

Supporting organisational change through an evidence diagnostic in Pakistan: the case of the National Tariff Commission



Project blog

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To support organisations in strengthening evidence use, you need a tailored and co-designed approach that addresses their specific needs, constraints, structures and processes. This was what we learned from a participatory, action-oriented diagnostic exercise that the FCDO-supported [Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact programme \(SEDI\)](#) carried out with the National Tariff Commission (NTC) in Pakistan.

In consultation with the NTC, the overarching purpose of this diagnostic was to identify the challenges to and the opportunities for the production, communication and use of evidence. The entire process of conducting the diagnostic was co-designed with the Commission.

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), SEDI's country lead in Pakistan, combined focus group discussions, participatory exercises, and interviews, while drawing on the learning from previous evaluations of NTC. We looked at how various units in the NTC could work individually and with each other to become better generators and users of evidence. Using the [Context Matters framework](#), we examined several dimensions that affected evidence use - organisational capacity, processes and systems, culture, resources and relationships (including networks) within the organisation as well as with external stakeholders.

In this blog, we summarise some of our insights from implementing this exercise.

Authority, acceptance and ability (AAA) are essential for pursuing new ideas and identifying spaces for change. The senior leadership at NTC demonstrated an appetite for change. They were not just interested; they also motivated their team and gave them the space and the time to participate in this exercise. Without that buy-in, we would not have seen such a high level of engagement and trust in the process. Over the course of the exercise, staff across the organisation became quite forthcoming and frank. This made it easier for us to collect secondary information (including previous evaluations of NTC) as well as useful feedback from in-person interviews with selected officials and meetings with teams responsible for producing or using data in the organisation. Although the diagnostic was carried out during the peak of a Covid-19 wave, the team at NTC adapted quickly and made themselves available for online engagement.

Based on the AAA framework used in [Harvard University's problem-driven iterative adaptation approach](#), NTC showed a high level of authority for and acceptance of change, along with the keenness to develop the ability for it.

A shared understanding of expected results is important. The organisation you work with needs to have the ‘big picture’. During our initial engagement, NTC’s focal persons came up with four main expected outcomes from the diagnostic: more awareness about the opportunities for and obstacles to the better production and use of data and information; consensus within NTC and commitment to the areas that need to be prioritised; increased understanding of the role external stakeholders (e.g. private firms or business associations) play in the evidence ecosystem; and more ideas for collaboration with national and international evidence producers, including policy think tanks.

Having this set of specific outcomes helped us sharpen the focus of the diagnostic, which in turn made it easier to come up with clear actions for NTC to take forward.

A participatory diagnostic offers the space to discuss challenges and work together to come up with feasible solutions. Prior to the diagnostic exercise, the teams at NTC did not have a chance to come together and discuss the constraints that prevented them from using evidence. Describing the SEDI team’s role in this diagnostic, one of the senior officials at NTC said it was like that of a doctor helping diagnose the problems of patients who were themselves not aware of what their issues were.

The constraints identified included, for example, lack of rapid and high frequency data, weak internal databases, lack of budget to access external data and some missing technical skills. ‘Softer’ issues such as lack of incentives to produce and use evidence, and low levels of trust in external stakeholders also came up as impediments.

For the problems outlined, the staff were also able to contribute ideas on feasible solutions. For example, mid-career staff were eager to upskill and reskill for increasing the use of data produced by external organisations. They also thought access to external databases and subscriptions of international journals would be useful. Budgeting of more time for internal and external validation exercises to inform decisions as well as for reflection on learning was welcomed.

The ideas that came in included changes that needed to be made in the organisation and those that needed to be made in terms of collaborations with external players. Strengthening the organisation's learning systems was identified as a priority along with an emphasis on increased collaborations.

Having open conversations about factors that are outside the control of an organisation are important for getting closer to feasible solutions. We had frank discussions with the teams at NTC about the political, economic, social, technological, and legal factors that influence the generation and use of evidence but were difficult to circumvent. These discussions made it easier to identify solutions that could work.

For example, challenges with public procurement were flagged as an obstacle to the rapid commissioning of services. But this helped firm up a clear recommendation for NTC to develop its own capacity to carry out surveys which is now being taken forward. After the completion of the diagnostic, the NTC has been working with local think tanks to build the capacity of its staff to undertake rapid surveys.

Through our exercises, teams were also encouraged to consider the consensus across all political parties to strengthen NTC and prioritise trade reform. This realisation about cross-party consensus created a strong basis for NTC to get some of the recommendations of this diagnostic approved by the political leadership.

A diagnostic can also offer the opportunity to introduce new ideas and challenge existing practices and norms. One of the exercises in the diagnostic looked at how gender-responsive evidence is included in NTC's work. Although the participants started off by describing trade reform as a gender-neutral space, their views changed as the discussion progressed and the SEDI team delved into evidence on women in trade, and gender-specific barriers to cross-border trade. The NTC team acknowledged the need to consider alternative views and make changes to their practices. Whether an idea is taken up depends on a whole host of factors, but the seeds can certainly be sown.

What happened after the diagnostic? At the end of the diagnostic exercise, the senior leadership and staff continued to have internal brainstorms to develop a plan for implementing selected recommendations.

We were gratified to learn that NTC has prepared a plan to operationalise a Centre of Excellence on Tariff and Trade Policy that is aimed at developing their capacity to carry out surveys as well as draw on big data to inform decision-making. The NTC is now actively forging collaborations with other national and international organisations producing and using trade related data. They have also taken steps to institute processes and set up spaces where they can regularly assess their progress, look at results and improve organisational learning.

The diagnostic showed us that 'evidence champions' in organisations can steer their staff to be self-reflexive. And that can make change happen.