

From Rhetoric to Reality: Embracing Evidence-Based Policy for Lasting Impact

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Evidence based policy making (EBPM) is the process of policy development that confers to the facts and credible information while making policy decisions in order to ensure that the decision made are unbiased and driven by people's need rather than political or bureaucratic desire, ideological beliefs or assumptions.¹ In a world where information flows ceaselessly and opinions are abundant, the pursuit of effective governance demands a shift from mere rhetoric to a foundation firmly grounded in evidence-based policy that can overcome unprecedented challenges requiring well-informed decision-making, making the transition from grand promises to concrete actions even more imperative.

Public health policy in the form of laws, regulations, guidelines, protocols has shown to have profound effect on health of the people² Several significant public health achievements in the 21st century have been influenced by some critical policy changes, including smoking bans, sugar levies, efforts to address health inequalities and social determinants of health, human papillomavirus vaccination, ultra-low emission regulations, seatbelt laws, the decriminalization of abortion, the creation of safer workplaces, and more and are supported by evidence back-up.³⁻⁵ Evidence based policy making is more relevant in resource poor settings as they have no luxury to learn from experimentation.⁶

Over the past two decades, Nepal has made commendable strides in improving the health of its citizens. There has been a significant improvement in life expectancy, and maternal, under-five, infant, and neonatal mortality rates have significantly decreased. Furthermore, progress has been achieved in nutrition and indicators related to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).⁷ Some structural and policy decisions guided by key policy documents including national health policy, health sector strategy, health insurance act, public health service act and safe motherhood and reproductive health right act, have significant contributions to

these health achievements.⁸⁻¹³ The foundations for formulation of these documents are the rigorous policy dialogues and use of available evidence. However, can we confidently assert that Nepal has fully embraced evidence-based policymaking? The answer is no. Access to reliable data and evidence, a cohort of professionals with policy analysis and evaluation capabilities, mechanisms to translate research into action, and room for flexibility and adaptability in existing policies are some of the prerequisites for evidence-based policy making.¹⁴ Unfortunately, these prerequisites are in a primitive stage in Nepal.

Increasing public spending on health is a must to promote inclusive social and economic development. However, fiscal space for health is usually limited in low- and middle-income countries.¹⁵ Such fiscal constraint compels governments to cut off budget from certain priority programs. EVP can adequately predict the risk, propose the intervention at early hand and helps for prioritizing the priorities. By using data and research to identify the most pressing issues and the most effective interventions, governments can ensure that taxpayer money is used in the most impactful way. In countries like Nepal, health policies are frequently shaped by political ideologies rather than evidence-based approaches. Political transitions make it challenging to implement health policies, as policies formulated by one government may not be embraced by the next. EVP has the potential to transcend these partisan divides. By drawing from credible data sources and relying on scientific methodologies, policymakers can rise above party lines and concentrate on strategies more likely to achieve desired outcomes. This convergence of thought fosters a sense of unity in purpose, elevating public discourse beyond mere debates and toward constructive collaborations. Thus, EVP can serve as a powerful tool to rationalize advocacy for health.

Evidence-based policymaking is not an easy job. It

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demands pragmatism, the fusion of scientific evidence with governance principles, and the art of persuasion to distill complex evidence into actionable policies. Researchers must also acknowledge policymakers' inclinations, their beliefs, emotions, and familiarity with the information when seeking to maximize the utilization of evidence in policymaking.⁵ In many cases availability of comprehensive and credible information to support policy making become challenging while in other cases the deliberate disinformation and unintentional misinformation spread through many different channels makes it difficult to navigate through inaccurate, misleading, and contradictory information which opens ways for manipulation.¹⁶ Politicians and policymakers may cherry-pick or manipulate evidence to support their preconceived agendas. Overreliance on centralized or expert-driven evidence may exclude local knowledge, which could provide a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. In a world where health benefits are unequally distributed, evidence-based policy making (EBPM) should take into account contextual evidence and address issues of equity and social justice. Policy makers should also exercise caution when addressing complex policy issues, as they may not always have straightforward solutions. Relying solely on evidence can oversimplify these issues and lead to inadequate or overly narrow policies. Moreover, as evidence-based policy requires a degree of patience for data collection and analysis, it may clash with the rapid-response nature of politics. Balancing the need for comprehensive research with the urgency of addressing pressing issues remains a delicate equilibrium.

In this pursuit, collaboration between policymakers, researchers, and experts from various fields is paramount. An inclusive approach that values interdisciplinary perspectives fosters holistic solutions that consider the multifaceted nature of challenges. Additionally, governments must strive to communicate their evidence-based strategies effectively to the public, bridging the gap between technical analysis and lay understanding to ensure widespread support and engagement.

As we stand at the crossroads of a rapidly changing world, the call to embrace evidence-based policy for lasting impact becomes increasingly urgent. Rhetoric alone can no longer suffice in the face of intricate challenges that demand informed and calculated solutions. By leveraging empirical evidence, governments can transform their promises into tangible outcomes, fostering a society that is not just well-governed, but resilient, adaptable, and equipped to thrive in the years to come. The shift

from rhetoric to reality is not just a pragmatic choice; it is a testament to our commitment to a better, evidence-driven future.

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