

Between Knowledge and Power: A Review of the Research-Policy Nexus in Africa's Social Policy

Odhiambo Alphonse Kasera¹; Odhiambo Jasper Ogutu²; Yona Mwo Wilfred²; Oloo Bruno Charles³; Oguna Omondi Hemolike³; Salu Francis Odhiambo³

¹Adjunct Lecturer of Political Science and International Relations at Maseno University; Rongo University, and University of Kabianga

²Finalists in the Masters of Public Policy and Research (MRPP) Program at Maseno University

³Finalists in the Undergraduate BA Program in International Relations Diplomacy with IT and very Close Mentees of the First Author.

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ABSTRACT

Evidence-based policy (EBP) has emerged as a crucial approach in shaping public policy. Originating in the health sector, EBP has tremendously expanded into various social policy domains. In contexts like Africa, the research-policy interface (RPI) should play a pivotal role in driving evidence-informed policy processes - not merely in the making of policies- for addressing the continent's most pressing challenges such as illicit politics, poverty, and the expanding inequality. Based on critical desk review, the study assessed research-policy nexus within the social policy domains in Africa. The analysis resulted into four interrelated themes: the emergence of EBP in Africa, the nuances of the research-policy interface, the potential for enhanced research utility in social interventions, and the structural barriers impeding meaningful engagement between research outputs and policy demands. The analysis yielded three key findings. First, in the context of Africa, the significance of a strong research-policy interface is underscored as a pathway for targeted interventions and equitable resource allocation. Secondly, collaborative networks, knowledge brokering, and the establishment of national policy observatories are perceived as pivotal in bridging gaps between evidence producers and policy actors -designers, makers, evaluators etc.- thereby promoting a more substantive evidence-informed governance framework. Thirdly and most importantly, entrenched challenges persist, including political dynamics that prioritize survival, entertain poverty, and provide public goods based on patron-client models. Consequently, the paper arrives at the conclusion that the realization of a truly evidence-driven policy architecture in Africa will depend not only on the strengthening of technical capacities of supply side actors and concerted donor demands, but, even more critically, on the political will of ruling elites to prioritize public welfare over political expediency.

Keywords: Research-Policy Interface, Africa, Social Policy, Opportunities and Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The Emergence and Necessity of Evidence-Based Policy

The concept of evidence-based policy (EBP) emerged prominently in the health sector during the late 20th century, driven by the need to align clinical practices with scientifically validated outcomes. The term gained traction with the rise of evidence-based medicine (EBM) in the early 1990s, particularly through the work of David Sackett and colleagues, who emphasized the integration of individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research (Sackett et al., 1996). One of the most influential programs in this domain was the Cochrane Collaboration, founded in 1993, which played a

critical role in synthesizing medical research to inform healthcare decisions. EBM became a model for decision-making based on rigorous data, randomized controlled trials, and systematic reviews, eventually influencing policy formulation in public health initiatives such as immunization campaigns, HIV/AIDS management programs, and maternal and child health interventions, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Lavis et al., 2004).

The success of EBM sparked interest in applying similar approaches to policymaking beyond the health sector, giving rise to what is now broadly termed evidence-based policy. In the early 2000s, this paradigm began to influence social policy domains such as education, labor, poverty reduction, and governance. Governments and multilateral organizations, particularly in the Global North, promoted the use of empirical data to inform social interventions, emphasizing accountability, efficiency, and value for money. In the United Kingdom, the Blair administration institutionalized EBP in its governance model, promoting the mantra of “what matters is what works” (Sanderson, 2002). This approach soon diffused into international development practice, where donor agencies and global institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations increasingly demanded policy decisions backed by credible research evidence.

A key alternative to the Cochrane Collaboration within the social sciences was the establishment of the Campbell Collaboration in 2000. Emerging from the growing recognition that rigorous, transparent, and systematic reviews were also critical outside clinical settings, the Campbell Collaboration focused on synthesizing evidence in domains such as education, crime and justice, social welfare, and international development (Petrosino et al., 2001; Littell et al., 2018). Its founding reflected a broader shift within the global research-policy community towards the use of research syntheses to improve policy and practice in complex, non-medical environments (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). The organization adopted rigorous methodologies akin to those used by the Cochrane Collaboration, but with modifications suitable for social interventions, where randomized controlled trials are often less feasible or ethically complicated (Petticrew & Roberts, 2003). Through its systematic reviews, the Campbell Collaboration contributed to improved understanding of “what works” in areas such as reducing recidivism, improving early childhood education, and enhancing social protection programs—offering policymakers credible alternatives to ideological or anecdotal decision-making (Boaz et al., 2008; Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000). Its influence helped shape global standards for social research reviews and promoted the principle that high-quality, context-relevant evidence should be central to the policymaking process across disciplines.

Over the past two decades, the utility and scope of evidence-based policy (EBP) have evolved, extending well beyond the traditional domains of health and core social programs. Contemporary governance challenges—such as climate change, urbanization, migration, and technological disruption—have necessitated the adoption of EBP across sectors including environmental planning, digital governance, and emergency response (Head, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017). Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore both the value and limitations of using real-time evidence in decision-making, showing how data-driven strategies could rapidly inform public health policies, while also revealing institutional, political, and epistemological constraints (Peters et al., 2020; Cairney, 2018).

In Africa, EBP is increasingly institutionalized through national policy observatories, evidence synthesis centers, and embedded research units within ministries (AFIDEP, 2021; Ebele & Yeo, 2016).

The rise of big data, AI-based predictive tools, and real-time monitoring systems has introduced new modalities of evidence generation, enabling governments to target and adapt interventions with greater precision (Young et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2022). However, the interaction between research evidence and policymaking—often termed the research-policy interface—remains fraught with both opportunities and challenges. While the growing demand for evidence offers space for more strategic, accountable, and responsive policy design (Nutley et al., 2007; Cairney & Oliver, 2017), barriers such as weak institutional capacities, political interference, limited absorptive capacity of policy actors, and fragmentation between researchers and decision-makers continue to impede impact (Oliver et al., 2014; Boaz et al., 2019). The complex nature of policymaking, influenced by values, interests, and power relations, often means that even

high-quality evidence struggles to influence agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation in a systematic or predictable way (Head, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017). These tensions are especially pronounced in low-resource settings, where external donor priorities, inadequate local research infrastructure, and limited trust between stakeholders further complicate the effective uptake of evidence. As such, the evolution of EBP into wider domains must be understood not as a linear or technocratic process, but as a dynamic interplay between research production and political, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts.

Against this background, this paper undertakes a rapid yet critical review of a broad spectrum of literature addressing the opportunities and challenges inherent in the research-policy interface across Africa. Recognizing that some of the continent's most pressing development issues—particularly those linked to poverty alleviation—demand robust, context-relevant social policy design, implementation, and evaluation, the focus of the analysis is narrowed to the research-policy interface within the realm of social policy interventions. The reviewed literature points to four overarching and interrelated thematic areas: (1) the emergence and growing imperative of evidence-based policy-making; (2) the conceptual rationale and practical dimensions of the research-policy interface; (3) the opportunities for enhancing the utility of research evidence in social policy formulation and implementation; and (4) the persistent structural and institutional challenges that hinder the alignment between the research supply side (producers of evidence) and the policy demand side (users and implementers of policy-relevant evidence).

To identify and analyze relevant contributions, academic publications and policy reports were sourced through Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. A thematic analysis was conducted using a Literature Analysis Matrix (LAM) structured around the four identified themes. This matrix enabled the systematic categorization of studies—some of which were cross-cutting, while others addressed individual themes in depth—based on their central assertions and empirical or conceptual insights. Accordingly, this paper is organized into four core sections. The introduction establishes the theoretical and empirical foundations (theme 1); section two interrogates the conceptual underpinnings of the research-policy interface (theme 2); section three explores the opportunities that have emerged for bridging research and policy in social policy contexts (theme 3), including three sub-thematic dimensions drawn from the literature; and section four outlines the ongoing barriers that complicate efforts to institutionalize evidence use in policymaking (theme 4). The discussion is embedded within each thematic section, with the final section of the paper synthesizing the key conclusions and policy implications emerging from the review.

The Rationale and Peculiarity of Research-Policy Interface in Africa

The research-policy interface (RPI) refers to the dynamic and iterative interaction between knowledge producers (such as academics, research institutions, think tanks) and knowledge users (including policymakers, bureaucrats, and development practitioners) in shaping public policy (Court & Young, 2006; Sumner, Crichton, & Theobald, 2011). This interaction encompasses the processes through which research evidence is accessed, interpreted, negotiated, and ultimately used—or ignored—in decision-making spaces. In the African context, the RPI has gained prominence as countries seek to ground development policies in context-specific, data-driven evidence rather than ideology or political expedience (Boswell & Smith, 2017; Juma, 2016).

At its core, the rationale behind the RPI lies in the belief that rigorous, context-sensitive research can enhance the quality, legitimacy, and effectiveness of public policies (Langer, Tripney, & Gough, 2016). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as those across sub-Saharan Africa, where the cost of policy failure is high, evidence-informed policymaking offers a pathway to efficient resource allocation, targeted interventions, and improved social outcomes (Newman, Fisher, & Shaxson, 2012). The urgency of this approach is particularly critical in Africa's social sectors—health, education, gender, and poverty reduction—where demand for scalable, equitable policy solutions is rising in the context of complex development challenges (Nabyonga-Orem, Asamani, Makubate, & Kirigia, 2021).

However, the concept of RPI in Africa cannot be reduced to a linear or technocratic model of “research into policy.” Rather, it reflects a highly political and negotiated process influenced by power relations, institutional structures, policy cycles, and the credibility or framing of research evidence (Keeley & Scoones, 2003; Parkhurst, 2017). For instance, in many African countries, the use of research is often contingent not only on its quality but also on whether it aligns with the political economy of decision-making, donor interests, bureaucratic culture, and timing within policy windows (Young & Mendizabal, 2009; Carden, 2009). This has led scholars to adopt more nuanced, systems-thinking approaches that emphasize policy networks, stakeholder engagement, and the role of intermediaries in brokering research evidence (Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000; Weyrauch, Echt, & Suliman, 2016).

Empirical studies further illuminate the multifaceted rationale behind strengthening the RPI in Africa. In Uganda, for instance, the use of community health data through the Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) platform in the Ministry of Health has been linked to more responsive budgeting and priority-setting (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2014). Similarly, in South Africa, evidence from the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) has informed social grants policy, notably in expanding the child support grant coverage (Patel, Hochfeld, & Moodley, 2013). These cases demonstrate that when well-structured, the interface between research and policy can shift political debates, influence agenda-setting, and legitimize progressive reforms.

Nevertheless, it is important to underscore that Africa’s RPI is still marked by fragmentation, institutional silos, and weak incentives for research uptake. A study by Stewart et al. (2019) in 10 African countries revealed that most policymaking processes remain only loosely connected to domestic research institutions, relying heavily on donor-funded technical assistance or grey literature. Moreover, the disconnect between academic timelines and policy cycles, coupled with limited investment in knowledge translation and brokering mechanisms, continues to hinder the potential of RPI (Boaz, Davies, Fraser, & Nutley, 2019).

Despite these limitations, the pursuit of a functional and inclusive research-policy interface in Africa remains both a normative and developmental imperative. As regional organizations like the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa increasingly promote “science-led development” and innovation-based governance (AOSTI, 2024), the RPI provides a strategic bridge to align research with national development priorities, democratize knowledge production, and ultimately foster policies that are equitable, evidence-driven, and locally anchored (Trollope-Kumar, 2020).

Utility of Research Evidence in Social Policy Interventions

The Concept and Practice of Social Policy Interventions in Africa

Understanding the opportunities available for utility of research evidence in social policy interventions requires *prima facie*, an appraisal of notion of social policy intervention itself. Literature on social policy interventions in Africa within the purview of research-policy interface is characterized by four main themes: definition of social policy interventions; the domains of social policy intervention; unique features of Africa’s social policy; and finally the nexus of internal and external actors and influences.

Social policy interventions are generally defined as deliberate, institutional responses—whether by state, civil society, or market actors—designed to address socially significant problems such as inequality, poverty, social exclusion, and vulnerability. They are embedded within broader frameworks of public policy aimed at ensuring minimum standards of well-being for citizens (Deacon, 2007; Midgley & Piachaud, 2011). In scholarly discourse, social policy is not limited to residual welfare systems but encompasses a wide range of redistributive, protective, and developmental state actions (Mkandawire, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990). In the African context, Adésinà (2009) proposes a “transformative social policy” framework, emphasizing the dual developmental and redistributive roles of policy in post-colonial state-building and poverty reduction. Here, interventions are not merely palliative but are deeply political tools for shaping state legitimacy, social cohesion, and economic inclusion (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). African scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of decolonizing social policy theory by framing interventions through indigenous and

historical lenses that recognize communal support systems, kinship networks, and Afrocentric epistemologies (Therborn, 2013; Patel, 2015).

The primary domains for social policy interventions in Africa include education, healthcare, social protection, employment, housing, nutrition, and gender equality (UNRISD, 2010; Garcia & Moore, 2012). Education remains a flagship intervention area, with policies such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Uganda (1997), Free Primary Education in Kenya (2003), and Ghana's Capitation Grant Scheme (2005) being central to post-structural adjustment recovery strategies (Kabubo-Mariara & Mwabu, 2007; Chimombo, 2009). Healthcare has also seen progressive intervention through schemes like Ghana's National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), Rwanda's community-based health insurance (Mutuelles), and Nigeria's Basic Health Care Provision Fund (Yates et al., 2017). Social protection, particularly in the form of unconditional and conditional cash transfers, has gained traction in Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), South Africa's Child Support Grant, and Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Scheme (Handa et al., 2018; Devereux & White, 2010). Other growing areas include youth employment programs, gender-responsive budgeting, and nutrition-specific interventions—highlighting the multidimensional and evolving nature of Africa's social policy priorities (Adésinà, 2009; Razavi & Hassim, 2006).

These policy domains in Africa share several defining characteristics. First, they are highly targeted, often focusing on specific vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, women, and persons with disabilities (Patel, 2015). Second, many are pilot-initiated and donor-supported, making their sustainability and scalability contingent upon external funding cycles (Ferguson, 2006; Mosse, 2005). Third, there is a growing shift from emergency-based relief to institutionalized rights-based approaches, underpinned by legal and constitutional frameworks, as seen in South Africa's inclusion of social rights in its 1996 Constitution (Seekings, 2008). Fourth, multi-sectorality and intersectoral collaboration have become more common, with interventions often integrating health, education, nutrition, and economic empowerment. For example, integrated early childhood development (IECD) programs and school feeding initiatives now straddle multiple policy domains (UNICEF, 2019). Lastly, digital innovations and mobile technologies are being used to improve delivery and monitoring mechanisms—evident in Kenya's Inua Jamii cash transfer program that uses biometric targeting and mobile payments (World Bank, 2020). These features make African social policy interventions simultaneously progressive and precarious—driven by innovation but often limited by capacity, funding, and fragmented governance.

Africa's social policy landscape is uniquely shaped by the interplay between internal policy actors and external development partners. Internally, actors include national governments, line ministries, parliamentary committees, decentralized units, civil society organizations (CSOs), faith-based organizations, and community-based networks (Adésinà, 2009; Hickey, 2009). These actors often reflect diverse and competing policy logics—such as political patronage, developmentalism, and rights-based activism. Meanwhile, externally, global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations agencies (e.g., UNICEF, WHO), and major bilateral donors (e.g., USAID, DFID/FCDO, GIZ) exert significant influence on policy design, funding, implementation, and evaluation (Devereux & White, 2010; Ferguson, 2006). This dynamic creates a hybrid policy environment in which global policy models are localized through context-specific adaptations, but not without friction. External actors often introduce metrics, conditionalities, and epistemologies that may not align with local capacities, needs, or socio-political contexts (Mosse, 2005). Moreover, donor-driven agendas can skew accountability away from citizens and toward financiers, reducing the space for participatory policymaking. Yet, these interactions have also enhanced technical expertise, introduced monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, and enabled the scaling of successful interventions. The research-policy interface in such contexts becomes highly negotiated, with evidence use shaped by power asymmetries, institutional mandates, and the politics of knowledge production (Green, 2017; Parkhurst, 2017).

Types of Evidence for Social Policy Interventions in Africa

Understanding the types of evidence available for social policy interventions in Africa is not only foundational but politically and methodologically urgent. Yet, much of the literature on evidence-based

policymaking (EBP) tends to treat the concept of “evidence” as self-evident, glossing over the heterogeneity, contested meanings, and contextual variability that shape its production and use. This omission marks the very starting point of the challenge at the research-policy interface. The assumption that evidence is a neutral, universally understood input in policymaking fails to account for the political economy in which knowledge is generated, selected, and legitimized. In the African context—where policy decisions often unfold in the midst of donor influence, state fragility, bureaucratic under-capacity, and competing claims to authority—understanding what counts as evidence, who defines it, and how it is mobilized is essential. In this section, I highlight the diverse landscape of evidence, ranging from pseudo-evaluations and donor-funded reports to academic research, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, and how they present both opportunities for improving policy decisions and risks of co-opting evidence for political expediency. Clarifying these evidence types and their institutional and epistemic contexts is therefore a critical step in diagnosing the strengths and limits of EBP in Africa, and in bridging the research-policy interface in designing more responsive, inclusive, and context-aware social policy systems.

One of the most common but often contested sources of evidence in African policymaking is pseudo-evaluation, which refers to evaluations commissioned and conducted by governments that are politically driven, methodologically weak, and rarely independent. These evaluations are often characterized by poor research designs, limited stakeholder engagement, and results that align more with political interests than empirical realities (Porter & Goldman, 2013). In many African states, such evaluations are used to legitimize pre-determined policy agendas or to fulfill donor reporting requirements, rather than to improve programmatic outcomes. The lack of transparency and methodological rigor undermines the credibility of such evaluations, reducing their utility for robust social policy decisions. Additionally, institutional capacity constraints within government departments further compound the challenge, resulting in a culture of compliance rather than learning (Cairney, 2016; Boswell & Smith, 2017).

In contrast, systematic reviews—rigorous syntheses of research evidence using standardized protocols—have become increasingly important in strengthening the evidence base for social policy. These reviews allow policymakers to access consolidated findings from diverse contexts, increasing reliability and transferability. In Africa, organizations such as the Africa Centre for Evidence (South Africa), Campbell Collaboration Africa, and AFIDEP have emerged as leaders in generating systematic reviews in education, health, gender, and poverty reduction (Stewart et al., 2020). However, challenges persist, including limited local research to include in reviews, the high cost of conducting systematic reviews, and the need to contextualize global evidence to African realities. Despite these constraints, the growing collaboration between African institutions and global networks—like the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)—has enhanced both the volume and visibility of evidence synthesis efforts across the continent (Oliver et al., 2014).

Meta-analysis, a statistical technique used to quantitatively synthesize results across multiple studies, is an increasingly important tool for informing evidence-based policymaking. It offers the advantage of summarizing complex and often conflicting findings into a single, more precise estimate of effect size, thus making evidence more actionable for decision-makers (Borenstein et al., 2021). In Africa, meta-analyses have been used in sectors such as education, health, and agricultural development to identify “what works” and to guide policy decisions on scaling interventions (Snijlsteit et al., 2016). For example, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), working through its Africa hubs, has supported meta-analyses on school feeding programs, maternal and child health interventions, and the effectiveness of cash transfers. These syntheses help counteract the issue of small-scale, context-specific studies that may be too limited to inform national policies. However, the use of meta-analysis in African policy contexts remains constrained by several factors: limited availability of high-quality primary studies, especially from African countries; methodological diversity that complicates comparability; and the challenge of ensuring local relevance of aggregated global findings (Stewart et al., 2020). Furthermore, policymakers often require contextual narratives alongside statistical summaries, highlighting the need to complement meta-analyses with qualitative interpretations and stakeholder consultations (Oliver & Boaz, 2019). Despite these challenges,

meta-analysis remains a powerful method for generating robust, scalable evidence that can inform policy formulation, program prioritization, and resource allocation—provided that African institutions are supported to both produce and use such evidence systematically.

Academic research conducted by universities and autonomous think tanks remains a critical yet underutilized form of evidence in African social policy processes. Institutions such as the University of Ghana's Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), Kenya's Institute for Development Studies (IDS), and Nigeria's Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA) regularly produce high-quality academic research on poverty, inequality, education, and governance. However, their influence on social policy is constrained by several factors, including poor communication between researchers and policymakers, lack of policy relevance in academic outputs, and institutional silos that limit policy engagement (Newman et al., 2012; Oranje et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities: universities offer methodological rigor, critical independence, and local knowledge that, if better aligned with policymaking cycles and demand, could enhance policy responsiveness and inclusiveness (Young & Mendizabal, 2009).

Transnational African research networks and institutions have also made significant contributions to evidence generation and policy engagement. The EVIDENCE Collaborative (formerly 3ie Africa), African Union's African Observatory for Science, Technology and Innovation (AOSTI), African Evidence Network (AEN), and African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) are instrumental in bridging the gap between research and policy by facilitating cross-national learning, capacity building, and knowledge brokering (Stewart & Langer, 2021). These organizations often act as intermediaries, translating complex research into accessible formats for decision-makers, while also advocating for institutionalization of evidence-use cultures in public policy. Their regional positioning enables them to contextualize evidence to African socio-political realities, though they still face challenges such as dependency on external funding, limited national ownership, and competing policy priorities (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017).

Lastly, donor-funded research remains a dominant source of policy-relevant evidence in Africa. International agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and philanthropic foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Wellcome Trust regularly commission large-scale studies on public health, governance, education, and climate change. For instance, the World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab and WHO's Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research have generated influential studies that shape national and regional interventions (Gonzalez Block & Mills, 2003). While donor-funded research often brings technical expertise and financial resources, critics argue that it sometimes reflects donor agendas more than national priorities, and may not always be aligned with local political economies or policy cycles (Lavis et al., 2006). Nonetheless, when designed in collaboration with local institutions, donor-supported evidence can significantly strengthen the foundation for policy reform and innovation.

Opportunities for Research-Policy Interface in Social policy Intervention Sector

The research-policy interface in the social policy sector, particularly in Africa, has historically been marked by a significant divide between the supply (research evidence production) and demand (policy application). However, several emerging opportunities are progressively bridging this gap, slowly fostering a dynamic, evidence-informed policymaking process that responds to local socio-economic challenges. However, several vital opportunities are catalyzing the use of evidence in shaping social policies, especially those focused on Africa's priority interventions, namely, in poverty reduction, health, education, and gender equality. These opportunities are central to enhancing the relevance and impact of social policy initiatives across the African continent.

Availability of a Wide Range of Research Evidence Typologies

One of the most significant opportunities to bridge the research-policy gap is the increasing availability of diverse forms of research evidence, including **systematic reviews**, **meta-analyses**, and **academic research**.

These typologies of evidence offer policymakers valuable tools to navigate the complex and often ambiguous landscape of social policy. Systematic reviews provide comprehensive summaries of existing research, consolidating findings across multiple studies to offer high-level conclusions about what works in various contexts (Bettcher et al., 2020). Similarly, meta-analyses aggregate results from diverse studies, providing quantifiable insights into the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as school feeding programs, maternal health policies, and social safety nets (Durlak, 2015). These evidence synthesis tools are indispensable for policymakers, as they provide well-rounded insights that can guide policy decisions across the health, education, and poverty sectors.

The emergence of regional organizations and transnational research producers has further amplified the availability of high-quality evidence. Institutions like the Africa Centre for Evidence (SACE), African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), and Campbell Collaboration Africa are vital in generating and disseminating evidence relevant to Africa's unique socio-economic and political contexts (Sheldon, 2005). These platforms not only produce evidence but also synthesize it in ways that make it accessible and actionable for policymakers. By providing policymakers with consolidated evidence bases, these organizations make it easier to design and implement social interventions that are both contextually grounded and scalable across diverse African settings, thus helping to align the supply and demand sides of the research-policy interface.

The Push by the Donor Community for Evidence-Based Policy Interventions

Another prominent opportunity is the increasing pressure from donor organizations for African countries to adopt evidence-based policies. Donors, such as the World Bank, UNDP, and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, increasingly require evidence-backed policy interventions as a prerequisite for funding social development projects (Patton, 2019). This demand for evidence in sectors like poverty alleviation, health, and education has created a significant push for African governments to incorporate research findings into policy formulation. For example, the emphasis on evidence-based poverty reduction interventions is particularly evident in donor-driven programs that focus on social welfare, health interventions, and education reform. The influence of donor organizations, who often provide substantial financial support, has thus made it more imperative for African governments to engage with research to ensure that policies are not only effective but also align with global best practices.

This shift is important as it creates a mutually beneficial dynamic between the supply and demand sides of the interface: African researchers and institutions are increasingly encouraged to produce relevant, high-quality evidence, while policymakers are incentivized to use this evidence in crafting interventions. For instance, in Kenya, the requirement that ministries and government agencies base their policy proposals on solid evidence increases the likelihood that research findings will directly inform policy design (Kanyinga et al., 2018). This interaction between donor pressure and government priorities thus leads to a more integrated approach to social policy, ensuring that interventions in areas like maternal health or gender-based violence are backed by reliable and contextually relevant evidence.

Changing Research Culture and the Emergence of Technocratic Governance

The governance landscape in Africa is undergoing a profound transformation with the increasing prominence of technocratic leadership. In many African countries, top policymakers, such as permanent secretaries in Kenya, are now required to possess deep expertise in the policy domains they oversee (Odhiambo, 2020). This technocratic shift has created new opportunities for closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers. As technocrats often come with specialized knowledge and a commitment to evidence-based decision-making, they can act as valuable intermediaries in bridging the research-policy divide. Technocratic leadership encourages the prioritization of empirical evidence in policymaking, thus promoting a more systematic and informed approach to social policy interventions, particularly in sectors like health, poverty alleviation, and education reform.

Moreover, this changing governance structure enhances the potential for effective policy implementation. As technocrats embrace a culture of evidence use, the incorporation of research findings into policy formulation becomes more normalized. For example, in sectors such as public health, where evidence on health system strengthening and health outcomes is critical, technocratic leadership can ensure that research is effectively utilized to improve health policies. The technocratic approach also fosters a data-driven policy environment, one that seeks to optimize outcomes based on rigorous evidence (World Bank, 2021). This shift towards evidence-informed governance can substantially reduce the gap between research production and policy application in social policy.

Emergence of Supply-Side Actors and National Policy Observatories

The development of supplier-side actors, including national policy observatories, evidence synthesis centers, and embedded research units within ministries, has created a rich infrastructure to bridge the research-policy gap (Chilunda & Adetunji, 2022). These institutions, which have been established in nearly every African country, are crucial in providing high-quality evidence tailored to national and local policy needs. For instance, KIPPRA (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis), EPRC (Economic Policy Research Centre) in Uganda, and SACE (South African Centre for Evidence) play central roles in synthesizing, interpreting, and translating research findings into practical policy tools. By embedding research units within ministries, these institutions ensure that research evidence is continuously available to inform the policymaking process, creating a seamless connection between research producers and users.

National platforms like the Kenya Knowledge Translation Platform and the Malawi Knowledge Translation Platform further exemplify how research institutions are increasingly embedded within government structures. These platforms help ensure that evidence is integrated into the policy process at all levels, from the design of new interventions to the monitoring and evaluation of existing policies. Similarly, the African Union's African Observatory for Science, Technology, and Innovation (AOSTI) and Africa Evidence Network (AEN) contribute to fostering regional collaboration in evidence generation and dissemination, ensuring that African countries can learn from one another's experiences (African Union, 2020). These suppliers of evidence create a more structured, professionalized, and effective system for linking research to policy, ultimately leading to the improved design and implementation of social policies.

Bridging the Gap with Collaborative Networks and Knowledge Brokering

The rise of collaborative networks and knowledge brokering institutions also represents a crucial opportunity for strengthening the research-policy interface. Transnational networks, such as the EVIDENCE Collaborative and CLEAR-AA (Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results), along with organizations like iHub Kenya and Makerere University's Centre for Health and Policy Evaluation, play an instrumental role in facilitating the exchange of information between researchers and policymakers (Hassan & Murnane, 2021). These institutions act as intermediaries that translate complex research findings into accessible formats, such as policy briefs, infographics, and executive summaries, making them more easily digestible for policymakers. Such translation efforts enhance the practical utility of research evidence, ensuring that policymakers can make informed decisions without being overwhelmed by technical jargon.

Additionally, knowledge brokers within these networks ensure that evidence is not only accessible but also contextualized for the specific challenges faced by African countries. They play a critical role in ensuring that research findings are aligned with local needs and policy priorities, which is essential for creating context-specific interventions in social policy areas like health and poverty reduction (Rehfuess et al., 2019). These intermediary roles help to align global research insights with local realities, fostering a more responsive and adaptive policy environment.

The Role of Contextualized Evidence in Policy Relevance

Finally, the increasing emphasis on contextualized evidence is an essential opportunity for bridging the research-policy divide. African countries face unique challenges, such as political instability, poverty, and

institutional weaknesses (Kasera et al., 2024; Kasera, 2025a), which often make it difficult to apply global evidence directly. As such, local research institutions, such as Makerere University and Health Data Collaborative (HDC), play a vital role in generating evidence that is not only academically rigorous but also closely attuned to the local socio-political and economic contexts (Behague et al., 2009). These institutions produce evidence that addresses the specific challenges and needs of local communities, ensuring that social policy interventions are not only based on sound research but also relevant to the people they are designed to serve. By focusing on contextualized evidence, African researchers and policymakers can create social policies that resonate with local populations and effectively address their most pressing issues. This approach enhances the policy relevance of research and ensures that interventions in critical sectors like education, health, and poverty reduction are grounded in local realities, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Generally, the emerging opportunities for enhancing the research-policy interface in Africa's social policy domain provide a pathway to transforming how research is integrated into policymaking. The growing availability of high-quality evidence, the increasing demand for evidence-based interventions, the rise of technocratic governance, and the development of national and regional evidence synthesis centers are all central to bridging the traditional gap between research production and policy application. These developments create a more dynamic and effective environment for evidence-informed policymaking, ensuring that social policy interventions in sectors like poverty reduction, health, and education are better designed and more impactful.

Challenges to Utility of Research Evidence in Social Policy Interventions

Despite recent gains in institutionalizing evidence use in policymaking, Africa's social policy sector continues to grapple with several entrenched barriers that limit the effective uptake of research evidence in shaping inclusive and impactful interventions. These barriers are not merely administrative or technical but reflect deeper systemic tensions rooted in the political economy of policy formulation, historical legacies of donor-dependence, and the structural disconnect between knowledge production and decision-making arenas.

One significant limitation arises from the predominance of external actors in shaping research agendas and policy directions. Much of the research that informs social policy in African countries is commissioned or funded by international donors, development partners, and multilateral agencies, often with pre-defined objectives that reflect global—rather than local—priorities. While such support has improved methodological rigor and international visibility, it frequently leads to the adoption of policy templates that are poorly adapted to local realities. Parkhurst (2017) warns that the push for 'evidence-based policymaking' can inadvertently foster a technocratic policy culture where policy solutions are transplanted across countries without adequate contextualization. Similarly, Chilisa, Major, Gaotlhobogwe & Mokgolodi (2017) critique externally-driven evaluation practices that prioritize donor accountability over local system learning, leading to the proliferation of context-insensitive interventions. These externally imposed models often fail to resonate with indigenous social structures, historical injustices, or informal safety nets that underpin African welfare systems. This results in policies that may be technically sound but politically fragile, socially alienating, or practically unsustainable.

The political context within which social policies are crafted also presents a major obstacle. In many African countries, policymaking is driven less by rational, evidence-based deliberation and more by political survival imperatives. Politicians often instrumentalize social policy to maintain electoral support or reward loyal constituents, using state welfare programs as vehicles for patronage rather than as mechanisms for structural transformation. According to van de Walle (2007), such patron-client relations are deeply embedded in African political systems and distort the allocation of public resources, undermining both policy efficiency and equity. Hickey (2013) similarly observes that many African governments introduce or expand social protection schemes primarily in response to political pressures or electoral cycles, rather than on the basis of empirical evidence or citizen needs. For example, in Kenya and Uganda, the rapid expansion of cash transfer

programs has been linked to political interests and external funding conditions rather than comprehensive national strategies for poverty reduction (Lavers & Hickey, 2016). This politicization of policy spaces marginalizes the role of research and contributes to the proliferation of short-term, haphazard interventions that are more symbolic than transformative.

A further constraint lies in the limited relevance of much academic research to real-world policy concerns. The disjuncture between universities and the policy or industry sectors remains a chronic problem in many African contexts. Despite their potential to serve as incubators of innovative policy solutions, universities are often sidelined in national policymaking processes. Cloete, Maassen, and Bailey (2015) argue that African universities suffer from weak institutional incentives to produce policy-relevant research, with academic output frequently skewed toward theoretical discourses that lack immediate application. This disconnect is compounded by fragmented national research agendas, lack of coordination among knowledge producers, and the absence of structured platforms for translating academic insights into actionable policy ideas. As a result, policymakers often bypass university-based researchers in favor of consultants or international experts whose outputs may be more digestible but less rooted in long-term, locally grounded scholarship.

Equally constraining is the scarcity of structured opportunities for sustained engagement between researchers and policymakers. Although there is a growing recognition of the need to bridge the communication gap, actual mechanisms for dialogue remain underdeveloped in most African countries. Newman, Fisher, and Shaxson (2014) point out that policymaking often occurs under tight timelines, political pressure, and bureaucratic inertia, leaving little room for consultative engagement with researchers. Simultaneously, researchers often lack the networks, skills, or institutional support to navigate policy spaces or communicate findings in formats accessible to non-academic audiences. This mutual disengagement is further complicated by the political economy of research consultancy, where research becomes commodified and transactional. Boaz et al. (2019) highlight that policymaker may commission consultancies not necessarily for the quality of the research but due to political alliances or donor preferences, leading to superficial studies with limited peer review or critical scrutiny. This short-termism undermines the depth and credibility of research and weakens the development of robust, independent evidence ecosystems.

Collectively, these challenges point to the need for a radical rethinking of how knowledge is generated, valued, and used within African policy systems. Without addressing the structural incentives that sideline local evidence, decolonizing research agendas, and embedding platforms for continuous engagement between researchers and policymakers, the research-policy interface will remain fragmented. Bridging this gap is essential for ensuring that social policy interventions are not only evidence-informed but also contextually grounded, politically legitimate, and socially responsive. Only then can research serve as a catalyst for transformative social change on the continent.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence-Based Policy (EBP), which initially gained traction in the health sector, has increasingly found relevance in the social sciences as a critical prerequisite for sustainable development. Although its intellectual and methodological origins are largely traced to Europe, African states have not only adopted the language of EBP but have also begun embedding it into national policy discourses. Nevertheless, the continent faces a paradoxical mix of both opportunities and formidable challenges in institutionalizing evidence-informed policymaking.

Africa's most persistent impediment to development remains poor governance—specifically, a form of illicit politics that thrives on widespread, chronic poverty. While there are growing opportunities for the use of research evidence to transform social policy—ranging from donor pressure for accountability to the emergence of evidence-supplying institutions—these gains are undermined by the entrenchment of political elites who often favor ad hoc, reactive, and populist policy interventions. In many instances, such interventions are rationalized as necessary and context-specific strategies to combat poverty, when in fact they serve to reinforce patronage and political survival.

The ongoing donor insistence on evidence as a prerequisite for funding poverty alleviation programs in Africa has stimulated the development of diverse evidence typologies and a vibrant ecosystem of research organizations and knowledge translation platforms. Concurrently, the increasing adoption of technocratic governance—where policy actors such as permanent secretaries are required to possess domain-specific expertise—suggests a slow but promising shift toward more empirically grounded decision-making.

However, optimism must be tempered with caution. The continent's socio-political terrain continues to be shaped by new forms of neo-dependency, including the influence of Chinese-led infrastructural and policy investments, as well as evolving configurations of neo-patrimonialism. The resulting intra- and extra-continental class alliances—between Africa's petty-bourgeoisie, typified by “politicpreneurs,” and Western or increasingly Asian bourgeois interests—pose a significant obstacle to the mainstreaming of evidence as a normative basis for policymaking (Kasera, 2025b). Thus, while Africa may be on the cusp of institutionalizing EBP in social policy, the political economy of evidence use remains highly contested and uncertain. The realization of a truly evidence-driven policy architecture will depend not only on the technical capacities of research institutions but, more critically, on the political will of ruling elites to prioritize public welfare over political expediency.

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Author Contribution

OAK conceived, researched, wrote, revised and submitted the article. The other authors made key editorial and grammatical contributions to the paper. All the authors endorsed the final resubmission of this paper for publication.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest during the conceptualization, research, writing, revision, and submission of the article.

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