

**VAKA  
YIKO**

inasp 



**A COMPLETE SEARCH  
STRATEGY FOR EVIDENCE-  
INFORMED POLICY:**

**A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK**

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**VakaYiko** is  
part of the DFID  
programme  
Building Capacity  
to Use Research  
Evidence (BCURE)

This handbook forms part of the VakaYiko Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit. The Toolkit aims to support skills development and practical processes for evidence-informed policy making in public institutions in developing countries. It consists of a training course, a series of practical handbooks, and a range of informational and promotional materials.

This is the second in the four-part series of practical handbooks for civil servants. The complete Toolkit is available on the INASP website:

[www.inasp.info/vytoolkit](http://www.inasp.info/vytoolkit)

# FOREWORD

**T**he case for using evidence in policy making has been made for some time, not only in an international development context but also in other areas.

In working to improve the way evidence feeds into policy, much effort has been directed towards strengthening the way researchers, think tanks, universities and policy-research institutes develop and communicate their research, and improving their strategies to **influence** policy. International donors continue to fund research that attempts to find solutions to the most acute problems that cause poverty.

But less emphasis has been put into promoting a culture of evidence-informed policy. Such a culture prioritizes building a robust evidence base for decision making, one that includes different perspectives, findings, and, often conflicting evidence. The promotion of evidence-informed policy making focuses on working with the ‘demand’ side – improving the policy-making **process** – and strengthening policymakers’ capacity to decide what evidence is useful, when and for what policy purpose.

In line with this thinking, in the DFID funded VakaYiko project we support policymakers and their staff to access and use robust evidence in their work. We are mindful of the political environment in which they are embedded, where different values, ideas and interests are at stake when making policy. We have found that this complex process could be improved by tackling three key areas:

The first is **attitudes** towards research. Here we focus on understanding the process of research, including different types of research, and how it can enhance informed decision-making.

A second key factor is improving policymakers' **knowledge** of a range of different types of evidence – not only research but also data, citizen evidence and experience. By combining them, staff in public institutions can create a robust evidence base for their policies. Often, this means raising awareness of the extensive support network that exists locally.

Lastly, our approach focuses on building the **skills** of civil service staff – such as researchers and policy analysts – to effectively search for, assess and communicate evidence to those who need it to make fast and important decisions.

In recognition of the importance of research in development, countries around the world are prioritizing investments in science, technology and higher education, as well as data and statistical quality. Now is an exciting time for us to build on this momentum by supporting our partner institutions to realize this vision.

We have developed this toolkit in collaboration with practitioners and policymakers from our partner organizations and institutions in Ghana and Zimbabwe. It is also informed by the rich insights we have gained from VakaYiko's work in other countries including Argentina, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda. We hope it contributes to improving how staff in public institutions use evidence. We also hope that it helps to shape debate and dialogue, ultimately contributing to building supportive cultures of evidence-informed policy making.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clara Richards', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

**Clara Richards**

Director VakaYiko, Team Lead EIPM (INASP)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This handbook has benefited from a rich breadth of insights, ideas and comments gathered through the VakaYiko Consortium's work on evidence-informed policy making. We are grateful to all those who provided comments and feedback on our drafts and pilots over a two-year period, and would like to extend our particular thanks to Ajoy Datta, Kirsty Newman, Louise Shaxson, Leandro Echt and Vanesa Weyrauch.

We would like to thank the partner institutions in Zimbabwe and Ghana who piloted this course and provided valuable insights: in Ghana, the Civil Service Training Centre and the Parliament of Ghana; and in Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and the Parliament of Zimbabwe. We are grateful also to the group of advisors and many facilitators who assisted the VakaYiko team in delivering the pilots and who shared feedback with us, in particular Masimba Muziringa, Lovemore Kusekwa, Nyasha Musandu, George Amoah and Prince Kulevome, who each assisted us with several parts of the course.

Finally we would like to thank our Consortium partners in Ghana and Zimbabwe: Ghana Information for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) and Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Making Network (ZeipNET), who shared their experience and insight with us throughout.

# ABOUT THE VAKAYIKO CONSORTIUM

The VakaYiko Consortium is a three-year project involving five organizations working primarily in three countries (Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe). Work in a fourth country, Uganda, started in late 2015. Consortium members are the Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS), the Zimbabwe Evidence Informed Policy Making Network (ZEIPNET), the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Parliament of Uganda and INASP.

The project starts with the understanding that the routine use of research to inform policy requires at least three factors to be in place:

- individuals with the skills to access, evaluate and use research evidence;
- processes for handling research evidence in policy-making departments; and
- a wider enabling environment of engaged citizens, media and civil society.

This course addresses the first level of capacity (individual skills and knowledge). In the VakaYiko programme, course delivery and embedding was part of a range of activities targeting all levels of capacity, including public events and policy dialogues, a mentoring and learning exchange programme, and technical assistance to institutions.

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# ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

VakaYiko's series of practical handbooks has been developed to support civil servants and parliamentary staff to find, assess and communicate a range of quality evidence to support policy making. The handbooks can be used on their own, or as a resource for participants in VakaYiko's Evidence-Informed Policy Making course.

# WHO

## IS IT FOR?

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This handbook has been designed for, and piloted with, mid-level civil servants such as researchers, analysts, committee clerks and librarians in government agencies and parliaments in Africa. These individuals play a crucial role in providing information, analysis and recommendations to guide decision-making and support informed debate. The handbook therefore focuses primarily on the process of gathering and presenting quality evidence, rather than the process of taking decisions based on this evidence.

“Evidence-informed policy is that which has considered a broad range of research evidence; evidence from citizens and other stakeholders; and evidence from practice and policy implementation, as part of a process that considers other factors such as political realities and current public debates. We do not see it as a policy that is exclusively based on research, or as being based on one set of findings. We accept that in some cases, research evidence may be considered and rejected; if rejection was based on understanding of the insights that the research offered then we would still consider any resulting policy to be evidence-informed.”

Newman, Fisher and Shaxson, 2012.

# FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

---

There are four core principles which underpin our approach:

1

## COMPLEXITY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

This handbook recognizes and values the complexity of the policy-making landscape and the role of evidence within it. It does not provide 'easy answers' or a one-size-fits-all template for evidence-informed policy making. It also takes a broad view of 'evidence', without making an argument for one type of evidence over another.

2

## THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

While recognizing and reflecting on the roles of organizational, institutional, political and other factors in evidence-informed policy making, the handbook starts with the assumption that all civil servants are contributing to policy making in some way, no matter how small.

3

## NETWORKS

A key emphasis of the VakaYiko approach is on the importance of interpersonal connections in building capacity for evidence-informed policy making. This includes both the need for different departments in the information system to work together (e.g. researchers, librarians and information technology staff) as well as the need for strong external linkages, in particular those between researchers and policymakers.

4

## PRACTICALITY

This is not an academic or theoretical resource. It does not cover complex academic topics such as systematic reviews, randomized controlled trials or data analysis in much detail. Drawing from the experience of our pilots, it focuses on practical skills that affect evidence-informed policy making in day-to-day work life.

# 1 INTRODUCING THE SEARCH STRATEGY

Information is all around us – from social media announcements on your phone, to emails you read at work or television you watch at home. The world of research is no different, and open access is helping to make more and more empirical evidence freely available. There is an enormous amount of high-quality evidence accessible for free on the internet on policy-relevant issues in developing contexts, and this is growing all the time.

In addition to government sources, donors, regional bodies, multilateral organizations, consultancies, think tanks, NGOs and university research centres are all constantly producing information aimed at informing policy.

A good search strategy will help you to find the information you really need, quickly and efficiently. Search strategies follow key steps, and anyone can improve their search strategy by understanding and implementing these steps. Given that we all operate in an imperfect world with time and other constraints, it is even more important to follow a systematic process. Following a series of simple steps should enable you to develop policies and make decisions that are informed by impartial, objective and robust searches of the evidence available.

## WHY HAVE A SEARCH STRATEGY?

- Avoids re-inventing the wheel by enabling you to see what is already out there
- Reduces your personal bias by following a standard procedure, rather than relying solely on what you know
- Saves you time by providing a clear plan
- Helps you source information in a responsible and transparent way
- Builds a clear contextual framework to ensure relevancy and avoid missing major factors

***Developing a search strategy is an iterative process: one attempt will rarely produce the final strategy. Strategies are usually built up from a series of test searches and discussions of the results of those searches among peers and colleagues.***



### KEY LEARNING POINT

A search strategy is important because it provides a systematic way to navigate large amounts of information. Skilful use of a search strategy will save you time and ensure that the information you gather presents a balanced and comprehensive picture of an issue.



### REFLECTION POINT

What kind of search strategy do you currently use?

Is there anything you are missing out, or anything additional that you do?

**FIGURE 1: STEPS OF A SEARCH STRATEGY**



Source: DFID, 2014.

# 2

## UNDERSTAND THE REQUEST FOR EVIDENCE AND FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE TOPIC

In this topic we cover the first three steps of the search strategy: understanding the request, familiarizing yourself with the topic, and expanding your networks.



- What exactly are you being asked to find out, and why?
- What format should the information be in?
- What is the timeframe?

Before finding any evidence, you need to make sure you understand the request and its purpose. You need to be very clear about what questions you are answering, otherwise, the issue becomes too broad (or too narrow), and it is difficult to solve the problem or gather meaningful information about it. There is a big difference between answering a 'what' question and answering a 'why' or 'how' question, and it is best to be clear about this as early as possible to avoid wasting time and energy later on.

It is also important to understand the purpose of the request. Are you being asked to provide a simple snapshot of a topic (e.g. what is the prevalence of X issue), or are you also being asked to gather evidence about why the issue exists and/or how it could be addressed? And what format should this information be in – is it a speech or an internal document? Is the purpose to provide background information, to persuade someone of a specific course of action or to provide various options for intervention?

Different questions may require different types of information. Without a clear and specific question (or set of questions) that you are trying to answer, it will be impossible to decide what sources and types of information you need, what is relevant and what is not.

## 2

### Familiarize yourself with the topic

- What are the key concepts and terminology?
- What are the latest debates and key issues related to this topic?
- Who are the most significant stakeholders?

If the issue you are being asked about is new to you, then you will need to start by familiarizing yourself with it. Searching the internet for your topic and reading newspapers, articles or blogs about it will provide a quick general understanding. Online media can:

- help you understand the language associated with a topic and identify useful search terms to use later;
- provide you with references which might be useful sources; and
- give you an idea of what the public opinion is related to a topic and where key debates lie.

It is important to remember, however, that such sources may not always be reliable or scientifically accurate, so you should use them for general familiarization purposes only and not as your main information source.

“Perhaps you are not sure that research is the right approach to the problem you hope to address. Research is not the only way of investigating a question, and it may not be the most useful one. At times, a much simpler investigation is all that is required, more like what a journalist might do to gain a greater understanding of an issue...”

Laws, Harper, Jones and Marcus, 2013: 17.



## ORGANIC VS. NON-ORGANIC FOOD

“Many people are debating whether organic food is more nutritious than nonorganic food. The discussion is interesting because common sense would seem to suggest that organic is better. Who wouldn’t agree that using less pesticides and chemical fertilizers would be better for people’s health? But organic food is a lot more expensive, so getting the right information is important for helping consumers decide whether they want to invest more in this type of food.

To become familiar with the topic, consumers might read an article published on Harvard’s Health Blog (Watson, 2012). This will help them to understand the basics: what does organic mean, what does conventional mean and what are the different pesticides used by both. It also provides information about the huge market around organic food and had a first snapshot of why people buy organic.

Although this article was published in a source that consumers might trust (Harvard’s blog), they might want more information. Consumers might seek out an expert – such as a nutritionist – who could point them towards some useful evidence products: A systematic review (Smith-Spangler and Brandeau, 2012), a guide (Environmental Working Group, 2014) on what is the safest food and a few articles in newspapers (Martin and Severson, 2008) that discussed the topic.”

## PUTTING YOUR ISSUE IN CONTEXT

To help guide your familiarization process, you can think about trying to build a contextual framework around your issue to understand how it fits into regional and international frameworks and discussions.

This helps you develop a broad understanding of the topic and become familiar with the key stakeholders, language and debates, ensuring that you do not miss any crucial parts of the puzzle. It can also lead you to more specific evidence products that you can consult later on in your search.

**TABLE 1: PUTTING YOUR ISSUE IN CONTEXT**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Example: gender equality in Ghana</b>
<b>National overview</b>	<p>Ghana's Fourth Progress Report on the Implementation of the African and Beijing Platform of Action and Review Report for Beijing +20 (Ministry of Gender, Children &amp; Social Protection, June 2014):  <a href="http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/national_reviews/ghana_review_beijing20.ashx">www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/national_reviews/ghana_review_beijing20.ashx</a></p> <p>Data from national sources: Ghana Statistical Services Gender Page:  <a href="http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/gender.html">www.statsghana.gov.gh/gender.html</a></p> <p>Data from international sources: World Bank Ghana Gender Page:  <a href="http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/ghana">http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/ghana</a></p>
<b>Regional framework</b>	<p>Media article on progress towards an ECOWAS Gender Policy:  <a href="http://news.ecowas.int/presseshow.php?nb=014&amp;lang=en&amp;annee=2015">http://news.ecowas.int/presseshow.php?nb=014&amp;lang=en&amp;annee=2015</a></p>
<b>Continental framework</b>	<p>African Union Gender Policy:  <a href="http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/gender_policy_2009.pdf">www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/gender_policy_2009.pdf</a></p>
<b>Global frameworks</b>	<p>UN Women: <a href="http://www.unwomen.org">www.unwomen.org</a>            (see also MDG reports, UNDP Human Development indicators etc.)</p>
<b>Donors who have funded the issue</b>	<p>Germany is one of the biggest donors on gender. See the GIZ Gender Knowledge Platform: <a href="http://www.gender-in-german-development.net">www.gender-in-german-development.net</a>            See also the African Development Bank gender pages:  <a href="http://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/sectors/gender">www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/sectors/gender</a></p>
<b>NGOs working on the issue</b>	<p>Gender Studies &amp; Human Rights Documentation Centre:  <a href="http://www.gendercentreghana.org">www.gendercentreghana.org</a>            Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE): <a href="http://www.fawe.org">www.fawe.org</a></p>
<b>Research institutes working on the issue</b>	<p>Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy, University of Ghana:  <a href="http://197.255.124.90/cegensa">http://197.255.124.90/cegensa</a>            CODESRIA Gender Institute: <a href="http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?rubrique25">www.codesria.org/spip.php?rubrique25</a>            UN Research Institute for Social Development (UN-RISD) research theme on gender: <a href="http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/(httpThemes)/F440B51FFF83692880257914005D7881?OpenDocument">www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BB128/(httpThemes)/F440B51FFF83692880257914005D7881?OpenDocument</a></p>
<b>Media and blogs</b>	<p>Ghanaian Minister for Gender, Children &amp; Social Protection receives award for advocacy in gender equality: <a href="http://www.allafrica.com/stories/201503251840.html">www.allafrica.com/stories/201503251840.html</a>            'Everybody Should be a Feminist' by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah:  <a href="http://www.bloggghana.org/everybody-should-be-a-feminist-by-nana-darkoa-sekyiamah">www.bloggghana.org/everybody-should-be-a-feminist-by-nana-darkoa-sekyiamah</a></p>
<b>Conferences and events</b>	<p>The 2nd Ghana Feminist Forum: a Personal Perspective:  <a href="http://www.africanfeministforum.com/the-2nd-ghana-feminist-forum-a-personal-perspective">www.africanfeministforum.com/the-2nd-ghana-feminist-forum-a-personal-perspective</a>            Global Commission on the Status of Women: <a href="http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw">www.unwomen.org/en/csw</a></p>

# 3

## Use your network

- Who can you contact to point you towards the best sources, outline key concepts and update you on the latest debates?
- Can you get connected to any of the key stakeholders?

Once you have an idea of what the topic is about and you are familiar with its language, you can approach your trusted network to ask for more information.

A good network consists of many different kinds of experts, including academic experts (e.g. a professor), information experts (e.g. librarians) and practical or technical experts (e.g. someone working in implementation). Networks can be virtual as well as in-person.

- Do you have internal or external contacts that are usually well informed and you contact often to request information?
- Do you have any personal relationships that help you find reliable information or provide trustworthy advice?
- Do you need to consider expanding your network in this topic, perhaps approaching a new organization or contact?

Networks can help point out what the best sources of evidence are on the issue, who else is discussing it, and what the current situation is regarding the issue. Building and using a strong network will enable you to make use of existing expertise in your country from universities, think tanks, civil society groups and multilateral organizations. You should keep using your network throughout the search process.



### KEY LEARNING POINT

Understanding the request for information, quickly and strategically familiarizing yourself with the topic, and using your network are important initial stages of a search strategy. These can save you time later on and help you find the most relevant information quickly.



### REFLECTION POINT

Think of an occasion when you have had to quickly deepen your understanding of a specific topic. What were the first steps you took? Why?

# 3

## CHOOSE THE RIGHT TYPES OF LITERATURE

4

Choose the right types of literature

- Which types of literature do you need to answer your question?
- Primary or secondary?
- Published literature or grey literature?
- Single study or body of evidence?

Your initial exploration will lead you to different types of literature. To build a balanced picture of your issue, you'll need to understand which are most suitable for your topic. You should never rely solely on one source or type, and will need to ensure that you select from a range of different types and sources.

There are many different ways to categorize types of literature, and the categorizations often overlap.

Understanding the different types and products available will help you make an informed decision about what is most useful for your search. Here are some of the key distinctions it is important to understand.

## IN THIS COURSE WE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN:

**Types of evidence** – the type of evidence used in the literature (e.g. data, citizen evidence, practice-informed evidence and research). Note that each type of literature makes use of at least one type of evidence, usually several.

**Sources of evidence** – where you go to find the evidence (e.g. World Bank website, library).

**Types of literature** – the category of literature you find (e.g. peer review, grey literature). Note that many sources of evidence contain many different literature types, and that each of these literature types may use more than one type of evidence.

**Evidence product** – the physical product you are handling (e.g. journal article, report, book, speech, video interview etc.). Each type of literature will produce many different evidence products.

## PRIMARY OR SECONDARY?

- **Primary literature** consists of original documents that contain raw material or first-hand information. This includes *evidence products* such as results of experiments and statistical data, as well as responses from surveys, feedback forms and interviews.
- **Secondary literature** contains information that is written about a primary source, such as interpretations of and discussions about existing primary sources. This includes *evidence products* such as journal articles that evaluate someone else's research, literature reviews or newspaper articles (DFID, 2014).

## PUBLISHED LITERATURE OR GREY LITERATURE?

- **Published literature** refers to that which is disseminated via the commercial publishing industry. This includes *evidence products* such as books and journal articles but would not include documents which are published informally (e.g. a report published by an NGO on its website).
- **Grey literature** is a very broad category which refers to documents produced by government, academics, businesses, NGOs and other institutions in formats not controlled by the commercial publishing industry. This includes *evidence products* such as working papers, government papers, programme reports, conference proceedings, media articles and unpublished academic papers such as dissertations.

## IS IT PEER REVIEWED?

- **Peer review** is what characterizes formal academic research. Academics usually publish their work in primary research papers/articles. If an article is peer reviewed, it means it has been read, checked and authenticated (reviewed) by independent, third-party academics (peers) as part of a formal quality assurance procedure. There are several different kinds of peer review such as single blind, double blind and open review. Peer review is usually used only for one *evidence product*, academic articles, which are often collated into scholarly journals. While academic books also go through a rigorous editing and review process, this is not the same as a peer review process.

## SINGLE STUDY OR BODY OF EVIDENCE?

- A **single study** is a type of *evidence product* that presents scientific results from one piece of research. No matter how rigorous or scientific individual studies are, they are unlikely to provide a sufficient evidence base on which to make cost-effective decisions.
- A **body of evidence** is an *evidence product* that collates and reviews multiple studies. As a practitioner, this can help you address policy or organizational problems by producing a reliable knowledge base by accumulating findings from a range of studies (DFID, 2014). Systematic reviews and literature reviews are examples of bodies of evidence.



### KEY LEARNING POINT

There are many different types of literature and evidence products. Understanding the differences between them will help you make an informed decision about which are the most useful for your search.



### REFLECTION POINT

Which types of literature do you use most often? Why?

# 4

## CHOOSE YOUR SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

### 5

#### Choose your sources

- What is the best way to find the literature you need?
- Can you find what you need online?
- Do you have access to a library?

## WHERE IS THE EXISTING EVIDENCE BASE?

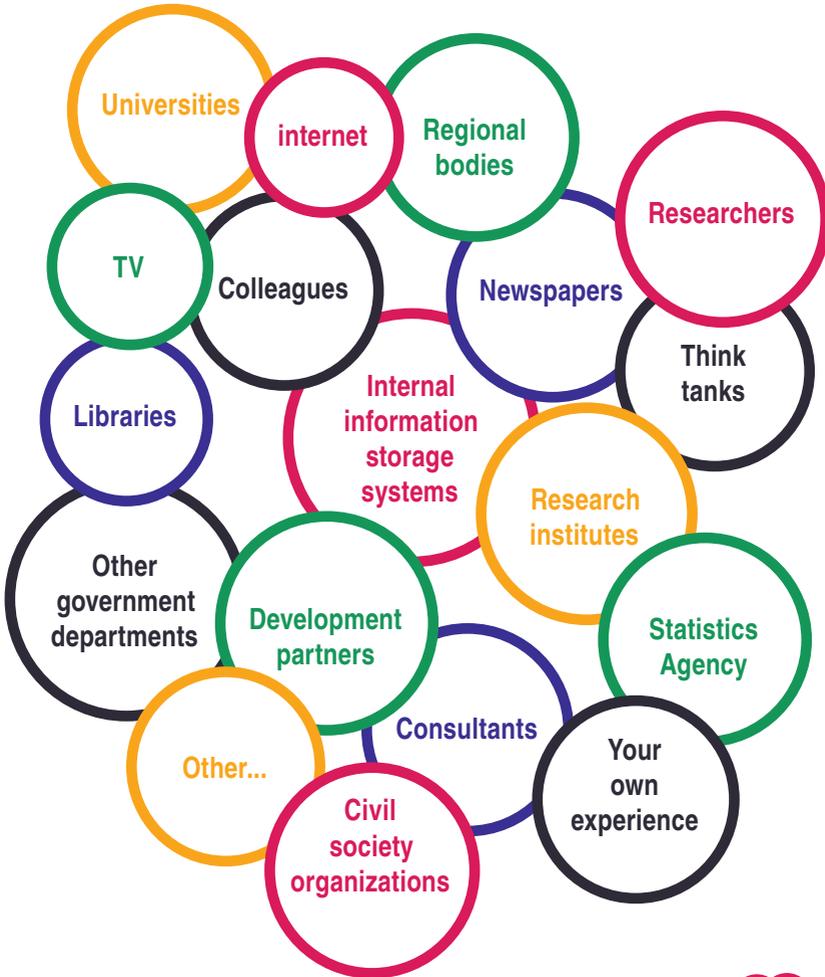
Once you have familiarized yourself with your topic, you should have a sense of the main sources of information about that topic. One of the most important questions you will need to ask yourself is whether the information you need is available from internal (government) sources or whether you need to consult external sources such as civil society organizations, multilateral bodies and research institutes.

**Internal sources** are public-sector agencies which generate information and data (e.g. statistics agencies, ministries and departments)

**External sources** are those outside the public sector which both analyse data emanating from the public sector and produce their own information and research (e.g. universities, think tanks, civil society organizations, international organizations)

You may decide that internal sources are best placed to provide some types of evidence, whereas external sources are better positioned to provide other types. Internal and external sources of evidence are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases you may decide that you need to use both to find a balanced spread of types of evidence (data, citizen evidence, practice-informed evidence and research).

**FIGURE 3: SOURCES OF EVIDENCE**



**REFLECTION POINT**

Which of these sources of evidence do you use most frequently? Why?

“The state’s ability to generate information is unmatched by any other evidence source. In all public sector agencies and levels there is a level of circulating information impossible to be generated by any external actors. However, the state generally uses much less than what it produces. Its huge production capacity is not matched by the capacity of its personnel to use it in decision making.”

Echt, 2015.

## WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE SOURCES, THINK ABOUT:

### People

- There is probably someone in your network who helps you with certain issues or topics.
- Do you have internal or external contacts that are usually well informed and you contact often to request information?
- Do you have any personal relationships that help you find reliable information or that you trust their advice?
- Does your department have good (or bad) relationships with universities, policy research institutes or think tanks?

### Experience

- Do you usually rely on your experience and previous practice and use it as a source?
- What about the experience of others?

### internet and databases

- Do you have a ‘go-to’ place to get information on the web?
- Which website do you consult most often?

### Other government departments

- Which other government departments are useful to get information?
- Does somebody in your institution or other institutions carry out programme evaluations?



## USE YOUR NATIONAL LIBRARY CONSORTIUM

INASP works with publishers to enable affordable and sustainable access to online resources for developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

National library consortia select appropriate resources for their research needs and budgets. In a process mediated by INASP, publishers then provide discounted (sometimes free) access through their own platforms. Resources are offered on a country-level licence to eligible institutions, including:

- universities;
- not-for-profit research institutions and centres;
- teaching hospitals;
- professional training schools and institutes;
- NGOs and CSOs;
- parliamentary libraries; and
- government ministries, offices and agencies.

To gain access, these institutions need to be members of the consortium. Membership of the consortium provides on average a 97% discount to thousands of subscription-based resources, including academic journals and the World Bank, IMF and OECD online libraries.

Each national consortium makes an annual selection from the resources available to them – this is based on the needs of their research community, collection development decisions and the budget available. If your institution has a library, you can also directly access free databases such as JSTOR's African Access Initiative or the Research4Life package. If your institution doesn't have a library, you can still benefit from the Consortium. You don't have to be a librarian to register your institution as a member of your national library consortium.

To find out what is available in your country and/or to join your national library consortium, find your country page on the INASP website: [www.inasp.info/en/network/country](http://www.inasp.info/en/network/country).

# ONLINE SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

Many policymakers find that evidence from external sources is difficult to access. But over the past two decades, the amount of information freely available on policy-relevant issues in low- and middle-income countries has vastly increased.

This is in large part thanks to the open access movement, formalized in the early 2000s through a series of statements made at global summits, and expanded over the next several years across the global research community.

In parallel, organizations such as INASP have been negotiating directly with publishers to win waived or reduced subscription fees on behalf of library consortia in Africa, Asia and Latin America, resulting in thousands of journals becoming freely available to researchers across the globe.

Along with the increase in access, the rapid growth of the monitoring and evaluation sector led to an explosion in the number of evaluations commissioned on development projects at all levels, and the consequent rapid growth of a rich body of practice-informed evidence available on the internet. Meanwhile, think tanks and research centres around the world run large-scale international research programmes on issues such as poverty, trade, gender, infrastructure, climate change, health and education. Hundreds of donors, from multilateral bodies to private foundations, produce a steady stream of reports, as do civil society organizations, consultancies and monitoring bodies. A commitment to transparency and recognition of the need for information sharing within the aid world has led to even greater efforts to make all these documents freely available online. All major multilateral organizations, donors and international NGOs now have e-libraries or publications sections on their websites.

Contrary to popular belief, and thanks to the efforts of many organizations around the world, much progress has been made in access to information for use in research in developing countries. Now one of the main barriers is a lack of awareness of what is available and how to use it. Many people are unaware of the plethora of different initiatives which exist, or of how to navigate all the different databases and websites available.

# EXTERNAL SOURCES OF EVIDENCE ONLINE

## ACADEMIC PEER-REVIEWED LITERATURE

**African Journals Online (AJOL)** is the world's largest online collection of African-published, peer-reviewed scholarly journals: [www.ajol.info/index.php/index/browse/alpha/index](http://www.ajol.info/index.php/index/browse/alpha/index).

### **The Campbell Collaboration Library of Systematic Reviews**

is the peer-reviewed online monograph series of systematic reviews prepared under the editorial control of the Campbell Collaboration. Campbell systematic reviews follow structured guidelines and standards for summarizing the international research evidence on the effects of interventions in crime and justice, education, international development and social welfare: [www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib).

**The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)** funds impact evaluations and systematic reviews to generate evidence on what works in public policy in developing countries. See its systematic review database (international development, broad topics): [www.3ieimpact.org/evidence/systematic-reviews](http://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence/systematic-reviews).

**Open Science Directory** contains about 13, 000 scientific journals and aims to enhance access to open-access/special-access collections by creating direct links to the journals: [www.opensciencedirectory.net](http://www.opensciencedirectory.net).

**Research 4 Life** is a partnership of the WHO, FAO, UNEP, WIPO, Cornell and Yale Universities and the International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers. African government offices are eligible for free registration. Research4Life consists of the following organizations:

- **AGORA: Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture**, run by FAO, covers more than 3000 journals in agriculture and related biological, environmental and social sciences: [www.fao.org/agora/en](http://www.fao.org/agora/en).
- **ARDI Research for Development & Innovation** currently provides access to around 20,000 journals, books and reference works from 17 publishers for 117 developing countries and territories: [www.wipo.int/ardi/en](http://www.wipo.int/ardi/en).
- **HINARI Access to Research in Health**, set up by WHO together with major publishers, is one of the world's largest collections of biomedical and health literature. Up to 13,000 journals (in 30 different languages), 29,000 e-books and 70 other information resources are now available to health institutions in more than 100 countries: [www.who.int/hinari/en](http://www.who.int/hinari/en).
- **OARE Research in Environment** provides access to up to 5710 peer-reviewed journals and 1119 online books, as well as other information resources: [www.unep.org/oare](http://www.unep.org/oare).

**Social Science Research Network** includes almost 60,000 social science articles for searching, with almost 40,000 available to download. It includes focused networks in specific disciplines, including politics and economics: [www.ssrn.com/en](http://www.ssrn.com/en).

A more extensive list can be found in the **Online sources of evidence for policy researchers in Africa** booklet.

[www.inasp.info/vytoolkit](http://www.inasp.info/vytoolkit)

If you want to find something on the internet, you go to a search engine, as they contain **everything** that is available online, right? Wrong! Search engines only cover a **proportion** of what is available online; a lot of information is **hidden** or **invisible** to them. For example, some databases of research literature or library catalogues will not appear in search engine results, especially if they require a subscription or password to get access.

# GREY LITERATURE

**African Economic Research Consortium** produces economic policy research. Most publications are policy-relevant research papers, policy briefs and working papers: [www.aercafrica.org](http://www.aercafrica.org).

**Africa Portal Library** is an online library collection of over 4,000 books, journals and digital documents related to African policy issues. The entire repository is open access: [www.africaportal.org/library](http://www.africaportal.org/library).

**Eldis** provides free access to relevant, up-to-date and diverse research on international development issues. Content comes from over 7,500 development partners. It includes useful 'Research Guides' to key topics as well as links to related literature: [www.eldis.org](http://www.eldis.org).

**Evidence on Demand** is an international development information hub, providing access to quality-assured resources relating to climate and the environment, infrastructure and livelihoods. It includes peer-reviewed Topic Guides containing an overview of the subject, a list of current best reads, plus pointers to where you can get further information: [www.evidenceondemand.info/homepage.aspx](http://www.evidenceondemand.info/homepage.aspx).

**Research Papers in Economics** is a decentralized bibliographic database of working papers, journal articles, books, book chapters and software components. It contains over 200,000 fully searchable economics articles, with about half of the listed articles available to download: [www.repec.org](http://www.repec.org).

**UN Research Institute for Social Development** is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Publications and multimedia resources are available on the website: [www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org).

**World Bank Open Knowledge Repository** is the World Bank's official open-access repository for its research outputs and knowledge products: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org>.



## KEY LEARNING POINT

Your search is likely to make use of both internal and external sources of information. Having a good knowledge of the range of external sources of information available to you online can help you choose appropriate sources to find the products and types of evidence you are looking for.

# 5 SEARCH EFFECTIVELY ONLINE

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Search effectively

- How can you search quickly and effectively to find what you need?
- Which key words and search terms should you use?
- How can you filter your results into a manageable list?

The first time you try searching for your topic, you might not find any results. Usually this doesn't mean there is no evidence on your topic, but that you may not be using the right search terms. Or alternatively, you might find far too many results. Using careful search terms will help you target your search towards a more manageable number of relevant pieces of evidence.

## STEP 1: KEY WORDS

Write a list of words or phrases that capture related terms to the topic. Let's take HIV as an example.

- **Categories:** words which describe a group of which your topic is a member – for example, 'health', 'disease', 'virus' etc.
- **Subtopics:** words which subdivide the topic – for example, 'sexual education', 'treatment', 'prevention' etc.
- **Synonyms:** words with the same (or similar) meaning – for example, 'human immunodeficiency virus', 'AIDS' etc.
- **Related terms:** words related to the topic – for example, 'immune system', 'infection', 'sexually transmitted disease' etc.

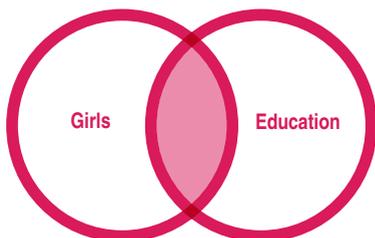
You can narrow the search by providing additional details – for example, affected population, youth, children, adults.

## STEP 2: SEARCH TERMS

- Boolean operators are AND, OR and NOT.
- They are used to combine search terms when doing research.
- You can also use brackets to combine Boolean searches.
- You can use inverted commas to find phrases.
- Finally, you can use truncation to find related words.

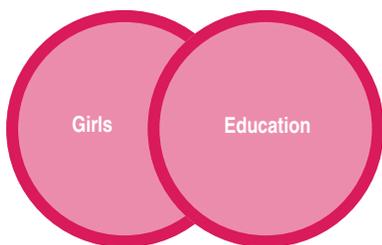
### SEARCH REFINEMENTS

Venn diagram of AND



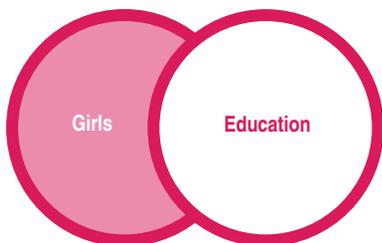
- Using the operator AND between keywords will limit the results of a search because all the keywords have to be present for an item to be retrieved.
- If you enter two words without a Boolean operator, most search engines assume you mean AND.
- For example, if you search for 'Trade commodities', the results you get will be the same as if you search for 'trade AND commodities'.

Venn diagram of OR



- Using the OR operator results in either or both of your search terms appearing in your results.
- Using the OR operator will result in a larger number of retrieved items and, therefore, expands the search.
- Typically, search engines automatically use OR to combine all terms in a search string.

Venn diagram of NOT



- NOT helps to limit your search because it takes out a category of undesirable results.
- NOT thus narrows or limits a search by excluding the keyword immediately following it.
- In some search engines (including Google) you use a minus sign before a word, instead of NOT.
- For example, to search for information on Iraq NOT war in Google you would use 'Iraq -war'.

## Phrases

- If you want to search for a specific phrase you can use inverted commas: “...”
- For example, to search for ‘cell phone’ you can use “cell phone”.

## Truncation

- Use \* to ‘truncate’ or shorten a word so that you find related words.
- For example, ‘hosp\*’ would find hospital, hospitals, hospitalization, hospitality etc.
- Be aware that truncating too early in a word may find irrelevant terms.

An example of a template you can use:

Operator	Description	Example
	uses a keyword or idea	Education
	uses a phrase, question or string of ideas	Girls Education
<b>AND</b>	includes both words	Girls AND Education
<b>OR</b>	includes either word	Girls OR Education AND Girls Education
<b>NOT</b>	excludes this word	Equality NOT Education AND Girls Education
*	wildcard, includes plurals and close matches	Gender*
” “	looks for whole phrases together by inserting quotations	“impacts of gender equality on girls education”
<b>use lower case letters</b>	upper case can limit your search	“girls education”
<b>title</b>	to find the word in the title of the page	title: girls

DFID, 2014.

There are three other factors you can use to refine your search:

- **Dates:** is the evidence you are looking for from a specific time period?
- **Geography:** are you looking for evidence from a specific country or region?
- **Synonyms:** have you considered other terms that have similar meaning to the ones you are using (e.g. gender-based violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, violence against women)?

## STEP 3: SEARCH

The next step is to open the relevant databases in an internet browser. Enter the words or phrases in the search bar and/or the Boolean operators and click the appropriate icon to begin the search. Note that many databases are different, though most will include some kind of guidance on how to use their search function. It's a good idea to read this before you start.

## STEP 4: FILTER

Even after refining your search using Boolean operators, you are likely to have more information than you have time to read through. Therefore, before you critically appraise your search results in detail, it is important that you can 'screen' them to ensure that the evidence you scrutinize fully is only the most relevant.

You can use categories to organize your results by their relevance (you can organize piles of 'in', 'out', 'maybe') and ask yourself the following questions to filter: "What country is the study from?" "When was the study done?"

Don't just review by title; look through the abstract of a study to make sure that the studies you gathered inform the question you are trying to answer.

## STEP 5: REVIEW WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND

The following questions might help you make sure you haven't missed important evidence:

1. Do you have any systematic reviews? Start by using them, since they cover a broad body of evidence.
2. Make sure you have scanned grey literature products that have a problem-solving approach, such as policy briefs, white papers or working papers.
3. Have you included studies written in your region or country?
4. Have you included a mix of internal and external evidence?
5. Do you have a range of products covering the four evidence areas (data, citizen evidence, research evidence, practice-informed evidence)?
6. Have you included perspectives from key stakeholders and current debates you identified at the familiarization stage of your search?

Once you have finished gathering evidence, you can consult your trusted network again or the experts on the topics, to make sure you have not left anything important out of your search.

### TIPS FOR REVIEWING

- Be clear about the requirements you set during your search. This will help you to be ruthless in discarding things.
- Try to avoid having to read things in full. Look at the title, abstract and/or summary, keywords and descriptors.
- If you are evaluating a large body of material, learn to skim read and/or scan information to get a quick indication of what it is about.

## WHO IS LEFT OUT?

A comprehensive search strategy should include evidence that explores the experience of the population as a whole, not just the majority. Evidence which looks only at the majority population can conceal widespread poverty and exclusion of marginalised groups.

For example, in Kenya, the national average for teacher/pupil ratio at pre-primary level is 1:28. However, disaggregated data shows that this ratio is 1:104 for people from the ethnic minority Turkana group. In this case, research evidence could help identify correlation and causation, providing you with greater insight as to why this ratio disparity exists. Citizen evidence derived from Turkana people could provide first-hand insights into their experience of this disparity, and practice-informed evidence could inform you about how previous policies have attempted to (or failed to) address this issue.

Without solid evidence, the main barriers that minorities and indigenous peoples confront can easily remain unaddressed. Acknowledging the special realities of minorities and indigenous peoples through evidence that reveals issues of discrimination and inequality can help to ensure that policies are responsive to their needs.

Adapted from Minority Rights Group, 2015.



### KEY LEARNING POINT

Searching effectively using Boolean operators and filtering techniques will save you time and ensure you find the most relevant evidence products for your search.



### REFLECTION POINT

How do you currently search for information online? Which strategies have you found useful and less useful for finding relevant information online? In what ways can you improve your future searches?

## FURTHER READING

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**Identifying and using online research literature: a guide for policymakers** (INASP): [www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/e-resources/access-support/identifying-and-using-online-research-literature-guide-policy-ma](http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/e-resources/access-support/identifying-and-using-online-research-literature-guide-policy-ma)

**'Availability Does Not Equal Access'**, Anne Powell on the Scholarly Kitchen Blog: <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/05/21/guest-post-inasps-anne-powell-on-availability-does-not-equal-access>

**Sample diagram of the peer review system of Elsevier** (one of the world's leading academic publishers): [www.elsevier.com/reviewers/what-is-peer-review](http://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/what-is-peer-review)

Leaflet on information about INASP's provision to access to research information: [www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/209](http://www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/209)

**Evidence Gap Maps** from 3ie: [www.3ieimpact.org/evaluation/evidence-gap-maps](http://www.3ieimpact.org/evaluation/evidence-gap-maps)

Courses:

**Search Skills for Researchers**

course downloadable at: [www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/127](http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/127)

**Accessing Information in Developing Countries**

course downloadable at: [www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/16](http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/16)

**Online health information,**

access and use course: [www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/66](http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/66)

**Science on the internet Tutorial:**

[www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/84](http://www.inasp.info/en/training-resources/courses/84)

# GLOSSARY

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## **Body of evidence**

an evidence product that collates and reviews multiple studies. Systematic reviews and literature reviews are examples of bodies of evidence.

## **Boolean operators**

used to connect and define the relationship between your search terms. When searching electronic databases, you can use Boolean operators to either narrow or broaden your record sets. The three Boolean operators are AND, OR and NOT.

## **Grey literature**

documents produced by government, academics, businesses, NGOs and other institutions in formats not controlled by the commercial publishing industry. This includes evidence products such as working papers, government papers, programme reports, conference proceedings, media articles and unpublished academic papers such as dissertations.

## **Impact evaluation**

an assessment of the changes that can be attributed to a particular intervention, such as a project, programme or policy – both the intended ones and, ideally, the unintended ones.

## **Literature review**

an evaluative report which includes the current knowledge about a topic, including substantive findings, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions.

## **Open access**

unrestricted online access to scholarly research. No registration is needed (INASP).

## **Peer review**

what characterizes formal academic research. Academics usually publish their work in primary research papers/articles. If an article is peer reviewed, it means it has been read, checked and authenticated (reviewed) by independent, third-party academics (peers) as part of a formal quality assurance procedure. There are several different kinds of peer review such as single blind, double blind and open review. Peer review is usually used only for one evidence product, academic articles, which are often collated into scholarly journals. While academic books also go through a rigorous editing and review process, this is not the same as a peer review process.

## **Published literature**

that which is disseminated via the commercial publishing industry. This includes evidence products such as books and journal articles but would not include documents which are published informally (e.g. a report published by an NGO on its website).

## **Policy brief**

a short paper (usually three to four pages) that covers a specific issue and is aimed at policymakers. Typical briefs have four main functions: to explain and convey the importance of an issue or outline a problem; to present solutions and policy recommendations; to provide evidence to support the reasoning behind those recommendations; and to point the reader to additional resources on the issue.

**Primary literature**

original documents that contain raw material or first-hand information. This includes evidence products such as results of experiments and statistical data, as well as responses from surveys, feedback forms and interviews.

**Qualitative methods and data**

the nature of answers (evidence) in terms of their verbal, written or other descriptive natures. It asks question such as ‘who?’, ‘which?’, ‘what?’, ‘when?’, ‘where?’ and ‘why?’ Qualitative research belongs to a family of approaches concerned with collecting in-depth data about human social experiences and contexts (Laws, Harper, Jones and Marcus, 2013).

**Quantitative methods and data**

asks questions such as ‘how many?’, ‘to what extent?’ or ‘how much?’ using counting and other computation. Quantitative research is concerned with the collection of data in the form of various measures and indices, and its description and analysis by means of statistical methods (Laws, Harper, Jones and Marcus, 2013).

**Secondary literature**

information that is written about a primary source, such as interpretations of and discussions about existing primary sources. This includes evidence products such as journal articles that evaluate someone else’s research, literature reviews or newspaper articles (DFID, 2014).

**Single study**

a type of evidence product that presents scientific results from one piece of research.

**Systematic review**

the use of transparent procedures to find, evaluate and synthesize the results of relevant research. Procedures are explicitly defined in advance, to ensure that the exercise is transparent and can be replicated. This practice is also designed to minimize bias. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined. Peer review is a key part of the process; qualified independent researchers control the author’s methods and results (The Campbell Collaboration).

**Truncation**

the ability in a search to enter the first part of a keyword, insert a symbol (usually \*) and accept any variant spellings or word endings, from the occurrence of the symbol forward (UC Berkeley, 2012).

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