SLIDE ONE: Title page

WHY EVIDENCE-INFORMED CABINET DECISION-MAKING?

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SLIDE TWO: Why evidence informed decision making?

My presentation today is to set out the case for using evidence to inform our Cabinet decisions – responding to the main theme of this workshop. I will be asking ***what are the reasons for doing this? And what reassurance can we take that if we do engage with the evidence, we will thereby make better decisions and get better outcomes?***

I know many of us are here because we already believe this. But I think it is useful to review these reasons, especially as they may help to guide us when we are thinking of the practical steps we can take to improve the <u>quality of the proposals</u> submitted to our Cabinets.

SLIDE THREE: Structure of my presentation

- Definitions – seven types of evidence

- Seven benefits of using evidence

- Reflections - policy development process

- Conclusion

SLIDE FOUR: Different approaches to evidence

There are two common schools of thought on the use of evidence in government and by government. On side are the extreme sceptics, who dismiss evidence as being based on manufactured or manipulated data. On the other are those who believe, with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, that in public policy "what matters is what works"[1].

I'll not be giving away too many secrets if I say now that in what follows, I will be sailing closer to the 'what works' shore than to the deep waters of extreme scepticism. But I will return to the extreme sceptics' position before I close to see what useful lessons we might take from their position.

SLIDE FIVE: Seven and a half types of evidence?

Let's first define our terms. What do we mean by "evidence"? I will take some time to spell this out, as it is important to recognise that 'evidence' covers a broad range of different products… here is a working list of 7 categories … perhaps in the course of the week we will add to it:

1. **Scientific/medical** ie double blind control trials – suitable eg to tell effectiveness of bed nets against malaria, or anti-retroviral drugs against development of AIDS

2. **Large scale _quantitative_ data**, often making comparisons eg looking at education policies in different countries and trying to link those to pupil attainment on international tests like PISA. (Such evidence often leads to disputes over whether correlation actually points to causation.)

3. **_Qualitative_ evaluation** focusing on smaller case numbers, asking individual actors about their motivations to try to understand the _reasons why_ something happened as it did.

4. **Policy evaluations**–these might be systematic reviews of all cross-country research in a specific area, eg 'what works to maximise school enrolment of girl children?' or more context-specific evaluations of the results of a pilot study or lessons learned from a donor-funded project.

5. **Census/statistical macro data** – gathered periodically which will tell you the size and demographics of a population. It might also point up very significant social issues, eg the emerging differences in sex ratios of young people in countries where the desire for boy children has led to widespread abortions of female foetuses.

6. **Opinion research** analysing preferences of whole populations, or different demographic slices, or perhaps focus groups of people working in a particular system, teachers and school administrators, or a community which will be affected by the construction of a dam.

7. **Management information or monitoring data** collected in the course of delivering a service eg showing staffing levels, administration costs, number of operations performed per year at a certain surgical unit. Or when a new policy is implemented eg showing early results from a plan to improve traffic flow through a city measuring average before and after journey times or average vehicle speeds.

SLIDE FIVE - CONTINUED

8. And I might add an eighth, more doubtful, category which I would call **anecdotal evidence or personal testimony**. Some may argue that anecdote is the very antithesis of evidence. Others that, if you add anecdotes together, they make invaluable qualitative or experiential data. But what we cannot deny is the political force of a single story or image that captures the public mood. Media pressure around an individual case may be hard to resist. But as we enter the internet and Twitter age it is not even necessary to have traditional media – look at social media use by Egyptians in Tahir Square.

So I offer for our discussion, debate and disagreement <u>seven types of evidence</u>, or <u>perhaps 7 and a half</u>. I would be glad if in our discussion, others add to this list or challenge what I have included.

Anything else???

SLIDE SIX: Policy and evidence

My second definitional point is to ask what is meant by <u>evidence-informed</u> decisions? Many of us are more familiar with a term that was in vogue in the English-speaking world during the 1990s and 2000s - **evidence-based policy**. So what is the difference? Why is it better to speak of evidence-informed policy or decisions?

The distinction being made here is important. The term "Evidence-based" implies for many people that, if you can only present the right evidence in the right way, it will determine the policy answer. Like following a recipe scrupulously and making the perfect exotic meals. But most of us here are not in the business of making exotic meals. A good fish stew or goat curry might be a better analogy, which is as much to do with taste, art and intuition (not to say availability of ingredients) than classical cuisine.

All of us would accept that the decisions taken in Cabinet are *political* decisions. Cabinet Ministers are not, on the whole, faced with one-dimensional problems where simply examining the evidence will determine the best answer. They have to balance moral and political values, the interests of different groups, the political acceptability of different options. My starting position is we are aiming this week to find ways to use evidence to *inform* Cabinet decisions, not necessarily *determine* those decisions.

Hence my preference for the term "evidence-informed" decisions. In the next 20 minutes or so I will present **seven reasons for using evidence to inform Cabinet decisions.** We might say - reasons "why using evidence makes good policy and good politics".

SLIDE SEVEN - Why use Evidence?

First, **evidence will help to ensure that we have properly understood a problem.** Often what presents first is not the root cause of a problem but the *symptoms*. We might have youths being rowdy at the weekend. We might tackle this by increasing the police presence, arresting troublesome individuals, cracking down on alcohol sales, even imposing a curfew. But underneath the presenting problem may be broader social and economic issues of unemployment, alienation, lack of affordable housing, factors which are preventing these youth from marrying, settling down, becoming economically independent, contributing adults.

Examining the evidence, such as trends in complaints about rowdiness over time, or comparisons of different levels of nuisance in different towns or countries, might help to identify the real problem.Evidence will also help to decide the **scale of the problem,** which is crucial to judging its political significance, urgency and possible long term impacts.

Second, **evidence can help us to choose between different policy solutions.** In the example I just gave, the responsible policy-makers in, let us say the Ministries of Interior, Justice and/or Ministry of Youth might ask "What solutions have already been tried? Why have they not worked?" Policy-makers might ask what solutions have been adopted in different countries. They might consult the people closest to the problem…for example, the communities affected, local businesses, the youths themselves – what do they think would relieve this problem?

Slide seven – Continued

The **third** reason to use evidence is to promote value for money. In every African nation, whether a programme is using donor money or our own hard-won national revenue, we want to make the best impact for the resources available. Value for money evidence can be employed in two ways. First, at the stage of deciding which policy to adopt, policy-makers can assess evidence about the predicted costs and estimated benefits of different options. They can make a **cost-benefit analysis**, which may be formal and quantified or more informal. Second, as policy is implemented and its impact is measured, we can use data to **reallocate resources from less effective to more effective programs**.

My **fourth** **reason for using evidence to inform decisions**, is that **evidence will help Ministers to win support, and if necessary funding, for their preferred solution**. Ideally, evidence will often enable consensus to be built around the policy. Political opponents and political allies, the media, the public, interest groups, communities, those individuals who will implement the policy – may all to a greater or lesser extent be persuaded by evidence. Even where Ministers cannot secure complete agreement to a specific policy, evidence can help to establish some platform of consensus or common ground. Clear presentation of persuasive evidence might enable people who disagree about the solution at least to agree over the shape and size of the problem.

SLIDE SEVEN - Continued

Evidence used responsibly to help win support in this way can help to challenge assumptions and prejudices. For example, where a community does not support education of women and girls, we might argue for equality from first principles, speaking of human rights and universal value. But if the rights of women and girls themselves are not recognised, then perhaps other arguments would be more influential. It might be more effective to present evidence about the economic and health benefits to the community of having educated females.

Evidence is invaluable when arguing the case for more money to tackle a problem. The argument might be taking place around the Cabinet table, persuading government colleagues to reprioritise spending. Or it might be in Parliament where legislators are challenging the government's Budget. Or we might need evidence to win the support of donors, development partners, or philanthropic bodies. In each case, evidence of need; evidence of likely effectiveness; evidence of community support or engagement, will give us leverage.

My fifth reason is that, **evidence enables the Government to meet its obligations of accountability.** The public has a right to know what policies are being pursued in its name, and why. Parliament, auditors, the courts, the media all have a legitimate role to play in holding the executive to account. Imagine one of your Ministers has to appear before a Parliamentary Committee, a judicial enquiry or even a tough interview with a high profile journalist [eg Hard Talk on the BBC World Service]. If they have no

evidence to explain why a certain course of action was pursued or why money was spent a certain way, they may feel quite naked. It is the duty of those of us supporting the policy development process to ensure we send our Presidents and Ministers out into the world decently clothed with respectable evidence to justify and explain the policies they are pursuing.

The <u>sixth</u> reason for using evidence to inform decision-making is that **research can help to predict and plan for potential problems**. I am talking here of **risk management**. We know that human systems are vastly complex and inherently unpredictable. Because we cannot be sure that everything will go right, we have to be prepared for what might go wrong.

Policy-makers can do this by looking at previous experience at home or in other countries; they can examine what is known about people's attitudes, abilities and behaviour, to assess where major risks lie. We might examine risks from natural disaster, from conflict, or community opposition, or spiralling costs. We might ask whether technical failure or fraud is possible. And then we can make contingency plans – How to minimise the likelihood of these risks occurring? How to respond if the worst happens?

My <u>seventh</u> and final reason for applying evidence to Cabinet-decisions relates to policy implementation. Once a policy has been agreed and is being implemented, **monitoring data provide valuable indicators to help adjust and fine-tune implementation**. Are the results that were predicted being achieved? If not, do we

SLIDE SEVEN - Continued

need to re-evaluate and adjust our policy? If different ways of delivering the policy are being tested, then evidence gathered by monitoring the policy implementation will enable policy-makers to make adjustments to maximise impact.

These seven reasons for using evidence to inform decisions are summarised in the next slide:

SLIDE EIGHT: Reasons for using evidence

The diagram shows essentially a three stage process

THE NATURE OF EVIDENCE AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY

I began by asking two questions:

- ***What are the reasons for using evidence to inform Cabinet decisions?*** and
- ***What reassurance is there that if we use evidence, we will make better decisions and get the results we want?***

I hope I have answered the first.

But turning to the second - is there any guarantee that evidence-informed policy will work? Is there any guarantee that if we conscientiously gather, analyse and use evidence to inform decisions that a mistake will never be made, policy will never fail, money will never be wasted?

Well, of course not. There are no guarantees. I don't offer the assurance that applying evidence will lead a Cabinet inevitably to the 'right' policy answer. Not least because there never is a single 'right' or perfect policy. There is the best affordable option; or the best fit with our circumstances; or the best solution for the time being. Policy is always open for future revision, future adjustment and future improvement.

And the same holds true for evidence.

SLIDE EIGHT- Continued

Going back to the two broad schools of thought about evidence that I referred to at the beginning of my presentation, we can see that both offer something useful, but neither gives the complete picture.

Scepticism over the value of evidence, especially quantitative evidence, has its place: evidence is never final, irrefutable, or self-evident. It is always *probabilistic.* It is often *context specific*. There is often *disagreement* over what counts as "evidence" and evidence is (and should be) always *contestable*.

We need to be a little sceptical and exercise caution. We need to be careful what evidence we rely on, and the degree to which we rely on it. Research and statistical evidence is not always 100 per cent accurate in the African context.

The "*What matters is what works*" approach is hard to argue against. Who would stand up and say they don't care 'what works'?

But it does not give the full picture. We need to borrow a little scepticism and ask: How do we *know* that it works? How do we know that a given result was not coincidence?

We must also ask *where* does it work? – So much policy evaluation research comes from the developed world. Can those results be transposed into an African context? Or how do they need to be adapted to work in our circumstances? Prime Minister Blair noted that we in Liberia do not do enough communication of our priorities

SLIDE EIGHT - Continued

to maximise the effective participation of our people in that policy process.

As a reformed academic, and as a Cabinet Secretary, I don't believe there is any perfect evidence or any perfect policy. Human affairs are in constant flux and both policy and politics have constantly to adjust and adapt. I think of good policy-making not as [just] concerned with producing the right answer but as undertaking the right process.

Some final reflections on the nature of the policy development process might reveal more about the ways in which evidence is useful in developing better policy.

SLIDE NINE: Policy development process analogies

I've heard policy making compared to the **oil industry**, with research 'upstream' and policy 'downstream'. Data is extracted, processed and then passed to policy makers. Researcher and policy maker are: "part of the same industry but … deal with the product in a different way"[2].

This image has some force, but I think it paints the policy process as too linear. Another analogy is an **adversarial legal system** with prosecution and defence each adducing evidence to support their own case. I like this analogy for illuminating the fact that policy emerges stronger if it has been challenged, if alternative facts and arguments from Ministries or NGOs or interest groups have been tested against each other.

A different way of looking at the element of conflict or challenge would be the traditional M**arx's dialectic** [borrowed from Hegel]. In this process a thesis is offered against which an antithesis is argued. The dialectical process yields synthesis. Progress is a product of this back and forth antagonism.

Less theoretically, you could view policy development as proceeding by means of pendulum swings. A policy theme becomes the vogue – maybe centrally set government delivery targets. This produces benefits and unintended consequences. In the decade that follows different policies are tried to counteract the unintended consequences. For example, in Liberia, there are the 150 day deliverables.

Which leads me to the final analogy: policy making as **trial and error.** In this metaphor, policy is made by constantly testing, adapting, and trying again. Like the cook who keeps tasting his soup then adding more salt. In Liberia, a good example is the transport master plan, which comes back each year, or with each new minister.

These analogies help us to see that using evidence to inform decisions will not produce perfect policy. Policy can never stand eternally; it is always subject to revision. But while it will not guarantee perfect policy, if we use evidence to inform Cabinet decisions, as I have argued, those decisions will be:

- More likely to get to the heart of a problem
- More likely to find an appropriate solution to the problem
- More likely to make good use of resources
- More likely to win support
- More easily explained and justified in systems of democratic accountability
- More likely to predict and plan for what might go wrong
- Better able to benefit from mistakes which have occurred.

SLIDE 10: Chinua Achebe 1986

I hope I have made the case that pursuing evidence-informed decisions is advancing both good policy development and good politics. Let me end by recognising the limits of evidence. For good policy development and good politics, evidence is necessary but not sufficient. To satisfy the human imagination, we also need stories.

You will recall I offered seven types of evidence, or seven and a half.

The final, slightly dubious, category was **anecdotal evidence** or the **individual story**. Purists might not want to include this as valid evidence, but politicians and we who operate in a political environment would do well to recognise its potency. This type of evidence is crucial to the communications task facing governments. Governments need to tell the stories, simply and effectively, of what has been achieved: basically the before and after stories, preferably in pictures.

I will leave you with a quotation from a lecture Chinua Achebe gave in 1986 on the occasion of receiving the Nigerian Merit Award.

> "...I am saying that development or modernisation is not merely, or even primarily, a question of having lots of money to spend or blueprints drawn up by the best experts available; it is in a critical sense a question of the mind and the will. And I am saying that the mind and the will belong first and foremost to the domain of stories."

Thank you