

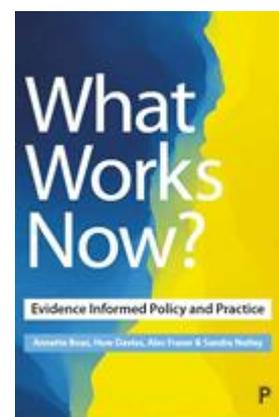
# Report of the What Works Next? roundtable

Nesta, 19 June 2019

This roundtable was organised by Annette Boaz, Huw Davies, Alec Fraser and Sandra Nutley, editors of [What Works Now?](#), in partnership with the Alliance for Useful Evidence at Nesta.

Our chair Geoff Mulgan (Nesta) kicked things off with a 1-minute history of the evidence movement, and a challenge that for evidence to truly become part of the air we breathe, it must be genuinely engaged with both the political and media environments. There are also lots of potential opportunities – for example to engage with work on data and analytics.

Annette Boaz presented an overview of the new book, looking back at twenty years of evidence-informed policy and practice and looking forward to the progress we still need to make<sup>1</sup>. For example, we're still predominantly of the 'push' mindset and at a very early stage of understanding the 'pull' factors of evidence use. Do we in the UK still lead this field- are we going to up our game and keep leading the movement? Should we be learning more from the international space? And in which areas will we see funding and investment?



This was followed by a presentation from Ruth Stewart (Africa Centre for Evidence) on using evidence in international development. Whereas in the UK demand lags behind supply, in South Africa and the Global South it's the opposite - there is an extraordinary appetite for evidence. Though the language is driven from UK, evidence use has its own history in South Africa and its government. The approaches to evidence use in countries like South Africa are born of necessity very often, but this can lead to positive spin offs. Fewer resources may make long-term collaboration between diverse stakeholders essential – this can lead to partnership approaches that are qualitatively different from 'co-production' and can likewise foster methodological innovations. Being situated closer to national governments also may speed up the transition of ideas from researchers to policymakers.

Responses were then invited from the group, which included:

- The importance of establishing evidence principles - not just scientific rigour but also transparency, democracy and equity<sup>2</sup>. (The importance of equity echoed by several).
- In emphasising the different contexts in which evidence is used, let's not forget that we have so much conceptually in common.

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of the 10 strands of continuity and change in the use of evidence in public policy and practice that were identified in the book can be found in the authors' short paper in Public Money and Management - and the even shorter blog on LSE Impact.

<sup>2</sup> For those interested in this idea see Justin Parkhurst's [The Politics of Evidence](#) (open access).

- There's a need for more leaders in the field like Alliance and Africa Centre for Evidence to push the agenda and do the work of connecting communities.
- Need to support individuals to build careers in this space.
- What does it mean to institutionalise evidence use? What does good evidence look like within parliament?
- What is the relationship between a good evidence system and outcomes?
- Do we know / can we see where uptake of evidence results in better outcomes?
- Do we understand how decisions (eg policy decision) are taken?
- We live in a democracy, so evidence must work politically. How do we explore the relationships between evidence, power and politics?
- Have we been constrained by always looking up to the medical model as the best evidence system - with social problems the goals of different stakeholders may conflict, and the funding model is very different.
- How do we make sure the messages from 'What Works Now?' reach out beyond a narrow academic audience to a wider relevant community?
- If we play the long-term game, equipping everyone to use evidence both inside and outside of government, will we do away with the need for 'add on' mechanisms for drawing in scientific advice such as advisory panels?
- Is 'research on research' a field of enquiry?
- Several metaphors emerged during the discussions about research on research. The main one was of an evidence 'ecosystem'.
  - Some questioned whether this is valid (i.e. have we got to such a point?) – and others pointed to the implications of the metaphor – (i.e. large predators exist which consume smaller beings) – is this what we want to encourage?
  - Other metaphors included 'misty mountains' where peaks of understanding or excellence rise from mists of confusion, and the classic 'marshy swamp' connotating an enduring lack of coherence and understanding.
  - An alternative metaphor was of an evidence 'architecture' – less extensive than an 'ecosystem' and also signalling [the dominance of evidence 'push' factors over 'pull' factors](#).
- Should we celebrate the diversity of the field or do more to join up and consolidate (eg standards of evidence). In the room, we lacked consensus on whether 'bigger is better' or 'let 100 flowers bloom' should guide us.

For the rest of the session we identified the conditions, supply, demand and impact factors necessary to move the field forward.

