



Sedi



Understanding the demand and use of evidence through a ‘political economy +’ approach: the SEDI experience in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda

SEDI Learning Brief 1



Summary

This learning brief summarises the experience of designing, conducting, and reflecting on a novel methodology for understanding the political economy of government agencies' use of evidence.

Developed under the Strengthening the Use of Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) programme, which is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and implemented across three sectors in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda, the 'political economy plus' (PEA+) methodology was intended to ensure that the programme's subsequent choice of who to work with and what to work on was informed by a detailed and in-depth understanding of contextual realities.

The methodology was also intended to build the programme team's capacity to adopt a 'thinking and working politically' (TWP) approach from the outset.

The PEA+ integrated analyses of evidence ecosystems and organisational capacity into a political economy framework, along with issues of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI). Issues regarding evidence ecosystems and organisational capacity have rarely been looked at together through an overarching political economy lens, making this an important innovation from SEDI.

Although ambitious and resource- and time-intensive, the multi-dimensional PEA+ framework highlighted the importance of answering the following crucial questions:

- Whose evidence is seen as credible and legitimate in the policymaking process – and why?
- Whose voices count, and who therefore has more or less influence in decision-making processes – and why?
- How does the political economy of evidence therefore shape the substance of policies and the parameters regarding who is included or excluded, and who benefits more or less – and why?

The PEA+ framework made it possible to problematise and question assumptions about power relationships through these three questions. Adding the organisational lens ensured that the analysis was focused on practical issues about the potential for SEDI involvement and possible entry points to work with government departments.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck soon after the PEA+ reports had been produced. It changed the nature of SEDI's work: the governments of Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda responded in very different ways and placed very different demands on the SEDI teams. SEDI sees political economy analysis (PEA) not as a one-off product or report but as a process. As such, remaining

informed about and responsive to context is integral to its design and implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a powerful illustration of how context can change and affect programming and policies. The in-depth analytical approach SEDI developed proved invaluable in thinking through how the programme can pivot to support governments during the crisis. This remains very much work in progress, as all country teams learn by doing and regularly share their learning.



Introduction

This learning brief details an adapted approach to PEA, and lessons learned from implementing it in the analysis phase of the SEDI programme, which is funded by FCDO. It is aimed at programme managers who wish to strengthen the use of evidence in government decision-making – whether that is their primary aim or part of a wider approach to supporting government agencies through the process of policy development, design, and implementation.

SEDI is being implemented in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda between 2019 and 2024.¹ This brief outlines how the project team developed an innovative PEA methodology (called PEA plus or PEA+, hereafter PEA+) to understand how policymaking processes in different sectors work in each country, what role evidence plays in them, and where and how government agencies

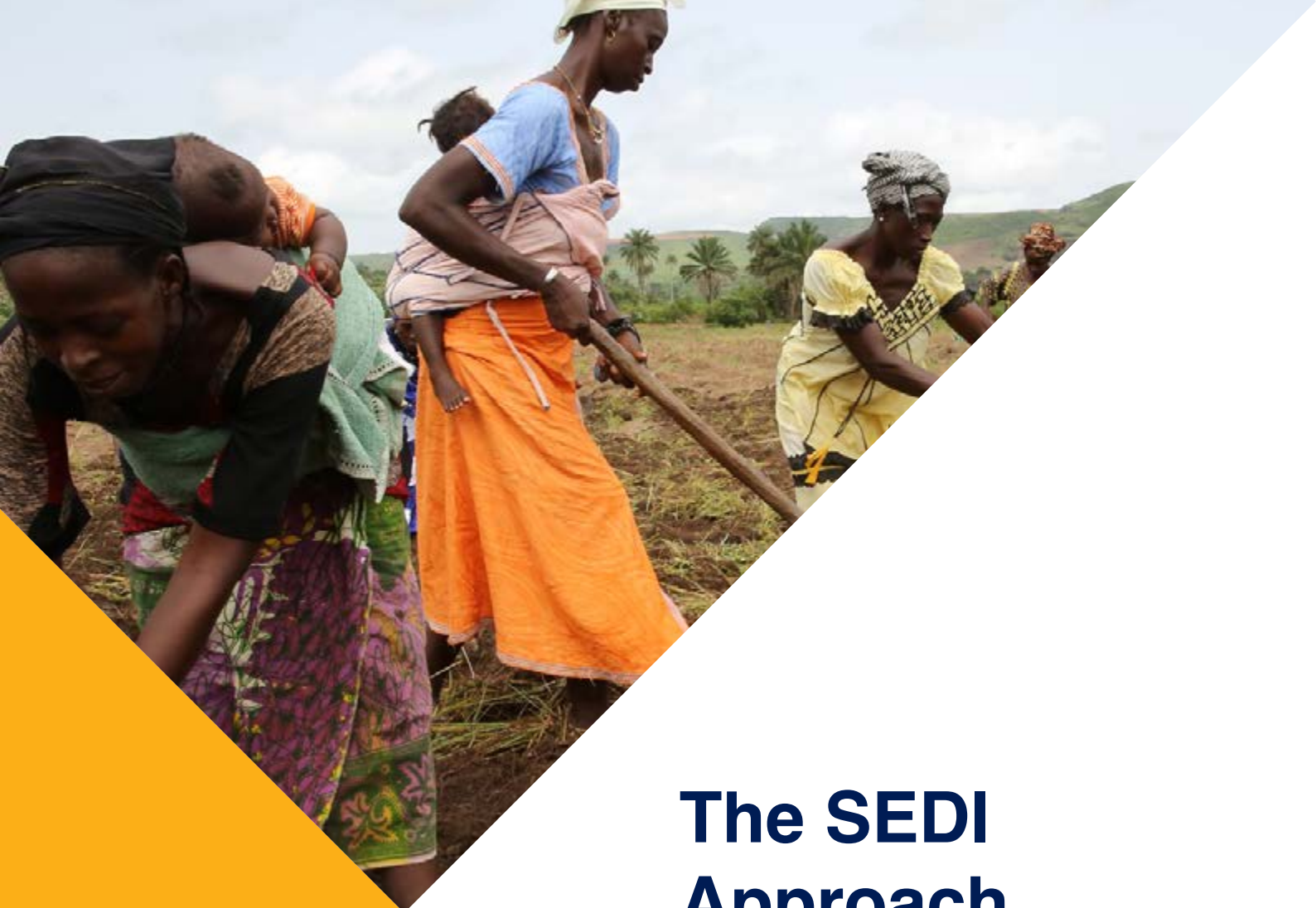
could be supported in their use of evidence in decision-making.

It highlights the analytical insights that emerged when each of the three country teams used this methodology to ask questions and analyse the data at national, sector, problem, and organisational levels; and to understand the implications for the way forward.

SEDI based its methodology on this PEA+ approach to ensure that the programme would be tailored to the contextual realities in each

country, and that interventions designed to enhance government agencies' use of evidence would be realistic. Investing in conducting an in-depth PEA+ in each country was done following a lesson learned from the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme that preceded SEDI, which did not conduct such analysis (Vogel and Punton, 2018).²





The SEDI Approach

SEDI's aim is to increase the use of high-quality evidence among policymakers in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda. It seeks to do this in two ways:

- by improving the use of evidence directly informing policy and programme decisions (referred to as the 'instrumental use of evidence'); and
- by increasing the use of evidence in processes, systems, and working culture (referred to as the 'embedded use of evidence') in government decision-making structures during policy and programme design and implementation.³

The programme's analysis phase was designed to set the scene for detailed and contextualised programme design. It had three distinct but linked purposes, which responded directly to learning from the previous BCURE programme. The first was to understand the political economy of policymaking and evidence use as part of designing and implementing a programme of work anchored in thinking and working politically (TWP) (Box 1). While BCURE projects had looked closely at the context of their work and applied their understanding of the politics of evidence, there had not been an explicit approach to developing contextual understanding and political awareness. The second purpose of the programme's analysis phase was to inform FCDO and partner governments' decisions about which sectors SEDI could focus on, by identifying potential entry points (sectors, issues, and agencies) to improve the instrumental and embedded use of evidence.

The third purpose was to lay the groundwork for country teams to strengthen partnership and cooperation with relevant government agencies, by developing a detailed understanding of their priorities and preferred entry points for the types of work SEDI country teams would be able to design with them.

One of SEDI's core principles is that achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes requires evidence that makes visible the underlying causes of inequality and exclusion. From SEDI's perspective, this is essential to ensure that policy and programming can be designed to address the intersecting structural and social factors that create and sustain discrimination, exclusion, and inequality. This principle underpins SEDI's theory of change – which will be tested throughout the programme – so that SEDI can contribute evidence to building the theory and knowledge base about improved evidence use.

Box 1: What does thinking and working politically (TWP) mean? ⁴

Limited success – or outright failure – in development programming has been linked to insufficient attention being given to contextual issues that can inhibit intended achievements, such as political, socioeconomic, and cultural systems and prevailing norms. As international development actors have stepped up efforts to think and work in more contextually aware ways, some core principles have begun to emerge about what this might mean in practice. While there are no set criteria or methods, TWP means that approaches need to be:

- problem-driven rather than solution-driven;
- grounded in contextual realities;
- locally led;
- adaptive, flexible, iterative, and often entrepreneurial;
- more open to risk and failure;
- staffed with skilled and experienced people who are comfortable with the political nature of development and have deeply rooted contextual knowledge and networks they can tap into;
- anchored in international development actors' roles as enablers, brokers, and convenors of locally led reform processes, rather than simply as funders, directors, or implementers; and
- focused on changing behaviours, not just formal rules.

SEDI also builds on a solid evidence base that shows that simply generating research is insufficient to ensure that the evidence is actually used to inform government decision-making (see Box 2). It is also essential to understand what kinds of evidence are used, when, how, why, and for whom, in order to clarify whose evidence is seen as credible and legitimate, whose voices and ideas are more or less influential (and so have more or less access to policymakers), and the implications for whether and how policies seek to tackle inequality and exclusion. Understanding the political economy of evidence is central to developing a more fine-grained awareness of context and the underlying power dynamics inherent in government decision-making (Parkhurst, 2018; Wills et al., 2016).

As the BCURE programme and other work has demonstrated (Vogel and Punton, 2018), policymakers' demand for evidence is often limited by several linked constraints

- Political economy factors: power relationships, existing structures, and current dynamics can constrain the use of evidence.
- Access and appropriateness: high-quality evidence may not exist, may be hard to access, or may not exist in formats that are conducive to decision-making.
- Values and norms: decision makers may not value independent evidence
- Capacity and incentives: there may be limited individual and organisational capacity to use evidence, with few incentives or mechanisms to improve use.
- The importance of timeliness and windows of opportunity for using evidence may be poorly understood by evidence providers, limiting the relevance and impact of available evidence.
- Limited incentives for coordination between those demanding and those supplying evidence results in unsystematic, and therefore inadequate, approaches to ensuring that evidence is available when it is needed.

Box 2: Defining evidence in SEDI

While the specific characteristics of evidence will be examined throughout SEDI's implementation, in defining the term 'evidence' the analysis team has adopted the four evidence categories identified during the BCURE programme. These were developed to ensure that evidence for policymaking and programming is not solely defined as research:

- government statistical, survey, and administrative data;
- evidence from research;
- evidence from citizens, stakeholders, and role players; and
- monitoring data and evaluation evidence.

Box 1 outlined how, in line with TWP principles, SEDI sees PEA not as a one-off product or report but as a process or a lens through which to examine the context. As such, remaining informed about the local political economy is integral to design and implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a powerful illustration of how context can change and affect programming and policies. Early evidence

in each SEDI country shows that effective COVID-19 responses are locally led and adapted to contextual realities, reflect local capacities and processes, are aware of power dynamics and differential impacts based on sex and vulnerability (especially in relation to gendered inequalities and inequity), and continue to adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground.





Analysing the political economy of policymaking and the role of evidence

The SEDI analysis phase sought to address three overarching research questions:

- What role does evidence play in shaping or influencing decision-making and policymaking in a given sector, and why?
- What does this say about what kinds of evidence, and whose evidence, has more or less influence and traction on decision-making, and why?

- What does this imply for policymakers' incentives and abilities to use evidence to inform decision-making processes?

To answer these questions, we need to ask how and why evidence plays the role it does in policymaking processes: how and why different political, social, and economic factors interact to shape these; and how and why those interactions affect whose evidence has greater weight or influence in informing policymaking. Simply asking what evidence is used in policymaking ignores the question of whose voices count in decision-making, why they count more than others' voices, and to what effect in terms of the kinds of policies that are designed and implemented.

SEDI based its analysis on a PEA in order to understand these 'why' questions: why people behave the way they do and what influences them to behave in that way (Rocha Menocal et al., 2018). PEA provides a structured way of thinking about power dynamics, politics, and the formal and informal 'rules of the game' that shape individual and organisational behaviours at macro and sector levels, and how these evolve or change over time. It considers what political structures, power dynamics, institutions, and ensuing choices, incentives, and behaviours create and reproduce inequalities through the ways in which they privilege whose voices and whose evidence count in decision-making. For this initial analysis, the programme team in each country carried out a macro-(country-) level analysis and three sectoral analyses to understand these details.

PEA also points to the importance of analysing contestation to understand how evidence is used in cases when, for example, the evidence for decision-making is incomplete or inconclusive, when there is disagreement over policy goals, or when different groups prioritise

different problems and/or approaches to solving them. Understanding power dynamics helps highlight how and why contestation happens and under what terms: who are the gatekeepers of the debates, how they set the parameters, and whose voices are influential. Importantly, PEA does not simply describe – it seeks to analyse the underlying issues to get at the detail of why these power dynamics exist. This helps address the important question of who can therefore challenge how evidence is selected and used in policymaking.

PEA also highlights the dynamism of the environments within which evidence is used and decisions are made. This emphasises the need to regularly refresh the analysis: learning from it so that projects and programmes can operate with full awareness of the changing incentives and pressures for action. This is a core component of the TWP approach: from the outset, SEDI's intention was to embed this TWP way of working throughout, regularly updating its PEA analysis across the life of the programme.



Developing PEA+: the SEDI methodology

The SEDI team broke down the research questions outlined in the previous section as follows:

- How does policymaking work in a particular sector, and why?
- How does evidence flow around the evidence ecosystem (i.e. between producers, translators, brokers, and users of evidence for policymaking), and why?

- What does this imply for how the evidence ecosystem can use robust evidence to support effective, pro-poor, gender-, and equity-aware policymaking?
- Which policymaking agencies are interested in using evidence to inform more inclusive and equitable policies, and how are they equipped to do so (e.g. in terms of capacities, incentives, and positioning)?
- How does this help SEDI and its partners to define entry points for the next phase of the programme – supporting sustainable reform of evidence processes, systems, and working practices within individual government agencies?

To address these questions, the team developed a methodological framework that is particularly innovative. Figure 1 summarises how the approach was visualised, and how the team planned to use it to make operational choices about the agencies with which to work.

It explicitly brings together three core themes of work at the heart of the project – sector analysis, an understanding of evidence use, and organisational diagnostics – while adopting a GESI lens throughout (see Box 3). The team adopted the term PEA+ for the new approach, to distinguish it from a more traditional PEA, seeing it as a single piece of analysis viewed simultaneously through three ‘lenses’, each one bringing specific issues into focus.

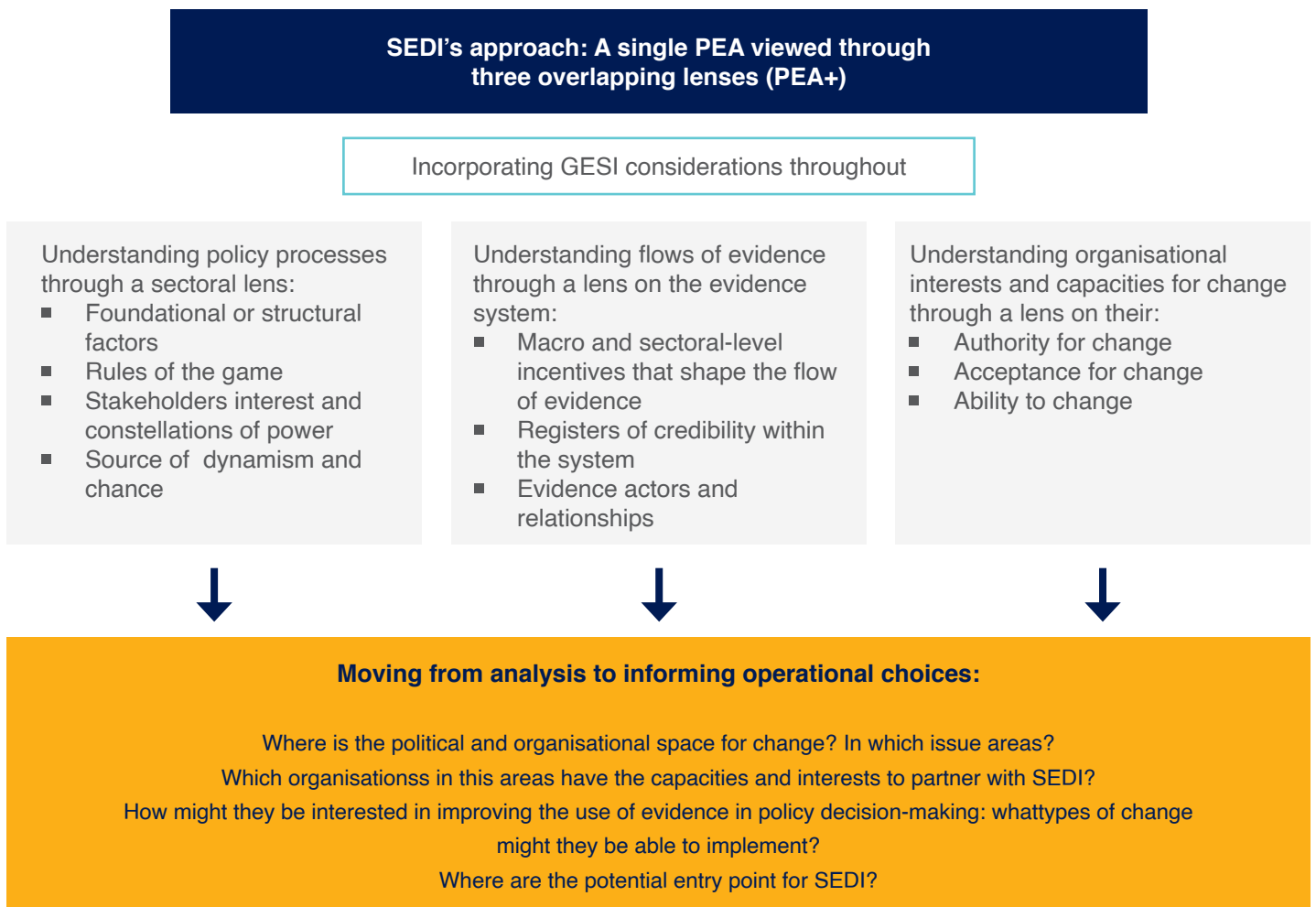


Figure 1: Overview of SEDI's PEA+ approach

The **sectoral lens** draws on classic models of political economy⁵ to explore the macro and sectoral contexts for policymaking, understanding what ‘rules of the game’ shape those contexts, which actors shape the rules of the game, and what their interests are. It uses this to understand whose voices are heard in the policymaking process, especially in relation to issues of gender, inclusion, and equity. It looks at the factors that are more and less significant in shaping policymaking at both national and sectoral levels. For SEDI, the focus is on whose evidence is incorporated into policymaking, how, and why. This addresses the crucial questions of where evidence really fits into policymaking, the quality of the evidence, and whether it is a minor or a major factor in informing decisions.

The **evidence system** lens draws on the literature on evidence and knowledge systems⁶ to investigate the ecosystem of evidence actors at national and sectoral levels: how they relate to each other both formally and informally, where

the relationships are strong and where they are weak. It uses this to consider the implications for how different pieces of evidence are regarded in terms of their salience, credibility, and legitimacy, and the implications for whose voices count in policymaking and why.

The **organisational lens** draws on work to improve the effectiveness of state capability, combined with literature on organisational factors affecting evidence use, including from BCURE.⁷ It focuses on how the systems for using evidence work within each government agency, and the internal factors that shape what types of evidence are prioritised and put forward for decision-making. It points to windows of opportunity for change within the government agencies in the sectors identified for the PEA+ analysis in each country, assesses the relative interest in and (signs of) commitment to strengthening or developing their evidence systems, and explores the degree of authority, acceptance, and ability agencies have to do so.

Box 3: Paying explicit attention to GESI

The SEDI methodology was developed around three lenses at the core of the project: sectoral, evidence system, and organisational. In addition, GESI considerations were mainstreamed throughout the research process as an integral component of a political economy approach.⁸ Inequities and exclusions are present in all societies to different degrees, and are gendered and political in nature. SEDI’s focus on the organisational context highlights the fact that government organisations are generally set up to work on technical issues. They prefer to work in technical ways, either intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing existing power structures and the status quo, or ignoring or undermining the interests of groups seen as politically problematic. Policies developed with a technical bias may demand sex disaggregation only when the focus is on women and/or girls. Where evidence on the underlying causes of gendered inequality is not demanded (either intentionally or through socialised omission) this reinforces a misconception that efforts focused on women and girls can address gendered inequalities. Consequently, analysis and actions will uncritically reflect prevailing unequal social norms and structures, and fail to challenge the power of stakeholders supporting the existing patriarchy, inequalities, and exclusion. The gendered harms and discrimination faced by less powerful or excluded groups thus remain invisible and unvalued. This has profound effects on how policies are designed, implemented, and monitored for effectiveness, and on the likelihood that they will lead to more equitable outcomes.

The following issues connect all three lenses to each other and affect the ways evidence is used in decision-making at macro, sectoral, and organisational levels:

- Where power resides, how it is translated into control over resources, how it shapes whose evidence is seen as relevant and credible, and how that influences organisational incentives and priorities to use evidence. The analysis of these issues was reinforced by intentionally considering GESI dimensions.
- The formal and informal structures, processes, and relationships among producers, brokers, and users of evidence. These affect where and how evidence is generated, the extent to which that evidence looks at differential impacts based on sex and other factors of exclusion, and how evidence flows to those who use it.
- Norms, beliefs, and narratives about key policy issues, among political leaders and more widely, which also affect what and whose evidence is seen as relevant and credible.
- Other sources of change (endogenous and exogenous, short- and long-term) that might influence what evidence is prioritised in decision-making.⁹

Exploring these issues in more detail gave rise to a rich set of questions that the teams would need to address before identifying which organisations SEDI could work with to strengthen the use of evidence. Questions were organised around the four main pillars of PEA:

- Foundational or structural factors: the deeply embedded national and sub-national structures and/or international factors that

shape the character of the state, the nature of state–society relations, the political system, and economic choices. They tend to be very difficult or slow to change.

- Rules of the game: the formal and informal institutions (rules and norms) that influence the way different actors behave, their incentives, relationships, relative power, and their capacity for collective action, including how these are expressed within government agencies. This encompasses both the formal or written rules and legal frameworks (e.g. a constitution), as well as informal or unwritten norms (e.g. gender norms), and the social and cultural traditions that guide behaviour in practice.



- Stakeholder interests and constellations of power: this involves understanding the key actors and stakeholders, how powerful and influential they are, what their main interests and incentives are in using (GESI-responsive) evidence in their work. It is also important to look within key agencies to understand how working cultures, structures, buy-in, and other factors influence the ways evidence is used. Key behaviours at national, sectoral, and – to the extent the civil service is politicised – at organisational level may be shaped by external events, such as an electoral contest, a referendum, or ongoing protests, as well as by internal factors, such as changes in leadership, structures, and incentives within the organisation.
- Sources of dynamism and change: the features in the broader external environment, or within government agencies themselves, that could lead to opening or closing the space for change, and that could influence how different actors respond to those changes. These might include wider political changes, or changes in social norms or in economic conditions; or technological changes, such as how patterns of adoption of digital technologies change who is able to generate evidence, who has access to it, and who therefore is able to analyse and use it in decision-making.

The full set of questions the team developed for the PEA+ are provided in the Annex. A future SEDI learning brief will outline how the questions were turned into a workable questionnaire.





Applying the SEDI methodology

The SEDI methodology was applied by three country teams from August to December 2019. The sectors of interest in each country had been previously defined by FCDO and national governments. In each sector, national partner organisations conducted a literature review and semi-structured interviews with a range of government and non-government actors. International partners led on the initial stages of methodological development and supported national partners in applying the methodology as necessary. Because this three-lens approach was completely new for all partner organisations, in each country a workshop part way through the analysis phase helped share and embed

learning about the process. Ongoing support was provided to national partner organisations as they conducted the literature review and interviews. A second workshop close to the end of the analysis phase helped the teams to

engage with and make sense of the findings.¹⁰ The reports of this PEA+ (one per country) were published in early March 2020, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

| What we learned

The main findings from the PEA+ analyses are summarised in Menon et al. (2021) and individual country reports (ACET, 2021); (SDPI, 2021); (EPRC, 2021). They highlight the (pre-pandemic) political economy realities that affect how policymaking processes and government organisations work, the sorts of relationships

government entities build with different actors in the evidence ecosystem, what this means in terms of the types, amounts, and quality of the evidence that is available in the policymaking process, and, crucially, how it is used to inform policy.

| What worked well

SEDI developed the PEA+ framework to test the hypothesis that an innovative three-lens PEA, together with the ability to integrate GESI more directly than is usually done, would both provide more data, more coherently and efficiently, and also be a means to analyse the national context in deeper, more useful ways for programming design and implementation. **Team members from each of the four analytical methods involved in developing the PEA+ – PEA, evidence systems, GESI, and organisational capacity – fully recognised how this new methodology made a much deeper and broader analysis possible.**

As can be appreciated from the discussion above, this scope was ambitious and involved a crucial element of learning by doing. The country-level insights outlined in the PEA+ reports demonstrate that **the PEA+ approach helped capture a wide range of robust information needed to understand deep-seated issues that shape the potential for SEDI involvement, and to help identify plausible entry points in complex**

environments. This in-depth understanding proved invaluable in thinking through how SEDI could pivot to support governments during the COVID-19 crisis.

A commitment to local ownership of the PEA+. SEDI is designed to be country-led. Country leadership of the PEA+ research process during the analytical phase was crucial in adapting the framework to contextual realities, and deciding how to apply the research methodology on the ground. SEDI partners recognised that commitment to owning and leading the process would be affected by country partners' skills and experience in PEA and TWP. Others in the consortium supported country partners as necessary throughout the analysis process.

The PEA+ provided a more politically aware understanding of power and process among and within institutions, and among and between individual stakeholders. In each sector its findings helped to clarify who participates in decision-making and why, and the formal

and informal barriers to and facilitators of that participation. This yielded information that allowed the SEDI team to be strategic about how to minimise barriers to, and maximise opportunities for, change, and – particularly in highly sensitive sectors, such as child labour and sexual and reproductive health – to avoid inadvertently supporting evidence use that could cause harm.

| The ‘aha moments’

There were several ‘aha’ moments early in the process of developing the SEDI methodology

- **A PEA+ approach enabled evidence systems analysts to problematise and question assumptions they might have otherwise taken for granted.** More attention to power relationships improved their understanding and appreciation of why evidence systems have developed in the way they have, whose evidence is more or less influential, whose evidence is perceived to be more credible or legitimate, and why.
- **PEA specialists realised the importance of understanding the evidence ecosystem, and of the value gained by threading GESI questions throughout the analysis.** In particular, PEA+ helped SEDI and its partners to better understand the relevance and importance of evidence as a factor in policymaking, the power relationships that influence how that evidence is produced and shared, and how evidence may compare to other factors that are also significant in policymaking processes. As well as highlighting whose evidence counts, GESI considerations also draw attention to who is visible and invisible in the evidence. They help analyse what this means in terms of which actors, organisations, and interests tend to have



different levels of access to decision-making, and what this then implies in terms of the voices and priorities that are captured in policies and programmes.

■ **Paying explicit attention to GESI strengthened the overall analysis of power dynamics.** It helped improve data collection on formal and informal power dynamics at both political, policymaking, evidence ecosystems, and organisational levels; and it helped identify gendered gaps in the production of data and evidence and use, and the reasons for this. This helped rectify what has been a methodological weakness in analyses of political economy,

organisations, and evidence ecosystems.

■ **The need to make practical recommendations for SEDI programme implementation highlighted the need to look at organisational capacities** and the authority, acceptance, and ability to implement programmes to improve the use of evidence. Organisational context has been a blind spot in some PEA frameworks, but team members responsible for leading on organisational change were integrated in a similar way to GESI team members. This helped focus the overall analysis and deepen the ways interview data were analysed.

What we would change or improve

The way FCDO set up the sectoral approach for SEDI ensured that there was government interest in SEDI, and each government had had an opportunity to identify its priorities. Although that step was important and helpful, pre-identification posed notable challenges for SEDI partners, especially in terms of building relationships with sectoral partners who might not continue to be part of SEDI implementation once the decision was made to drop a particular sector from the future work programme.¹¹ In the end, the COVID-19 pandemic put these sector decisions on hold, but **the expectations and pressures regarding the selection of a potential sector created incentives and dynamics that were not always easy to manage.**

While the innovative elements of the SEDI methodology offer real promise as regards providing more fine-grained and in-depth analysis, a PEA+ approach, in itself, can be quite challenging and resource-intensive. The process 'worked' in the sense that it provided new insights into evidence use in all three countries, but the team underestimated the time

needed to both develop the methodology and share it within country and sector teams. The result was that some team members struggled to move from just describing the political economy to the sort of in-depth analysis needed to get behind the façade and understand the deep incentives that shape certain behaviours regarding evidence use. Adopting a more open and timely approach to engaging with FCDO would have enabled the SEDI team to lay out the process in detail, and set realistic expectations and timeframes for each sector in each country.

The standard approach is to begin with a literature review before identifying stakeholders. Inevitable delays in contracting across such a large team limited the time available, so the literature review was conducted in parallel with the stakeholder mapping. With hindsight, the team would suggest **focusing on stakeholder mapping and analysis from the outset**, using the literature review as a means to check on findings arising from that process. Beginning with stakeholder mapping would also help build a TWP approach from the start.

In retrospect, the team would also suggest developing **a more robust way of triangulating between the stakeholder mapping, interviews, and literature review**, to reduce the risk of researcher bias on key issues that affect the scope and depth of the analysis, and hence the findings. As part of sharing the

methodology, from the outset the team would set up a light-touch learning process to help with this triangulation. This would strengthen the inductive component of the analysis, helping move beyond simple description to a deeper analysis.

Ongoing challenges

Although enough government organisations expressed a real interest in improving their use of evidence in all three countries, the reports outline two challenges that programmes like SEDI face: promoting evidence use within decision-making systems that have a high degree of informality, and promoting evidence use that reflects SEDI values and standards,

but that does not impose them on partner organisations. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic since the PEA was completed has created a third ongoing challenge.

Improving evidence use when decision-making takes place in informal systems

There is a balance to be struck between wanting to improve the formal system and recognising the power of entrenched informal systems and actors that drive political and policymaking behaviour. This means understanding how diverse incentives and disincentives interact, and appreciating the limited abilities of some potential government agency partners to demand, appraise, interpret, and use high-quality evidence. These sobering realities require SEDI to use its insights strategically, and to understand complex and changing trade-offs as it selects how and with whom to work.

Each SEDI country is strongly patriarchal. This affects what evidence exists, how it is valued and interpreted, whose voices count, and what evidence is acceptable in the political discourse. Policies on family planning in Uganda and child labour in Pakistan (for example) are strongly influenced by cultural, religious, and discriminatory gendered norms and beliefs.

A challenge will be to develop approaches that promote the use of evidence that is sound and useful, and to help partners to develop the means to know, systematically and objectively, whether, why, and how evidence for policymaking is GESI-responsive or not.

In Ghana, the neo-patrimonial system and the political marginalisation of important actors (including, in some cases, parliament and ministerial technocrats) creates parallel systems based on the priorities of the political parties currently in power. In Uganda, powerful ideas, norms, and beliefs are shaping how policies are framed, as well as what evidence is seen as legitimate.

The challenge for SEDI is to understand how to improve the quality and use of evidence in decision-making in these systems without setting up an unhelpful ‘values versus evidence’ conflict.

Promoting quality evidence use

SEDI has been designed around a set of values and common understandings about what are acceptable standards of data and evidence use. Partners with whom the team works will place different quotas of value on different types of evidence, may value evidence SEDI considers to be of poor quality, or may ignore relevant evidence. SEDI will need to understand the political economy of these choices regarding what evidence to use – maintaining the team's internal standards but not simply transplanting them wholesale. This links to a related question of how to maintain SEDI's own reputation as an impartial promoter of robust, quality evidence, but still be effective within a complex and sometimes highly polarised political environment.

In all sectors in all three countries, there are some highly social and political constraints on the quality of evidence available for use in policymaking. This is particularly the case where issues are so contested that it is difficult to get traction for improving the quality of even the most basic data collection, such as the issue of child labour in Pakistan. Where this happens, working to improve the demand for evidence could be as much (or more) a political exercise as a technical exercise, which might push the boundaries as regards how SEDI was originally conceived.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on decision-making

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 introduced an ongoing challenge in each country. Designing and co-creating a SEDI portfolio of interventions has become more difficult because the contexts and policy

and programme priorities in government departments are changing rapidly. SEDI is already responding to partners' requests for support, moving away from its original sector-based approach.



| Next steps

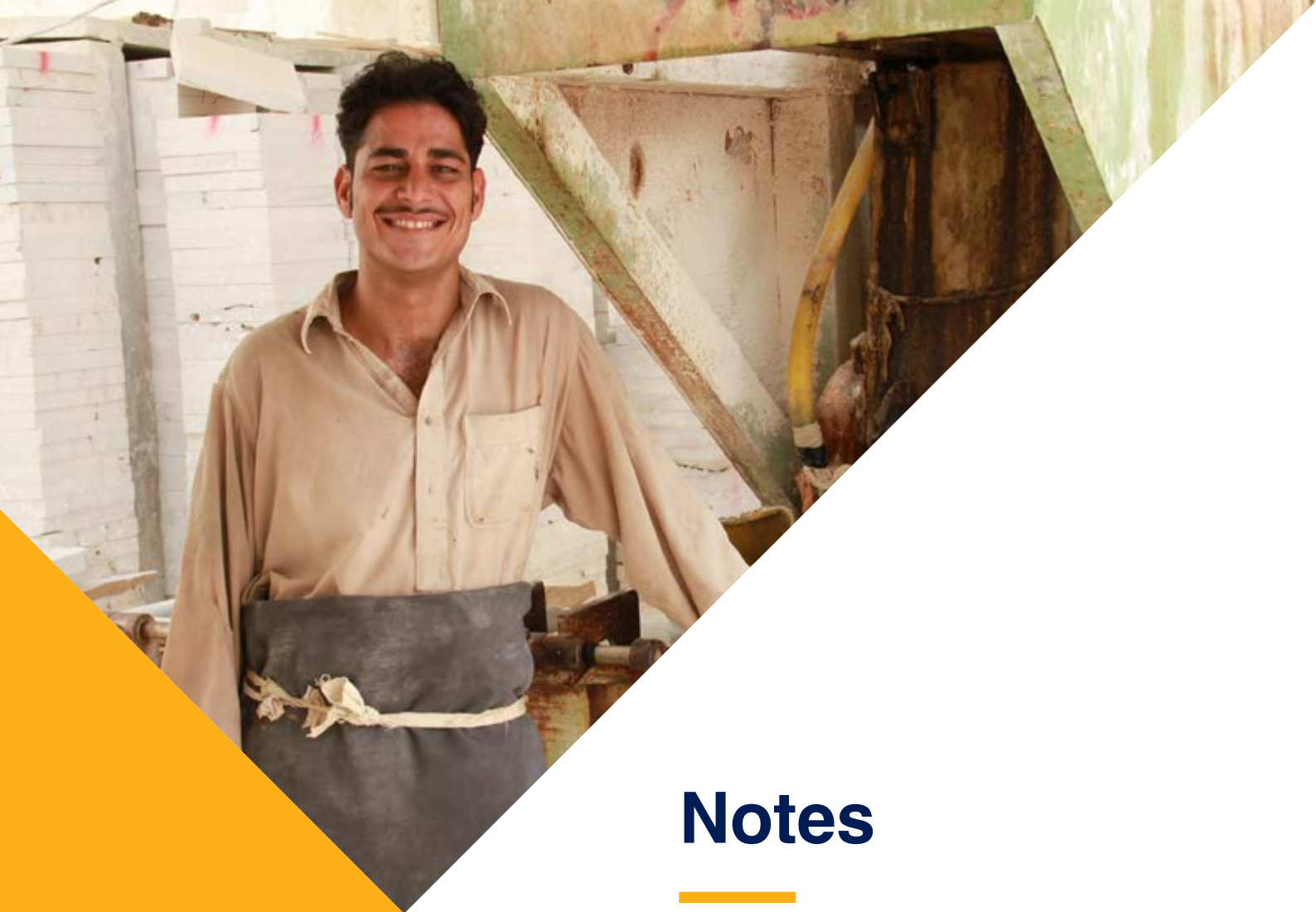
The analysis phase, including developing, implementing, and learning from the PEA+, kickstarted the building of a TWP culture and approach across the whole SEDI team. COVID-19 has boosted government and public awareness of the need for evidence, and what happens when evidence does not exist when needed, or when decision makers ignore it.

SEDI committed to carrying out an in-depth, full PEA+ as a necessary investment in building a programme that would (and could) think and work politically, and that would (and could) see a PEA+ as part of a broader learning and adaptive management system.¹² The team will be following up on specific aspects that will benefit from more attention than we had the time and scope to offer during the initial PEA+, such as a more detailed organisational diagnostic.

While the initial effort was immensely valuable it also consumed a great deal of time and resources. A key component of SEDI's TWP approach is to conduct light-touch PEA+ 'refresh' exercises to find out what has changed since the full PEA+ was carried out. The pandemic presented an added impetus to undertake the first of these. The insights it provided showed that efforts to keep internalising TWP through regular partner check-ins and information exchanges have contributed significantly to continuously updating our understanding of the political economy of evidence use in each country. It has informed the team's thinking about how to ensure external stakeholders are routinely included in both project consultations and sense-making.

SEDI is integrating requirements to use PEA+ information in the design of interventions, and is testing processes and guidance to underpin this aspect. Drawing on the existing knowledge base

from other programmes and country contexts¹³, the team will integrate the PEA+ approach into the monitoring, learning, and adaptation (MLA) system – testing what intervals and types of data collection, reflection, and learning work. The MLA system identifies the resourcing needed to embed PEA+ and other aspects into an effective support system for the programme. It includes strong learning loops, since continuous learning about SEDI's innovative approaches to PEA+ is key to the programme's agenda.



Notes

¹SEDI is being implemented by an international consortium comprising the African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) in Ghana, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan, and the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) in Uganda. They are supported by the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) in Kenya, the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) in South Africa, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), INASP, 3ie, and Oxford Policy Management (OPM) in the UK. The consortium is led by OPM. The team comprises a mix of specialisms, including political economy, evidence systems, organisational change, and sectoral/technical expertise.

²BCURE was a five-year, £15.7 million programme, funded by the former Department for International Development (DFID), which

was designed to test six different but linked approaches to building capacities to use evidence in 12 countries in Africa and Asia. While knowledge of evidence ecosystems was required, which provided important contextual information, it was not obligatory to conduct a PEA. BCURE projects, according to the evaluation, were consequently aligned with interests in using evidence but did not delve more deeply into the political economy of partner agencies that affected BCURE outcomes.

³SEDI's approach to 'embedded' and 'instrumental' use, in its terms of reference, draws on a framework outlined by FCDO in a 2017 blog post: <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-is-evidence-actually-used-in-policy-making-a-new-framework-from-a-global-dfid-programme>.

⁴The main sources for this box include Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (2015) and Booth and Unsworth (2014).

⁵See Gaventa (2009), Harris (2013), and McLoughlin (2014), among others.

⁶See, for example, Hertz et al. (2020), Carden (2009), and Stewart et al. (2019).

⁷The methodology for this 'light-touch' organisational lens of enquiry took a state capability angle, inspired by Andrews et al. (2017). Guiding questions were drawn from existing literature on organisational-level factors affecting evidence use in government agencies, including Weyrauch (2016) and Wills et al. (2016). It is important to note that this lens was designed as a preliminary exercise to identify organisational entry points for SEDI which the team would investigate in much further depth as part of a full organisational diagnostic, undertaken in partnership with government agencies after selecting the sectors.

⁸The Gender and Development Network has published a useful practitioners' guidance note on integrating gender into PEA approaches: <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2018/5/9/putting-gender-in-political-economy-analysis-why-it-matters-and-how-to-do-it>.

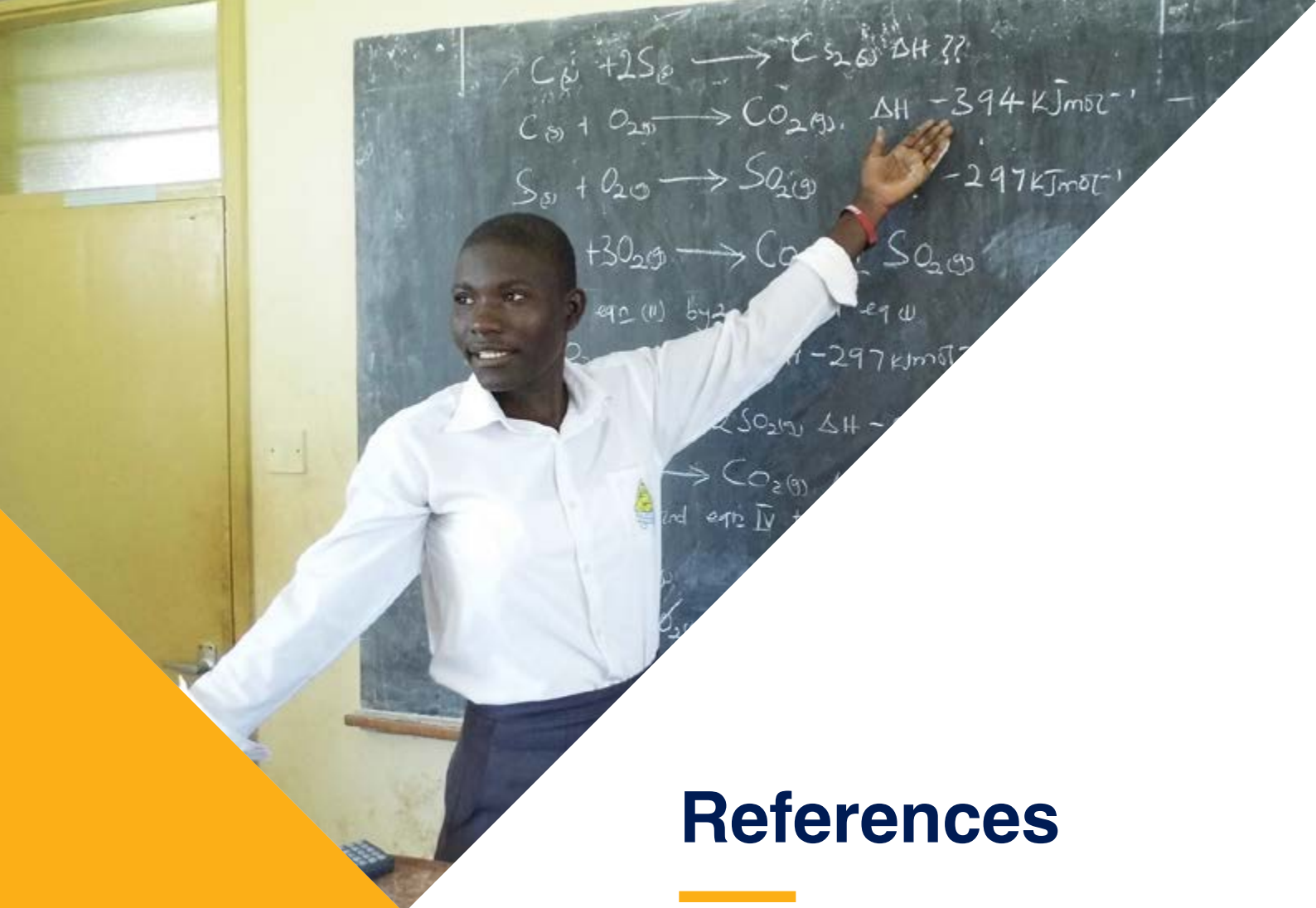
⁹The COVID-19 pandemic is an extreme example of one such source of change. Others might include changes in technological capability, such as digital technologies and social media, changes in donor relationships, changes in the economic environment etc.

¹⁰SEDI developed a full guide for how to conduct research on the political economy on the ground. This is available from the authors on request.

¹¹FCDO's stated expectation was that only one or two of the three sectors in each country would be chosen.

¹²Building a culture of and integrating PEA and TWP in SEDI will be done in multiple ways: through the MLA system (see the draft MLA system document), which is part of realising SEDI's commitment to adaptive management (see the learning brief on adaptive management), and through intervention design requirements.

¹³Including experience from the Indonesia Knowledge Sector Initiative, LearnAdapt, and the wider TWP community.



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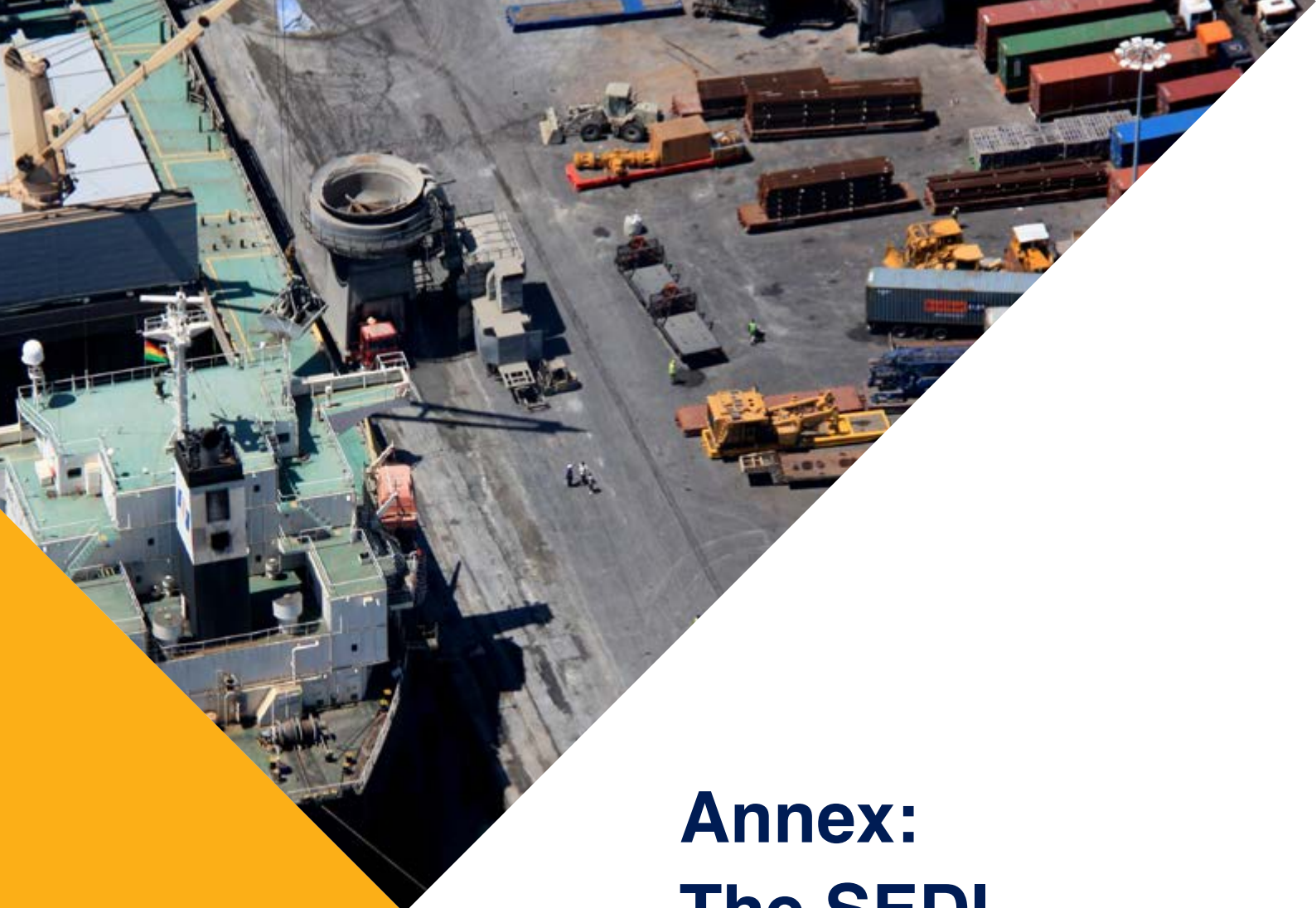
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Annex: The SEDI Questions

The SEDI questions highlight the complexity of fully understanding what influences the use of evidence in policymaking. They are presented here as the full set of questions the team began with, to demonstrate the complexity of the task facing the SEDI team – though they were subsequently synthesised into a practical guide for conducting semi-structured interviews.

The SEDI questions

Foundational or structural factors: What are the deeply embedded national and sub-national structures that shape the nature and quality of a given political and policymaking system? How do they influence what role evidence plays in that system?

Key factors to consider	Types of question to ask
<p>Understanding these higher-level issues helps to understand the broad patterns of inclusion and exclusion in society, and how they are likely to be manifested in a given sector or problem (in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, geography, religion, age etc).</p> <p>The ways in which revenue is raised (from national and international sources) and distributed indicates what issues are being prioritised in discussions about policy (policy ‘narratives’), and whose evidence counts in those discussions. Highly technocratic debates will prioritise different types of evidence from those that are highly political.</p>	<p>State–society relations: How has the history of state–society relations influenced the current government’s priorities? What are the power structures, ideas, and values that have shaped poverty-reduction and sustainable development efforts to date? How are these encoded in national documents, such as 25-year plans, and what types and sources of evidence are therefore deemed to be credible? Within the sector, what are the power structures, ideas, and values that have shaped poverty-reduction and sustainable development efforts to date? How are they encoded in sectoral strategy and policy documents? What does this mean for what types of evidence are seen as salient, credible, and legitimate within sectoral policy processes? To what extent is this salience, credibility, and legitimacy contested? If it is contested, by whom and through which processes, and who are the gatekeepers of those processes?</p> <p>Power relations between groups: What are the patterns of inclusion/exclusion within the country, and what are the fault lines of conflict, violence (including gender-based violence), and rivalry? To what extent is power devolved to sub-national levels and with what effect on the state’s reach, authority, and legitimacy? How is this changing with digital technologies and social media? Taking all of this into account, what does this mean for whose voices count in policymaking at the national level and whose evidence is listened to? What are the patterns of inclusion/exclusion within the sector? Do they differ from wider patterns and, if so, how and why? How do national fault lines of conflict, violence (including gender-based violence), and rivalry play out in the sector? What does this mean for whose evidence is seen as credible? Is there anything specific about how digital technologies and social media influence how evidence is produced and used within the sector?</p> <p>Sources and uses of revenue: What are the international and domestic sources of revenue and what is their history? What does this mean for how the current government’s priorities are established and for whose voices count in determining those priorities? What is the history of investment in the structures and systems that produce and use evidence (higher education, the research base)? How are current and emerging narratives regarding aid used by national and international actors to justify requests for revenue and subsequent patterns of expenditure? What kinds of evidence are incentivised by these narratives? What are the primary international and domestic sources of revenue in the sector? What does this mean for how sectoral priorities are established? How does the capacity for using evidence vary between district and national levels within the sector? What effect does this have on policy implementation?</p>

Rules of the game: What are the formal and informal structures and norms that govern the use of evidence?

Key factors to consider	Types of question to ask
<p>Formal rules and regulations are only some of the factors shaping evidence use. Informal understandings and arrangements play important – but often hidden – roles. These might include informal deals to maintain political stability, gender norms, clientelism, or other forms of political support. Power can be distributed through both formal and informal rules, and can be routinised, with different effects on the question of whose voices count. Social networks, and ideological, religious, and cultural forces work in similar ways.</p> <p>Current events and circumstances can influence the objectives and behaviours of key actors, particularly their positioning and capacity to act for or against change at national, sectoral, and organisational level, with complex implications for how evidence is sourced, appraised, interpreted, and used.</p>	<p>Formal rules and regulations: What national-level processes and regulations (e.g. procurement rules) frame relationships between evidence-relevant actors, particularly around the supply of and demand for evidence? What are the effects in terms of the nature, quality, and volume of evidence that is available for policymaking? How well is evidence used in the checks and balances between executive and legislature: who is best equipped to use evidence effectively (policymakers, parliamentarians) and how do they use it? What are the formal accountability mechanisms between government and citizens, between different levels of government, and between government and international donors? What types of evidence are prioritised and what types are crowded out in those relationships? What is the sectoral system for reporting progress to parliament, cabinet, and the Auditor General, and what types of evidence are privileged within that system? Within the sector, what forms of evidence are privileged by donors and other international actors? Who benefits from this?</p> <p>Informal rules and behaviours: What are the informal arrangements, including patronage, which maintain the status quo, reproduce and dynamically perpetuate unequal gender norms, and sustain clientelism and other inequitable cultures? How do these arrangements affect whose voices count in the policy process? Between ministries, is there a hierarchy in terms of whose evidence is prioritised? Are there any macro-level narratives (agendas) that are particularly influential in shaping what evidence is used for (e.g. to inform policy formulation, justify previous decisions, set national agendas, advocate for budget allocations, bolster policy positions, or set rules and standards)? Whose voices are heard in these narratives and what types of evidence are credible? Where and how does patronage influence the preferred sources of evidence within government departments and parliament? How is patronage gendered and what effect does this have on power and participation? What policy narratives are in circulation in the sector, how did they develop, and how do they weigh up different types of evidence? Which types of evidence dominate? Whose evidence therefore dominates? How does competition for political power play out in the sector? To what extent does patronage shape sectoral policymaking and sustain clientelism in the sector? What does this mean for whose evidence is seen as credible, salient, and legitimate, and whose voices really count in sectoral policymaking?</p>
	<p>Regional/global rules of the game: How do external influences (e.g. international agreements, supra-national structures, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, regional commitments) affect what evidence is prioritised and collected, on which issues, who collects and analyses it, and who is able to access the evidence? How do informal rules and behaviours, as outlined above, play out on the international stage?</p>

Stakeholder interests and constellations of power: What types of organisation are involved in supplying, mediating, and using evidence? What is the scale, scope, and depth of capacity for evidence supply, evidence brokering, and evidence use?

Key factors to consider	Types of question to ask
<p>Current events and circumstances can influence the objectives and behaviours of key actors, particularly their positioning and capacity to act for or against change – at national, sectoral, and organisational levels – with complex implications for how evidence is sourced, appraised, interpreted, and used. The role of international actors vis-à-vis national actors can have a strong effect on what types of evidence are valued.</p>	<p>Stakeholder map: What does the map of national-level evidence actors look like? How do the main evidence actors define their purpose, and what are their underlying interests? Which actors within the evidence ecosystem define what counts as ‘credible’ or ‘robust’ evidence? What is the basis for that definition? What incentives and power do different actors have to push for innovative practices regarding evidence – internally and beyond their own organisations? Where are the strongest networks of evidence actors, what types of organisation are in them, and what types of evidence do they privilege? Which actors act as brokers in relationships between the supply and demand of evidence, and to what effect? What is the map of sectoral evidence actors across supply, demand, and brokering functions? What are the underlying interests of the main actors? What does that imply for how they relate to each other? Which are well networked, and what types of evidence do they privilege? Which organisations or other actors (working groups, expert committees, networks, think-tanks etc) play an intermediary or brokering role in the policy process? What types of evidence do they privilege and with what effects?</p>
	<p>Current events: How do current events influence the objectives and behaviours of key evidence actors in national-level policymaking? What does this mean for what evidence is put forward in debates about policies? How does the media amplify or dampen particular narratives about evidence? What is happening on social media that influences whose voices count, and whose evidence is seen as credible? What effects are current events having on the objectives and behaviours of key actors in the sector? What does this imply for what evidence is put forward for sectoral policymaking? Is this a high-profile sector in the media and/or social media? How does that affect how evidence is used in public debates?</p>
	<p>GESI: What types of evidence do women generate and provide in the public space? How is their evidence interpreted by power holders? Are there some groups of women or organisations whose evidence is more visible in public discourse? Is there a particular focus on what gets public space when discussing women and girls (e.g. economic empowerment, reproductive health, gender-based violence, or other women-centric topics) or constructed groups, such as ‘the elderly’ or ‘the disabled’? To what extent is that attention gender-sensitive or informed by existing gender social norms?</p>

Sources of dynamism and change: Where are the sources of dynamism in the use of evidence in policymaking? Who is investing in improving capacities for supplying, using, and brokering evidence, and whose capacities are they prioritising?

Key factors to consider	Types of question to ask
<p>How do interactions between foundational factors, rules of the game, and stakeholder interests and constellations of power open up or constrain opportunities for progressive change? Potential entry points for reform can emerge at the national, sector, issue, or organisational level, which can offer pointers for action.</p>	<p>What are the main sources of uncertainty that influence policy priorities (e.g. demographic, technological, environmental, economic)? To what degree are these uncertainties contested and which sources of evidence are used in these contestation processes? Who are the gatekeepers of these processes and why? Which donors are investing in improving the use of evidence in the sector? What sorts of innovations are they promoting and in what types of organisation or network? Which evidence actors do donors see as credible and who can access donor-generated evidence? How contested is this? How fast is the sector moving and how well is the evidence system able to keep up?</p>
<p>Understanding how complexity, uncertainty, and risk are handled will also give insights into the levels of contestation within change processes, and what this implies for whose evidence is prioritised in decision-making.</p>	<p>What technological or other innovations (e.g. digital technologies, social media) are changing the search for and use of evidence? How and where are social media and digital technologies opening up or constraining spaces for change in the types of evidence available for decision-making and how different types of evidence are prioritised for use? How is uncertainty about the effects of these changes handled? Who is most likely to be affected by change, and what are the implications for whose evidence is prioritised and whose is omitted from discussions and decisions?</p>

Organisational PEA: Authority, acceptance, and ability to improve the use of evidence within government agencies

Key factors to consider	Types of question to explore for each public sector organisation
<p>How are the broad elements of the external environment manifested (or not) within individual government agencies with which SEDI envisages working to support embedded and instrumental use of evidence?</p>	<p>Authority: Is there high-level leadership/endorsement and buy-in on evidence? (e.g. minister and permanent secretary level)? Are there any informal authorisers/ influencers to consider and how supportive are they?</p>
<p>Authority explores the support needed to effect policy change. Acceptance explores the extent to which those who will be affected by a reform or policy change accept the need for this change and its implications.</p>	<p>Acceptance: What are the dominant 'cultures of evidence' within the organisation? How is evidence framed: do different people frame evidence differently and, if so, why? What does this imply for whether the team is likely to support efforts to improve evidence use in a meaningful way? Where are the gaps?</p>
<p>Ability explores the practical side of reform or policy change, including the human and financial resources required to support interventions.</p>	<p>Ability: What human, financial, and infrastructural (i.e. technology) resources are available to support evidence use? How are the key evidence functions carried out within the agency and where do they sit (formally/ structurally and informally)? At what point are they in the planning/budgeting cycle and are there opportunities to integrate new evidence approaches within this?</p>
<p>Definitions from Andrews et al. (2017).</p>	<p>Throughout: What are the implications of these answers for how evidence is used to address GESI considerations?</p>

About SEDI

Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact (SEDI) is a five-year programme (2019-24) that is working on increasing the use of evidence by policy makers in Uganda, Ghana, and Pakistan. In partnership with country governments, this programme aims to develop capacity and promote innovation in increasing evidence informed decision making. SEDI is funded by UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

The SEDI consortium is led by Oxford Policy Management and comprises national, international, and regional partners. The national lead organisations – the Africa Centre for Economic Transformation in Ghana, the Economic Policy Research Centre in Uganda, and the Sustainable Development Policy Institution in Pakistan provide programme leadership and coordination in each country. These national organisations are authoritative voices in policy processes and will ensure effective engagement and a sustainable legacy for SEDI.

The international partners – International Network for Advancing Science, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, Overseas Development Institute, Oxford Policy Management – as well as the regional partners – the Africa Centre for Evidence and the African Institute for Development Policy – contribute their knowledge and years of experience in working with governments across the world to promote evidence-informed development. They provide technical thought partnership, facilitate cross country learning, and collaborate on programme delivery.

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