

USING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IN THE DESIGN OF NUTRITION POLICIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED, POORLY DOCUMENTED

INSIGHTS FROM A REVIEW OF NUTRITION-RELATED POLICIES IN SIX SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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It is now widely acknowledged that the policymaking process should be informed by a variety of sources of evidence, among which scientific knowledge, but also information on the environment and context in which decision-making occurs, as well as the lived experiences of the targeted communities or groups.

In particular, the effective use of scientific evidence is believed to strengthen the potential contribution of policies and programmes towards nutrition outcomes through:

- maximising the efficiency of resource allocation
- improving the implementation of policies and programmes through adaptive management

Nevertheless, how to make such evidence available and usable by decision-makers is an issue that still faces many challenges¹.

In order to better assess how far nutrition-related policies explicitly rely on scientific evidence in sub-Saharan African countries, the Nutrition Research Facility undertook a review of policy documents in six countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda².

These countries were chosen because nutrition is a priority in their cooperation programme with the European Union, they were involved in initiatives to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making and their policy documents were referenced in the WHO-GINA database³, which was used as the source of documentation.

A total of 31 national strategies, policies and action plans from various sectors and having explicit nutrition objectives were selected for assessment (published between 2011 and 2019).

The analysis considered three aspects: (1) any textual reference to research, scientific or academic evidence; (2) any reference to the consultation of experts, researchers or scientists during the policy formulation process; and (3) any citation of scientific or grey literature in the document.



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What lessons can be drawn from this analysis?

1. Most of the reviewed documents explicitly refer to the use of evidence as a need, though evidence of its effective use is rather limited in many instances. Some policies refer to previous reports or reviews they build upon, such as the 2010/11-2014/15 Uganda Health Sector Strategic & Investment Plan. Above all, most documents stress the need to further develop and use evidence in future nutrition programming. For instance, the 2016-2020 Burkina Faso Integrated Strategic Plan for Preventing Non-Communicable Diseases considers the low use of research findings as a weakness and calls for a better consideration of scientific evidence.

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