sufficient feedback loops, leading to limited influence on final decisions.

Interaction and collaboration between policymakers and researchers: Many policymakers in the study (47%) reported that policymakers engage with research institutions ‘often’, or ‘sometimes’ (29%), but only 18% reported ‘always’. This suggests a fair level of engagement, with opportunity to increase the frequency and depth of interactions as a strategy to support evidence use in policy processes.

Best practices and strategies for improving policy cultures in Kenya

The study identified the following best practices from Kenya’s efforts to promote evidence-informed policy culture.

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”

Anchoring decisions directly to data: In Kenya, programme-based budgeting requires ministries to justify allocations based on measurable outcomes and past performance. This anchors decisions in empirical data, ensuring that planning and resource allocation remain evidence-driven beyond political timelines. Performance contracting and results-based management models also align performance reviews and resource allocation to measurable outcomes, fostering a results-oriented culture in government operations.

Having platforms that support evidence collection and sharing: Platforms such as Sector Working Groups and Inter-Ministerial Technical Committees provide structured spaces for data sharing, evidence review, and harmonisation of policies, helping to align sector strategies with national priorities while avoiding duplication. In addition, collaborations between universities, think tanks, CSOs, and government agencies create platforms for dialogue and mutual learning. Putting in place platforms for public participation brings citizen input and localised evidence

into policy development, enhancing legitimacy and relevance.

Building the capacity of policymakers enhances their ability to understand, interpret, and apply evidence. Training sessions, policy briefs, and tailored workshops help bridge the gap between researchers and policymakers.

Embedding research capacity: Deploying in-house research staff or seconding technical experts ensures real-time evidence generation and application during policy formulation and implementation. In addition, having strategic partnerships with thinktanks and academic institutions provides access to reliable data, comparative research, and technical support, enriching policy with diverse evidence sources.

Advocacy by media and the civil society is effective in pushing evidence-based agenda. For instance, media coverage of public health crises, environmental concerns, and gender-based violence was effective in pushing the government to act on research findings.





How the Utafiti Sera House model can support integration of evidence into policymaking in Kenya

The Utafiti Sera House model creates structured spaces where researchers, policymakers, civil society actors, and practitioners continuously engage on specific policy themes. Unlike ad hoc consultations, Utafiti Sera emphasizes sustained engagement, co-creation of knowledge, and mutual trust. By institutionalizing dialogue, it bridges the gap between knowledge production and policy uptake.

The model has been applied in Kenya to address issues such as youth employment, social protection, gender equality, and urban resilience. The model's strength lies in its ability to convene diverse actors and build consensus around policy solutions. It also enhances the legitimacy of research by embedding it in participatory dialogue rather than presenting it as external expertise.

The study found that scaling and adapting the Utafiti Sera model could significantly enhance Kenya's policy culture. By creating multiple "houses of evidence" tailored to thematic issues, Kenya can institutionalize evidence-informed policymaking beyond donor-driven initiatives.

Recommendations

Kenya's policy culture is evolving towards greater recognition of the importance of evidence in decision-making. However, entrenched political interests, resource limitations, and institutional weaknesses continue to constrain the systematic use of evidence. Based on the findings, this study makes the following recommendations for policymakers and other actors to strengthen Kenya's policy culture:

Institutionalize the use of evidence – Establish legal and policy frameworks that mandate the integration of evidence into policymaking at both national and county levels.

Build Capacity – Invest in continuous training for policymakers to enhance their ability to interpret and use research findings.

Strengthen Research-Policy Linkages – Promote partnerships between academia, CSOs, and government to foster knowledge sharing.

Improve Knowledge Management – Develop robust data systems, archives, and M&E frameworks to preserve institutional memory.

Enhance Political Will – Encourage political leaders to champion evidence-informed decisions, while reducing reliance on ad hoc political expediency.

Scale up Utafiti Sera Model – Expand the model to cover additional thematic areas and institutionalize it within government structures.

Promote Inclusivity – Ensure that evidence generation and uptake reflect the needs of marginalized groups, enhancing equity in policymaking.

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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