

THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE IN POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Strengthening the generation, communication, and use of local agroecological evidence for food systems transformation



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September, 2026

OVERVIEW ABOUT THIS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCT

Food systems transformation requires decisions informed by credible and relevant knowledge. Yet the existence of evidence does not guarantee that it will be used. Research on evidence use consistently points to the importance of relevance, timeliness, accessibility, interaction, relationships, trust, skills and the wider policy context. FAO's recent work applies this insight specifically to agrifood systems and science-policy interfaces, highlighting the need for relevant, credible and actionable evidence and for stronger, context-specific mechanisms linking evidence producers and users.

This knowledge product translates those lessons into a practical approach for KHEA and other agroecology actors. It argues that policy engagement should begin with a decision or change pathway, not with a predetermined report or policy brief. The key questions are: What decision is being influenced? Who makes or influences it? What do they need to know? What evidence already exists? What is missing? When is the evidence needed? How should actors engage around it? And how will influence be assessed?

Five practical shifts:

- 1) From evidence products to decisions;
- 2) from one-way dissemination to engagement;
- 3) from research-only evidence to appropriate combinations of evidence;
- 4) from generic messages to context- and audience-specific communication;
- 5) from counting activities to assessing influence and learning.

What this knowledge product provides:

- Description of how evidence can contribute to policy and other decision-making processes.
- A practical Evidence-to-Decision pathway for KHEA and project teams.
- An Evidence-to-Decision Mapping Tool for planning engagement.
- A framework for assessing the effectiveness of evidence engagement.
- Principles for strengthening local agroecological evidence in food systems transformation.

Why evidence matters — and why evidence alone is not enough

Evidence can help actors understand problems, compare options, assess feasibility, challenge assumptions and monitor implementation. However, policy and other decisions are made within institutional, economic, social and political contexts. A systematic review covering 145 studies found that poor access to good-quality and relevant research and lack of timely research outputs were among the most frequently reported barriers to evidence uptake. Collaboration between researchers and policymakers, relationships and skills were among the most frequently reported facilitators.

FAO's work on agrifood systems reaches a similar practical conclusion: translating evidence into tools and recommendations for different agrifood-system actors is challenging because actors have different interests and backgrounds; effective dialogue and country ownership matter, and there is no one-size-fits-all tool.

Evidence-informed decision-making

Evidence-informed decision-making can be understood as a process in which multiple sources of information, including the best available research evidence, are considered before decisions are made, implemented or adjusted. Importantly, evidence use does not necessarily mean that a policy adopts a research finding word-for-word. Evidence may influence how a problem is understood, how options are assessed, what questions are asked, or how implementation is adapted.

Start with the decision, not the evidence product

A common weakness in policy engagement is beginning with an available dataset, report or research finding and then looking for an audience. A more decision-oriented approach begins by identifying the decision or change that needs to be influenced.

Question	What it means	Example
What decision?	What policy, programme, investment, regulatory or implementation decision is being considered?	Should a district integrate a specific agroecological practice into extension plans?
Who decides?	Who has formal authority and who has influence over the decision?	District technical officers, planners, political leaders, farmer organisations and other stakeholders.
What do they need to know?	Which questions must be answered to make or influence the decision?	Costs, feasibility, farmer demand, expected outcomes, risks and implementation requirements.
When is it needed?	What policy or planning window creates an opportunity for evidence use?	Strategy review, budget preparation, annual planning or regulatory review.
How should it be used?	What form of evidence and engagement is appropriate?	Briefing, technical dialogue, demonstration, data dashboard, farmer testimony or policy brief.

Different decisions require different evidence

FAO emphasises that agrifood systems actors have different interests and backgrounds and that decision-support tools need to respond to country and user needs. This supports a practical distinction: *the evidence needed by a farmer to decide whether to adopt a practice is not necessarily the same as the evidence required by a regulator, buyer, extension service or policymaker.*

What counts as evidence?

For agroecology and food systems transformation, useful evidence may come from several sources. The appropriate combination depends on the question, the decision and the standards required for that decision. FAO's analysis of agricultural evidence-policy systems in Benin, for example, identifies organisations that produce, broker or use data, research, evaluation and expert knowledge, within a wider system shaped by institutions, incentives and funding.

Evidence source	Examples relevant to agroecology
Research evidence	Studies, experiments, evaluations, systematic reviews, surveys and quantitative analyses.
Implementation evidence	Monitoring data, adoption rates, programme experience, costs, delivery lessons and outcome data.
Experiential/local evidence	Farmer knowledge, local innovations, practitioner experience and community observations.
Contextual evidence	Policy and regulatory environment, markets, institutions, social conditions, climate and resource constraints.
Administrative and sector data	Agricultural statistics, market information, budgets, extension records, certification and compliance data.

N.B: Recognising multiple forms of evidence does not mean treating all evidence as equally rigorous or interchangeable. Evidence should be assessed according to the question, the decision, the context and the quality requirements of the intended user.

Evidence, narratives and what people care about

Evidence is interpreted within a problem frame. Different actors may care about the same agroecological intervention for different reasons. Effective engagement therefore requires understanding both the evidence and the questions, values and priorities of the intended audience.

Communication Principle: Tailoring evidence to an audience does not mean changing the evidence. It means selecting and presenting relevant findings, implications and uncertainties in a form that enables the intended user to understand and act on them.

Actor	Possible evidence demand
Farmer	Expected benefits, costs, labour, risks, practical feasibility and peer experience.
Extension officer	Technical feasibility, training requirements, implementation guidance and local results.
Regulator	Safety, efficacy, compliance, standards and risk evidence.
Buyer	Volume, quality, reliability, traceability and compliance.
District/local government	Local development relevance, costs, feasibility, livelihoods, resilience and implementation capacity.
National policymaker	Problem magnitude, policy options, implications, costs, equity, feasibility and scalability.
Donor/investor	Results, sustainability, scalability, value for money, risks and learning.

From dissemination to engagement

Sending a policy brief, report or research paper to a decision-maker is dissemination. Engagement is a two-way or multi-way process in which actors exchange evidence, experience, questions and perspectives around a decision or problem.

Evidence-use research consistently points to interaction and relationships as important facilitators. A systematic review found contact, collaboration and relationships to be a major facilitator in more than two thirds of the studies it examined, while timing and opportunity were recurring barriers. Interactive policy dialogues have also been proposed as mechanisms for bringing stakeholders together around evidence and options.

Dissemination	Engagement
Evidence is packaged first	The decision/evidence need is identified first
One-way communication	Dialogue and interaction
Audience receives findings	Stakeholders interpret and discuss findings
Success = product delivered	Success includes learning, relationships and influence
Often a one-off event	Can be sustained through relationships and policy windows

Co-production

Where feasible, intended users should be involved earlier than the dissemination stage: in defining the problem, shaping evidence questions, interpreting findings and identifying implications. This can increase relevance and create shared understanding while also making the evidence process more responsive to decision-making realities.

Connecting evidence and change

The pathway from evidence to change is rarely linear. Evidence may influence how a problem is framed, strengthen relationships, inform an option, support a policy decision, improve implementation or generate questions for further evidence.

FAO's agrifood science policy guidance emphasises governance, stakeholder engagement, capacity building and continuous learning as part of effective science policy interfaces.

1	Identify the decision	What change or decision needs to be influenced?
2	Understand the context	What institutions, interests, incentives, constraints and policy windows shape the decision?
3	Identify evidence needs	What does the intended user need to know?
4	Generate / assemble evidence	What existing and new evidence can answer the question?
5	Translate and engage	How can evidence be made accessible and discussed with relevant actors?
6	Influence decisions	How does evidence contribute to agenda-setting, options, policy, planning or implementation?
7	Learn and adapt	What changed, what did not, and what should be done differently next time?

KHEA Evidence-to-Decision Mapping Tool

Use this tool before developing a knowledge product, policy message, advocacy activity or evidence-generation plan. It helps ensure that the evidence activity is connected to a real decision and a defined engagement pathway.

Mapping question	Notes / evidence to capture
1. What decision or change are we trying to influence?	
2. Who has formal authority to make the decision?	
3. Who else can influence the decision?	
4. What does each actor currently know/believe?	
5. What evidence is needed for the decision?	
6. What evidence already exists?	
7. What evidence gaps remain?	
8. What is the required quality/verification standard?	
9. When is the evidence needed?	

10. What engagement opportunity or policy window exists?	
11. What evidence product or format is appropriate?	
12. Who is the most credible messenger or broker?	
13. What action do we want the engagement to enable?	
14. How will we assess influence and learning?	

Assessing the effectiveness of evidence engagement

Counting meetings, policy briefs and participants can demonstrate activity, but these measures do not show whether evidence contributed to a decision. A more useful framework tracks a progression from reach and engagement to understanding, decision influence and implementation influence.

Level	Key question	Possible indicators
1. Reach	Did intended users receive or access the evidence?	Evidence shared, accessed or requested.
2. Engagement	Did intended users interact with the evidence?	Questions, dialogue, feedback, requests for further analysis.
3. Understanding	Did the evidence contribute to understanding or reframing?	Changed understanding, problem framing or shared interpretation.
4. Relationship / network	Did engagement strengthen relevant relationships or connections?	New or stronger links between evidence producers, brokers and users.
5. Decision influence	Was evidence considered in a decision process?	Evidence cited, discussed or reflected in plans, policies, strategies or investments.
6. Implementation influence	Did the decision affect implementation or practice?	Changes in implementation, guidance, resource allocation or practice.
7. Learning	What was learned about the evidence and engagement pathway?	Documented lessons and adaptations for future engagement.
N:B: Policy influence is often indirect and takes time. Absence of an immediate policy change does not necessarily mean that evidence had no value. Intermediate changes in understanding, relationships, agendas and options can be important outcomes.		

Principles for strengthening local agroecological evidence

01	Start with the decision	Define the decision or change pathway before deciding what evidence product to produce.
02	Know the evidence user	Identify who will use the evidence and what questions matter to them.
03	Use appropriate combinations of evidence	Bring together research, implementation, local, experiential and contextual evidence where appropriate.
04	Contextualise evidence	Make clear where evidence comes from, for whom it applies and under what conditions.
05	Co-create where feasible	Involve intended users in defining questions, interpreting findings and considering options.
06	Build relationships and trust	Invest in sustained interaction, credibility, mutual understanding and respectful dialogue.
07	Match the format to the decision	Use the format, language, level of detail and messenger that best supports the intended decision.
08	Engage at the right time	Align evidence generation and communication with policy and decision-making windows.
09	Track influence, not only outputs	Assess whether evidence was accessed, discussed, understood, used and reflected in decisions or implementation.
10	Learn and adapt	Document what worked, what did not and how future evidence and engagement should change.

Practical checklist for KHEA project teams

- Before starting an evidence or policy-engagement activity, ask:
- Have we clearly identified the decision or change we want to influence?
- Have we identified both formal decision-makers and other influential actors?
- Do we understand the policy, institutional and implementation context?
- Have intended users helped define the evidence question?
- Have we checked what evidence already exists before collecting new data?
- Are we clear about the quality and verification requirements?
- Does the evidence include relevant local and implementation experience?
- Is the evidence sufficiently contextualised?
- Is the evidence available in time for the decision?
- Are we using an appropriate messenger and engagement channel?
- Are we creating opportunities for dialogue rather than only dissemination?
- Have we defined the action or decision we want engagement to enable?
- How will we know whether the evidence influenced the process?

- How will we capture learning for future policy engagement?

Key Point: For each major advocacy or evidence activity, complete the Evidence-to-Decision Mapping Tool before developing the final knowledge product or engagement plan.

Key takeaways

- Evidence is most useful when it is connected to a clearly defined decision.
- Different actors require different evidence because their decisions, responsibilities and information needs differ.
- Evidence use is shaped by timing, relevance, accessibility, relationships, trust, skills and the wider policy context.
- Local and experiential knowledge can complement research evidence, provided its provenance, limitations and quality are transparent.
- Co-production can improve relevance by involving intended users in defining questions, interpreting findings and identifying implications.
- Policy engagement should be treated as an ongoing process of interaction and learning, not simply dissemination of a finished report.
- Evidence engagement should be assessed through influence and learning as well as activities and outputs.
- For agroecology, stronger evidence-policy systems can help connect local experience and implementation learning to wider food systems decisions.

Closing message

“The question is not only whether we have evidence. The question is whether we have the right evidence, for the right decision, for the right actor, at the right time and whether we have created the relationships and processes needed for that evidence to be used.”

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Food Systems Transformation workshop materials supplied by project team under the McNight Foundation projects.