



# The Politics of Evidence-Based Policymaking in Albania: Implications for Human Rights Advocates

Erika Bejko<sup>1</sup> · Marsela Dauti<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Evidence-based policymaking has received considerable attention in social work literature. Yet, little emphasis has been placed on how the political environment shapes the attitudes of government officials toward evidence, especially in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes. We focus on the politics of evidence-based policymaking in Albania. Based on our experience with two state-level departments responsible for social housing and social protection policies, we highlight three strategies used by government officials in response to evidence. Our experience shows that even when officials are exposed to evidence, they retain their political agenda. Findings suggest that to strengthen the role of evidence in politically challenging environments, social work researchers and human rights advocates should work in close collaboration to address political barriers to evidence-based policymaking.

**Keywords** Evidence-based policymaking · Political environment · Communist legacy · Human rights advocates · Albania

One of the authors: I am very enthusiastic about starting a discussion on how evidence can be used to inform social policies in Albania.

Government official: Why is that important?

One of the authors: Because it is important to know which programs work and which ones don't. Why waste money on programs that don't have any impact?

Government official: We don't want to know if programs don't work.

One of the authors: Why's that?

Government official: What will happen is that the opposition will say that the government has failed. Why would we want that? It is politically costly to engage in such efforts. We better not!

This was one of our first conversations with a government official regarding the importance of evidence for policymaking in

Albania. Being aware of the highly polarized political environment and how it shapes policy development in the country, we were not surprised by the reaction of the government official. What surprised us was her direct and honest response. This conversation also reminded us that our efforts to promote the use of evidence in policymaking had to carefully consider the political environment; otherwise, we would fail.

A rich body of scholarly work has examined the importance of evidence for policymaking (see e.g., Ham, Hunter, and Robinson 1995; Liebman 2013; Sutcliffe and Court 2005; Van Dyke and Naom 2016; Vohnsen 2013; Young, Ashby, Boaz, and Grayson 2002). Beyond informing policy decisions, the process of using evidence can open up participatory spaces and strengthen governance and transparency (Gambrell 2008; Stilgoe, Irwin, and Jones 2006; Young et al. 2002). Government officials tell voters that policy decisions will be based on rigorous research rather than political interests or ideology (Choi, Pang, Lin, Puska, and Sherman 2005; Harding 2008; Vohnsen 2013). These outcomes are important especially for countries that suffer from poor quality institutions—weak rule of law, corruption, lack of government transparency, and poor enforcement of property rights (Shirley 2008; North 1990).

Evidence-based policymaking requires a shift from authoritarian top-down and opaque actions to outcomes that are transparent and engage communities and policymakers in deliberation (Chalmers 1983; Gambrell 2008; Stilgoe et al.

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✉ Erika Bejko  
ebejko@yahoo.com

Marsela Dauti  
marsela.dauti@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana, Bulevardi Gjergj Fishta, Tirana, Albania

2006). Hence, the extent to which initiatives of evidence-based policymaking are successful depends on the quality of governance. When the initiatives of evidence-based policymaking are introduced into contexts characterized by centralized government practices with low levels of transparency and accountability, they meet with resistance. Furthermore, the effective use of evidence in policymaking requires the commitment of political leadership (Fields, Stamatakis, Duggan, and Brownson 2015; Pope, Rollins, Chaumba, and Risler 2011). Often, this commitment is lacking. Political leaders might not be aware of the importance of evidence for policymaking, or promoting the use of evidence in policymaking might oppose political agendas (Vohnsen 2013; Young et al. 2002).

In this article, we discuss the politics of evidence-based policymaking in Albania. Policymaking is a political process, and political dynamics and interests affect policymakers' perceptions and attitudes toward evidence (Parkhurst 2017). We draw on our experiences of collaborating with government officials in two state departments that were responsible for social housing and social protection policies. This study provides important insights into how government authorities perceive and respond to evidence in a polarized political setting and contributes to the broader debate on how evidence can influence social policies in politically challenging environments. Results suggest that to enhance the effectiveness of their efforts in limited political spaces, social work researchers should collaborate with human rights advocates and strengthen the relationship between evidence-based policymaking, participatory democracy, and human rights.

This article focuses only on the case of Albania; however, it provides broader insights into policymaking and change. The use of evidence in policymaking remains a challenge for social work researchers and human rights advocates despite the political environment in which they operate. While the efforts of promoting the use of evidence in policymaking might lead to different outcomes (see e.g., Dhaliwal and Tulloch 2012 for examples of government actions informed by evidence, especially in developing countries), we emphasize the importance of the political environment in which evidence is introduced and how this environment shapes policy outcomes.

## Barriers to Translating Evidence into Policy

It is well established in the literature that the relationship between evidence and policymaking is not linear (Ham, Hunter, and Robinson 1995; Harding 2008; Uneke, Ezeoha, Ndukwe, Oyibo, and Onwe 2012; Young et al. 2002). Numerous studies shed light on the strategies used by policymakers in response to evidence. One of the strategies, as Harding (2008) suggests, is “reshaping and repackaging” (p. 316) evidence. In other words, policymakers use evidence to advance their interests,

such as to justify existing policies (Jack, Dobbins, Tonmyr, Dudding, Brooks, and Kennedy 2010; Stilgoe et al. 2006; Vohnsen 2013). Some of the strategies include omitting research findings that are not consistent with government policies (Stilgoe et al. 2006), blocking the publication of research findings that challenge the beliefs and agendas of policymakers (Vohnsen 2013), and not commissioning research on sensitive topics because the results will affect electoral support (Choi et al. 2005; Ham et al. 1995).

Besides vested interests in maintaining political status quo, another explanation is the knowledge gap between policymakers and researchers. Policymakers lack an understanding of evidence and evidence-based policymaking. Meanwhile, researchers lack an understanding of policymaking processes. The evidence produced by researchers is often not useful for policymaking processes. Furthermore, research results are not communicated effectively (Choi et al. 2005; Stilgoe et al. 2006; Uneke et al. 2012).

Scholars refer to policymakers and scientists as two communities with different priorities, agendas, and expectations (Choi et al. 2005; Leicester 1999). Whereas the goal of scientists is to advance science, the goal of policymakers is to advance their political agendas and ensure electoral support. Policymakers have little expertise or time to consider scientific publications. Another consideration is the time frame. Policymakers make quick decisions, which cannot wait for research results. Furthermore, policymakers are accountable to political parties and voters. Their priority is the electoral agenda rather than research findings (Choi et al. 2005; Leicester 1999; Young et al. 2002).

But focusing on the knowledge gap and differences between scientists and policymakers leads to underestimation of the role of political institutions and how they shape the incentives of policymakers to use evidence. Evidence-based policymaking requires not only a shift in mindset but also political power. Political processes should be open for scrutiny. Policy outcomes should be transparent, and the public should engage in discussions of the effectiveness of policies. Furthermore, policymakers should build critical thinking skills (Van Dyke and Naom 2016; Gambrill 2008). When the policymaking process is closed to the public, government authorities may feel threatened by such practices and skills (Chalmers 1983). For instance, cultivating critical thinking skills can damage the careers of government authorities in oppressive environments. The challenges for advocates of evidence-based policymaking in such contexts are not only to communicate the importance of evidence to policymakers and build collaborative partnerships but also to promote democratic practices of governance.

The politics of evidence-based policymaking has received little attention in social work literature. Greater emphasis has been placed on personal and organizational barriers, such as lack of evidence-based practice training, lack of skills to

effectively communicate evidence to policymakers, nonsupportive organizational culture, and information overload (see, e.g., Austin and Ciaassen 2008; Jacobs, Dodson, Baker, Deshpande, and Brownson 2010; Pope et al. 2011). A few studies conducted on evidence-based practice in Eastern Europe focus on the use of evidence in child protection services and the attitudes and beliefs of social workers toward evidence-based practice (see e.g., Iovu 2013; Iovu and Luciana 2012). A better understanding of the politics of evidence-based policymaking is critical to the success of interventions by social workers, especially regarding how social workers approach the political environment and advocate for greater use of evidence in policymaking.

Evidence-based policymaking faces particular challenges in the context of Albania. In the following paragraphs, we discuss five challenges that focus on the communist legacy of state control, low levels of government transparency and accountability, political conflicts and polarization, brain drain, and meager investments in research infrastructure.

## Barriers to Evidence-Based Policymaking in Albania

During communism, the Albanian government invested in scientific institutions. From 1960 to 1970, the number of scientific institutions in Albania tripled (Abdiu 1972). But their purpose was to elevate the ideas of communist leaders rather than critically appraise them (Tarifa 1996). The Labor Party assigned so-called research tasks, which were then implemented by research institutes. The goal of research projects was to demonstrate that party objectives were met and even exceeded expectations. Political and social isolations, coupled with a politicized education system, led to a narrow perspective of how science could contribute to development. *Evidence* referred to data produced for bureaucratic purposes or data that served the government efforts to control work undertaken in different sectors, such as education, economy, and military (Dauti and Kurti 2016). The communist legacy might continue to have an impact. Abazi (2010), for example, argues that social sciences during the postcommunist period “work in a vicious circle that reproduces in essence the same reality, the same social relationships and mentalities, although in different forms” (p. 64, translated by the authors).

The legacy of communism might also be reflected in current attitudes. As in the communist past, officials might not support evidence that social policies and programs are not effective. Criticism might be perceived as a party attack that threatens the status quo. The legacy of communism may also be reflected in how evidence is perceived. As in the time of communism, evidence may be considered a tool for government control of a situation. In this case, government officials

refer to evidence as data that show government objectives being met.

The fall of communism led to a massive movement of the Albanian population into neighboring countries. The impact of this out-migration as well as the movement of returnees back into Albania is discussed in the article by authors Dhëmbo, Duci, and Vathi. In the out-migration of 1990–1999, however, approximately 42% of professors and research scientists left Albania (Country Report 2006). Brain drain reached its peak during 1991–1993 and 1997–1998, two critical periods for country’s development. The former coincides with the collapse of communism and the latter with the political and financial crisis. Poverty, isolation from the international academic community, lack of academic freedom, and research opportunities are some of the drivers of migration (UNDP 2006).

In terms of specific impact on scientific research, including the collection of data and the use of scientific evidence, less than 10% of the Albanian lecturers and researchers who left the country after 1990 returned by 2005. Seventy-five percent of those who returned do not work in universities or research institutions (UNDP 2006). Furthermore, meager investments have been made in research. For instance, 98% of the budget of the Academy of Science in 2006 was used for administrative expenses. Only 2% was invested in research infrastructure (Country Report 2006).

Albania is characterized by low levels of government transparency and accountability (Transparency International 2016; USAID 2014). Efforts to promote the use of evidence in policymaking in this context will face resistance. Government officials might avoid the discussion of ineffective social policies. Evidence demonstrating that social policies are not effective will result in negative public reaction and loss of popularity (Choi et al. 2005; Leicester 1999). Hence, officials might not support the use of evidence, or they might appear open to the idea of using evidence but in practice ignore it.

Government officials might be more receptive to evidence that supports their political ideology and party program (Harding 2008). The interest-convergence theory suggests that policymakers will respond to advocates of evidence-based practice when their interests converge (Bell 1980; Crowder 2014). While this theory has been criticized for overlooking the role of personal agency, it highlights how unequal power relations hinder social and political change (Driver 2011). One of the implications of this theory is that policymakers will respond to the efforts of promoting the use of evidence in policymaking if such efforts advance political interests, for example, expand their electoral base or advance party program.

Political appointments and frequent staff turnover also undermine the promotion of evidence-based policymaking (European Commission 2014). Political appointments result in unqualified staff members, who might be more interested in

demonstrating loyalty to leaders than in undertaking new initiatives that focus on evidence (Harding 2008). Furthermore, frequent staff changes might affect the extent to which evidence is appropriated and expanded.

In the presence of political conflicts, political leaders might be concerned that the opposition will use evidence to condemn the party in power. If the evidence demonstrates that social programs do not work, for instance, the opposition will blame the party in power, emphasizing that the situation increases inequality. This political calculation might prompt resistance and opposition. As Choi et al. (2005) indicate, officials refrain from undertaking actions they anticipate will weaken the support for their programs.

## Method

This article is based on the experience of collaborating with two state departments: the Department of Social Welfare Policies at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth and the Department of Urban Services and Housing at the Ministry of Urban Development.

The experience with the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth focused on evaluating the extent to which the design of social protection policies was informed by evidence. To assess the role of evidence, we conducted interviews with policymakers, led focus group discussions with civil society representatives, and reviewed policy documents. Evaluation results were presented to government officials in a roundtable discussion format. The experience with the Ministry of Urban Development focused on conducting two research projects, a needs assessment and a situation analysis of social housing. Social housing programs target vulnerable groups, such as single parent families, victims of domestic violence, the elderly, returning immigrants, and Roma and Egyptians.<sup>1</sup> Research findings revealed that the poorest of the poor do not benefit from social housing programs (UNDP 2014). Results were used to inform the government strategy of social housing for the next 10 years. Research projects were based on interviews with policymakers, housing specialists, representatives of civil society organizations, and on the analysis of secondary data.

We served as consultants in these research projects during 2014–2015. In the first project, our interactions with government officials were limited during the implementation of the evaluation project and presentation of evaluation results. Our involvement in the second project was of longer duration. In addition to implementing and presenting evaluation projects,

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the census of 2011, there are 8301 Roma and 3368 Egyptians in Albania. However, these numbers have been contested. Depending on the source, reported numbers vary from around 11,600 to more than 100,000 for both communities (UNDP 2015a, b). De Soto, Beddies, and Gedeshi (2005) provide a brief history of Roma and Egyptians in Albania before and after the fall of communism.

we supported policymakers in translating evidence into the social housing strategy. Several meetings were held in state departments to discuss research findings and their implications for the housing sector in the country.

In the process, two international consultants also supported policymakers in developing a social housing strategy. This included a 2-day workshop on social housing and the provision of information on funding schemes, social housing in European Union countries, forms of financial support for social housing programs, monitoring and evaluation of housing programs, and communication and engagement of stakeholders in the process of designing, implementing, and monitoring the social housing strategy. The information was provided at the request of government officials.

We had several opportunities to interact with government officials, who provided written comments on research results and implications and conversed with us during formal and informal meetings. Government officials demanded that the emphasis be placed on the accomplishments of the new government, showing how the new government, compared to the previous one, was doing a better job. The authors were asked to soften the language. For instance, instead of “the quality of programs should improve,” it was suggested that the authors say “there is room for improvement.” Interactions with government officials also allowed observing their attitudes toward vulnerable groups, especially Roma and Egyptians. Officials reverted to the myth that Roma and Egyptians do not need stable and secure housing because they are always on the move. This myth prevailed, especially during initial discussions held at the Ministry of Urban Development. Evidence shows that such myths, which perpetuate the discrimination and exclusion of Roma and Egyptians, are common among government officials (UNDP 2015a, b).

Our experience with these two departments cannot be generalized to all government departments in Albania. Our goals are to shed light on the difficulties of using evidence in policymaking and initiate a discussion about how social work researchers and human rights advocates can be more effective during policymaking processes, especially in politically challenging environments.

## Findings

Government officials responded to the evidence provided by the research team by (a) refusing, (b) ignoring, or (c) using findings. We discuss each of these three responses in the following paragraphs.

### Refusing Research Findings

Refusal was accompanied by reactions such as, “I do not agree at all,” “This is not true,” “This conclusion does not

convince me,” and “This is a wrong observation.” Four types of findings were rejected:

**Findings Highlighting That Decision Making Is Political** For instance, representatives of civil society organizations said policymakers do not prioritize monitoring and evaluation results because they are politically costly. A study participant said, “Government officials do not want to know if programs don’t work. This is because they will be held accountable.” A government official responded by saying “Wrong observation.” Representatives of civil society organizations also reported that policymakers use the number of beneficiaries as an indicator of policy effectiveness; numbers serve electoral purposes. When confronted with this reaction, one of the government officials said, “Numbers have never been used for electoral purposes but rather have been viewed as achievements.”

**Findings Highlighting the Ineffectiveness of Social Programs** Representatives of civil society organizations reported several problems, such as the increase in existing inequalities due to social housing programs, lack of transparency among government officials at the central level, and lack of response by central-level officials to local-level officials. Government officials at the housing department responded by saying, “This is not true.”

**Findings Highlighting the Problems Characterizing the Relationship Between the Government and Civil Society Organizations** Representatives of civil society organizations reported that government officials are skeptical of the data they produce. Furthermore, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth does not consult civil society organizations when budget decisions are made. A government official responded by saying, “This is not a problem of the ministry. Organizations have been treated equally. All organizations have been involved.” Similarly, another government official said, “We have organized hearings with all interest groups for all problems, including hearings for the budget.”

**Findings That Were Perceived as an Open Critique of Government Intentions** During fieldwork, representatives of civil society organizations said that the government pretends to be open to them because of pressure from international organizations. One of the representatives said: “They [government officials] want to tell to the international community: “Look, we are open. We fulfill international standards and respect human rights. But it is just window dressing.”” In addition, it was pointed out that the distribution of funds from the central government to local governments is based on political affiliations, and the process of policymaking is not transparent.

## Ignoring Research Findings

Compared to the first reaction, when public officials openly refused research findings by saying that they would not take them into consideration, in the second scenario, the findings were disregarded because officials did not consider them important. In other words, these types of findings were completely ignored; they were neither discussed nor mentioned in formal or informal meetings. Government officials overlooked four types of findings.

**Findings That Suggested Major Changes to the Governance System** For instance, findings that suggested strengthening the monitoring system for social housing programs or making public funds transparent were ignored by government officials.

**Findings that Suggested Steps, Which Required Strong Implementation and Coordination Capacity and the Integration of Different Social Services** This was especially the case with social housing. One suggestion was offering a package of services to poor families in which social housing services were combined with other social services. Although officials accepted the importance of service integration in principle, they focused only on those steps they could undertake within a short period of time and with demonstrated short-term results.

**Findings That Suggested Conducting Systematic Analysis (Qualitative and Quantitative) That Could Inform the Design of Social Policies** When we discussed the importance of conducting rigorous analysis with one of the specialists in the housing department, the specialist said, “We know these things. Why do we need to conduct a research project?” Her attitude, in part, was explained by the belief that she had sufficient information.

One evaluation study suggested the value of strengthening collaborative relationships in the delivery of social housing programs. For this, several steps were outlined, such as reviewing programs implemented in similar contexts, identifying their advantages and disadvantages, and discussing their applicability with different stakeholders. Despite this level of specificity, officials simplified the process into signing collaborative agreements with different actors involved in the housing sector. This change transformed the rigorous analysis into a bureaucratic procedure.

**Findings that Suggested Undertaking Collaborative Initiatives with Different Actors** We observed the tendency of establishing clear boundaries between departments, even when they belonged to the same ministry. This was usually associated with avoiding responsibilities or delegating them to other departments.

## Selecting and Using Research Findings

Government officials selected research findings that were consistent with the political program of the government. For instance, one of the priorities of the government was increasing the number of beneficiaries of social housing programs (Council of Ministers 2013). Similarly, officials emphasized the importance of expanding existing programs, even when findings demonstrated the programs were not effective. Officials were interested in increasing the number of beneficiaries—and hence expanding their electoral base—instead of preventing problems or addressing their root causes. The other instance when officials were open to research findings was when findings suggested that local-level officials should undertake steps to improve the situation.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This article focused on the politics of evidence-based policymaking in Albania. Based on our experience with two state-level departments during 2014–2015, we have presented three strategies used by government officials in response to evidence. Our experience suggests that even when officials are exposed to evidence, they retain their political agenda. This result corroborates the findings of other authors who argue that political interests trump evidence (Harding 2008; Stilgoe et al. 2006; Uneke et al. 2012; Vohnsen 2013).

One of the dangers is translating evidence-based policy into policy-based evidence (Harding 2008). Evidence serves political interests, hence reinforcing practices it is meant to change. In one of the departments, our efforts to promote the use of evidence had no impact. Government officials simply did not agree with the research findings, but instead perceived them as attacks on their political party. Their disagreement with research findings preserved their position in the department and legitimized the program of their political party. Meanwhile, in the other department, officials selected only those findings that were in line with the agenda of their political party, which provides support for the interest-convergence theory (Bell 1980; Crowder 2014). In each case, officials' attitudes were influenced by political interests, not evidence.

One explanation for the actions of government officials is that they are not aware of the importance of evidence and the difference it can make for their work. One official referred to research as “the process of producing numbers” or “demonstrating what we already know.” Even though we were using the same term, *evidence*, we were referring to different things. For some, evidence was the same as numbers. For others, *evidence* referred to the directives of the prime minister or notes taken during briefings with the minister. However, even when we clarified the concept, we did not observe a change in the attitudes of government officials.

Another explanation is that the political environment in Albania encourages centralized practices of governance. The environment undermines the efforts of promoting evidence-based policymaking because such efforts thrive in settings that encourage autonomy and innovation (Duggan, Aisaka, Tabak, Smith, Erwin, and Brownson 2015). Government officials should collaboratively and openly discuss the success of social programs that work, those that do not work, and what can be done to address the problems these discussions identify. While interacting with government officials, we observed the opposite: Government officials tried to demonstrate that programs work or expand them, even when evidence suggested that this was not the preferred step. In a politically oppressive environment, government officials do not view the initiatives supported by evidence-based policymaking as useful for their political careers. They are more committed to demonstrating loyalty to political leaders than to raising questions regarding the effectiveness of social policies. Criticism might produce undesirable results, such as losing popularity or losing one's job (Harding 2008).

As seen earlier in history, officials viewed criticism as an act against the government. However, their attitudes cannot be explained by the communist legacy alone. It is also true that by refusing criticism, officials were able to preserve their workplace privileges in state departments.

One of the implications of our work is that social work researchers should strengthen their collaboration with human rights advocates that share their views regarding the value of evidence in policymaking. Collaboration can take different forms. Human rights advocates can uptake and integrate evidence into advocacy tools. For instance, evidence on the effectiveness of social housing programs can be used by human rights advocates when interacting with local and central-level authorities. This step would require close collaboration with researchers; training human rights advocates on how to use and communicate evidence effectively. A challenge for human rights advocates is confronting misconceptions and beliefs of government officials. Evidence can be an important tool in the process. For instance, one of the misconceptions of government authorities, which were previously discussed, was that Roma and Egyptians did not need stable and secure housing. We highlighted that evidence suggests the opposite, which called for government officials to revisit their assumptions. But our efforts would have had greater impact if human rights advocates integrated this finding into their large-scale efforts.

Our experience with state departments in Albania suggests that in a politically challenging environment, evidence alone cannot have an impact on policymaking unless it is combined with advocacy efforts seeking to address the poor quality of governance, opening up participatory spaces, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing government transparency. Initiatives to promote the use of evidence in policymaking should be closely linked with those seeking to promote

democratic practices of governance and enhance government responsiveness and accountability. If not, initiatives that support evidence-based policymaking will be added to the list of unsuccessful initiatives.

In this article, we focused only on government authorities. Future work should consider how other stakeholders view the role of evidence in policymaking. One of the study participants emphasized that the international community, in its support of social welfare programs, is more concerned about the efficiency of the system—for example, the change in the number of beneficiaries—rather than its effectiveness. Other aspects that warrant further examination are the capacity of state institutions to produce evidence and the differences between government authorities at the central and local levels regarding the perception and use of evidence.

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