

## **REGIONAL RESEARCH PROMOTION PROGRAMME**

### **NATIONAL POLICY DIALOGUE ALBANIA**

#### **Policy Document No. 1**

**Title: Use of Scientific Evidence in Designing Social Protection Policies in Albania**

Marsela Dauti & Erika Bejko<sup>1</sup>  
Institute for Democracy and Mediation  
RRPP National Policy Dialogue  
January 2015

#### **Summary**

This study focuses on the features of evidence-based policymaking relationship in Albania. It examines the extent to which social protection policies are informed on evidence and the perspectives of the civil society representatives about evidence-policymaking relationship. The authors based their analysis on the content of official documents, such as the Social Service Strategy (2005-2010) and the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection (2008-2013) as well as on

---

<sup>1</sup> Marsela Dauti, PhD, University of New York in Tirana, Rr. Kodra e Diellit, Selita, Tirana, Albania, [marseladauti@unyt.edu.al](mailto:marseladauti@unyt.edu.al); and Erika Bejko, PhD, Department of Social Works and Science, University of Tirana, Boulevard 'Gjergj Fishta', Tirana, Albania, email: [ebejko@yahoo.com](mailto:ebejko@yahoo.com).

Note: Authors would like to thank the Institute for Democracy and Mediation and participants of this study with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

individual interviews with senior officials and a focus group discussion with civil society representatives.

The results of the analyses show that the evidence-policymaking relationship is weak. In most cases, evidence is missing. When available, this evidence refers to the number of beneficiaries and incurred expenses, rather than the policy impact on individuals, households or communities. The officials are skeptic about the data collected by the civil society organizations. Similarly, civil society representatives are skeptic about officials and their will to make evidence part of the policymaking. The findings suggest an increase of access to scientific research, the design of programs with the aim of strengthening the monitoring and evaluation capacities, the coordination of evidence between the central and local tiers of governance, the application of various government grant schemes that support the use of evidence in policymaking, the stimulation and expansion of civil society organizations' good practices, and the promotion of an organizational culture that highlights the importance of evidence. Social workers may contribute to the strengthening of evidence-policymaking relationship in at least three ways, namely: the use of secondary data, the realization of comparative studies, and the support of experimental studies.

## **Introduction**

The evidence-policymaking relationship has been elaborated by numerous authors (see for example Baker et al., 2012; Oakley, 2002; Manski, 2014). Several positive aspects associating the use of evidence in policymaking have been highlighted, including the increase of policy effectiveness, improvement of transparency and strengthening of democracy. At the same time, several problems have come out, such as 'reshap[ing] and repackag[ing]' of evidence (Harding, 2008, p. 316) with the aim of supporting predefined political options and 'filtering out' information that does not meet with officials' preferences (Vohnsen, 2013).

Various debates exist on the definition of evidence. For example, the Social Works Dictionary defines evidence as the data collected through experimental research and meta-analyses (Zlotnik, 2007). However, some authors argue that the role of the experiments is overrated. The experiments have numerous disadvantages, such as: they are expensive; cannot be applied at any context and for any problem; and their results cannot be generalized beyond the context where the intervention has been carried out (Manski, 2014; Ravallion, 2009). Quality evidence may also be collected by means of non-experimental research. In this paper, the concept of evidence-based policymaking refers to the process of decision-making on policies based on analyses, studies, or assessments that are governed by scientific methodology.

This study focuses on the use of scientific evidence in the social protection policies in Albania. In specific, it addresses the following questions:

- To what extent are the social inclusion policies informed by scientific evidence?
- Which are the perspectives of civil society representatives regarding the scientific evidence-policymaking relationship?

To answer the above-mentioned research questions, the authors based their analysis on the content of the official documents, on individual interviews with senior officials, and a focus group discussion with civil society representatives. The analysis sheds light on a series of problems, such as the official documents are characterized of a lack of sources and of the specification of information. Policy success indicators refer mainly to the number of beneficiaries and incurred expenditures, rather than to the policy impact on individuals or communities in need. The officials and the civil society representatives are skeptic towards one another. In concrete terms, the officials are skeptic about the data collected by the civil society organizations, and the civil society representatives are skeptic about officials' will to make evidence part of the policymaking. The study provides several ideas on how to address these issues. Moreover, it examines the contribution that social workers can give to the strengthening of the evidence-policymaking relationship.

This paper is divided into the following sections: initially, it starts with a literature review on the evidence-policymaking relationship. Then, it describes the research methodology, followed by the findings. The last section provides conclusions and recommendations. .

## **Literature Review**

There exists a strong link between the use of evidence in policymaking and the social, economic, and political development (Young et al., 2002). The officials, who embrace the idea of using evidence, communicate to the voters the message that they will take objective decisions based on evidence (Harding, 2008). The officials disregard ideologies or political or private interests (Vohnsen, 2013). The opening up of the policymaking process strengthens cooperation, participation and democracy (Young et al., 2002); all important elements for the transition from a closed to an open society.

However, the efforts to use evidence do not necessarily lead to a better policymaking. The policymaking based on evidence can be transformed into evidence based on the policymaking. The latter refers to the “creating and selecting evidence that suits and justifies certain formulated policies” (Choi et al., 2005, p. 635). For instance, Harding (2008) argues that officials “reshape and repackage” (p. 316) evidence with the purpose of supporting predefined political alternatives. Otherwise, the officials “filter out” from the collected evidence, the information that is inconsistent with their policy goals. Vohnsen (2013) brings the criticism of the British House of Commons Science and Technology Committee versus the trends of the policymakers on ‘picking evidence that supported already prepared policy and of commissioning research in order to justify legislation already agreed upon’ (p. 4). Similarly, Stilgoe et al. (2006) argue that “‘evidence-based’ has become a way to justify policy rather than a way to make policy” (p. 23). Furthermore, “the way some policies claimed to be evidence-based was a ‘fraud which corrupts the whole use of science in government’” (p. 23).

Studies suggest that the efforts to include evidence in the decision-making will have a positive effect in presence of the political will and of an organizational culture that appreciates the role of evidence (Marston, 2003). The will to admit the importance of evidence may be low in presence of political conflicts. For example, political antagonism may make a new government reject the evidence collected by the previous government. This can lead to several scenarios, such as the decision-making based on personal values, intuition and under the influence of the interest groups. As a result, it is important to ask the question: How willing are the officials to accept the results of studies and to undertake the necessary changes?

In a closed political system, the officials dissent from the idea of using evidence. One of the reasons is that research results may not be politically correct. For example, the results may lead to the conclusion that a government program was a failure (Ham et al., 1995). The officials present several ideas and alternatives for solving problems, but they do not state the source of information (Vohnsen, 2013). The main goal of the taken decisions is to stay in power. Nevertheless, this is not only a characteristic of closed societies. Officials may show a negative stance to evidence even in an apparently open society. This happens, for instance, when the collected evidence disputes the attitude of their superiors. Harding (2008) argues that the officials have a greater interest in backing their superiors' preferences instead of resisting them. This would help them ensure support and move up with their career quickly. Once they have made a decision for narrow political purposes, the officials are inclined to present it as an evidence-based decision. This makes it very hard for the voters to differentiate between evidence-based policymaking and policymaking-based evidence. Another strategy utilized by officials is to cover up their narrow political intentions and preselect facts that support their decisions. Yet, as already elaborated below, the officials' stance should not be seen as separated from the attitudes of researchers who are engaged in collecting evidence.

The relation between officials and researchers plays an important role in the integration of evidence in decision-making. In the case of Nigeria, Uneke et al., (2012) show that officials and researchers "traveling in parallel universes" (p. 751). For instance, researchers have no

knowledge about the decision-making process and the evidence that they produce is to no beneficial for the decision-makers or the latter have no access to the evidence. In addition, the relationship among them is characterized of mistrust.

Vohnsen (2013) argues that the scientific research and politics have “conflicting temperaments”. Similarly, Choi et al. (2005) state that decision-makers and researchers belong to two different communities. While the goal of researchers is to advance science, the goal of policymakers is to obtain popular support (p. 632). While the researchers’ aim is science advancement, the purpose of the policymakers is to ensure citizens’ support (p. 632). The researchers may work on a project for several years, whereas the policymakers have to make decisions within a shorter period of time. Officials are less concerned about the quality of evidence than about the pressure of time. Policymakers ask for quick, clear, simple answers; meanwhile, the studies may lead to more questions rather than answers or bring to light several problems that call for major changes (Stilgoe et al., 2006). Simultaneously, policymakers are concerned that highlighting knowledge gaps will lead to a reduction of support for their programs. In brief, policymakers respond to political rationality, whereas researchers respond to scientific rationality.

These differences between the two groups have led to skepticism on the real role that evidence can have in the decision-making. According to Choi et al. (2005) “policies are the result of compromises” (p. 633). Between a policy that will lead to an increase of popularity in the short run and a policy that will have an impact in the long run, policymakers are likely to choose the first option (Marston, 2003). Several other problems exist, for instance, the policymakers do not have time to wait for scientific evidence or lack the sufficient capacities to use it. Moreover, the policymakers have strong beliefs which do not change even when facing evidence that objects to them (Young et al., 2002).

Several authors point out that the expectations on evidence should be reduced. The idea that research should focus on the solution of problems relies on the wrong idea that political decisions are rational – based on the best information. As argued by Young et al., (2002), “information may be complicating and inconvenient, obscuring the clarity of choices most easily

made under conditions of relative ignorance” (p. 218). According to this approach, in a specific case, the role of evidence is less of assistance in the solution of problems, rather than informing the public, including the officials. This makes evidence become more “an instrument of a democratic process rather than of the decision-making process” (p. 218).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that one should give up on using evidence in policymaking. Vohnsen (2013) suggests as follows: “Rather than seeing the process as a political attempt to mask ideological desire as a scientific endeavour, I suggest that it would be more productive to see it as a clash between the differing temperaments of science and politics respectively” (p. 5). This approach suggests that the focus should be on the identification of ways to shorten the distance between science and politics.

Evidence is important not only for the drafting of good policies, but also for the opening up and transparency of the policymaking process. This takes on a particular relevance in transitional democracies like Albania’s. The involvement of the officials in the process of collection of evidence and communication of results is only the beginning of a long process. The results can be used in order to make decisionmakers accountable and to measure the effect of their policies over time. In the case of Albania, policymakers may show resistance to evidence for a variety of reasons. For instance, they may be concerned that evidence may be used against them in the case when evidence shows that the programs they support are ineffective. The resistance is more likely to be present amid political disputes (the evidence that demonstrates that programs are ineffective, is not in the interest of the ruling political party, but it affects the opposition), during the allocation of resources based on political affiliation as well as during frequent political changes – all these are development characteristics in Albania.

This paper will shed light on the features of evidence-policymaking relationship in Albania. The focus will be pointed on the extent to which the social protection policies are evidence-informed, as well as on the perspective of civil society representatives about evidence-policymaking relationship. In addition, it will pay attention to the role of scientific evidence in social sciences, particularly in the social work department. The results will be used with the aim to strengthen the

evidence-policymaking relationship. The methodology is based on research questions and it consists as follows:

## **Methodology**

### *I. Extent to which Social Protection Policies are informed by Scientific Evidence*

In examining the extent to which social protection policies are informed by scientific evidence we reviewed the following documents: Social Service Strategy (2005-2010), Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection (2008-2013), State Social Service bulletins (2008, 2011, 2014), and the monitoring report of the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection (2007-2009). In addition, we also reviewed the internal communications (memos) between the Social Service Policy Department and the Minister of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (2010, 2011, 2012), Minister of Social Welfare and Youth (2013), Deputy Minister of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (2011), and Prime Minister (2010, 2012). These communications focused on various topics, such as the novelties introduced by the Law no. 9355, dated 10.03.2005, “On Social Assistance and Services” regarding women as heads of households; the reformation of the assessment system for the disabled people; the necessary improvements to the Law on Social Assistance and Services; investment priorities in the district of Argirocastro; and potential interventions in the economic aid scheme.

When analyzing the above-mentioned documents, we came up with the following questions: Is evidence used? If yes, what type of evidence? Who are the authors? When was it published? Does it quote the source of information? If yes, how many times? Is there evidence to support identified issues? Is evidence reflected into the policies? If yes, how? Have the cost analyses and effectiveness of alternative social policies ever been conducted? Based on these questions, it was performed the analysis of the content of each document. For instance, it was scrutinized the number of evidences in the text and their type. This information was completed by means of



interviews with the current and former directors of the Department of Social Service Policies at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth.

The two main documents that are analyzed in this paper – Social Service Strategy (2005-2010) and Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection (2008-2013) – belong to two different timeframes. This consents to examine the variations over time, – that is, has the evidence-policymaking relationship changed over the years? Nevertheless, it is difficult to conduct a good retrospective analysis for several reasons. Firstly, it is impossible to monitor the policymaking process; for example, how have decisions been made in 2005? Which were the efforts of civil society organizations or other stakeholders? Which strategies have been used to communicate the information? How open have the officials been to information? Secondly, the political changes have led to a turnover of senior officials. The officials involved in policymaking in 2005 are now working in a completely different domain. In addition, it is hard for them to recall back the experience of some years ago. Thirdly, the officials tend to give politically correct answers; avoiding to highlight the problems as the information may be used by their opponents. This is particularly the case of a context characterized of political tensions.

## *II. Perspective of Civil Society Representatives about Evidence-Policymaking Relationship*

With the support of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), in November 2014, we conducted a group discussion with civil society representatives. There were nine representatives from the following organizations: Diabetic Children and Youth Association, Save the Children, Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF), ARSIS, Children’s Human Rights Centre of Albania (CRCA), Pink Embassy/LGBT Pro, Labor Invalids’ Association of Albania, and SOS Children’s Villages. These organizations were selected on the basis of the information collected by the Department of Social Care and Integrated Services at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth. These are some of the organizations involved in the process of designing of the social protection policies, as the list of organizations was rather long. We used two selection criteria. Firstly, we selected the organizations that are currently active. Secondly, we avoided the

selection of organizations having a similar activity scope , with the purpose of ensuring a diversity of opinions during the discussions.

The discussion focused on the following three topics: experience with policies on economic assistance and social service; attitudes (and logic) of officials; and, suggestions for the strengthening evidence-policy-making relationship. We asked the following questions: What is your experience with policies on economic aid and social service? What evidence (such as descriptive data, results of pilot studies, and experience on the ground) have you communicated to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth? How have you communicated the evidence? Have there been any changes in the quality of your communicated evidence over time? To what extent have the officials been open to the communicated evidence? Have they considered your evidence? Then, participants discussed three potential scenarios describing officials' attitude towards evidence: (a) decision-makers are open; (b) decision-makers are resistant due to political interests; and, (c) decision-makers hesitate because of the lack of capacities. The participants were asked to choose the scenario that best described their experience.

### *III. Importance given to Scientific Evidence in Field of Study in Social Work*

In order to examine the relevance given to scientific evidence in the field of study of Social Work, we analyzed the content of the curricula of three university subjects: Evidence-Based Social Policy, Social Policy, and (Qualitative and Quantitative) Research Methods. In addition, one of the authors brought her teaching experience at the Department of Social Work and Social Policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences (of the University of Tirana). The following question governed the analysis of the collected information: What importance does social work pay to the use of evidence while designing the social policies? We focused only in the social work field of study, because social workers are the main professionals involved in the design and implementation of social policies.

## **Findings of the Analysis**

### *The Lack of Information Sources*

A common characteristic of the analyzed documents is the lack of citation of the source of information in most of them. For instance, in the chapter on the analysis of the situation (chapter 2) of the Social Service Strategy, it is cited only one source of information (once), expressly the Living Standards Measurement Survey (1998). The analysts refer to this survey to report that 25% of the population lives in poverty and 5% live in extreme poverty (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2005, p. 16). Except for the above-mentioned case, the other paragraphs make no reference at all and, therefore, they seem to be personal statements. For example, the report states that “Experiences acquired over the years and the studies carried out on the variety of social services and their geographic location, have brought into evidence the main groups in need, those who are exposed to risks, of the variety of the services and their location” (p. 19). The experiences and the conducted studies are not specified.

The same problem applies to the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection, even though its analysis relies mostly on the statistical data. The entire analysis mentions the Living Standards Measurement Survey of 2002-2005, and this can be explained by the fact that the strategy was developed with the assistance of the World Bank. In addition, the strategy refers to the international conventions and points out the country’s obligation “to meet all legal obligations stemming from the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the European Social Charter (revised), the ratified conventions, and the Stabilization-Association Agreement” (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2008, pp. 2-3). These obligations “urged the need to reform the system of payments and services for the marginalized groups, households, and individuals and to develop a Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection” (pp. 2-3). These descriptions point out the international influence in the government initiatives. Similar influence may have also been present in the Social Service Strategy, even though it is less clearly noted in the document.

### *The Lack of Information Specification*

Often, the presented data are characterized of a lack of source specification. For example, the Social Service Strategy points out that the “awareness-raising for Government, civil society and donors regarding this category [trafficked women] has been significant” (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2005, p. 26). It is unclear what authors mean with the term ‘significant’ in this statement. Another example comes from the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection, which states that “while not too systematic, various studies indicate that domestic violence is present in the Albanian society” (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2008, p. 16). This paragraph does not state the title or author of the studies. In addition, the authors do not explain what they mean with ‘not systematic studies’.

#### *Focus on the Description rather than on the Explanation of the Situation*

The analyses focus mainly in the description rather than the explanation of the situation. For instance, the Social Service Strategy’s Chapter 2 on the overview of the situation, provides a description of the situation, such as the lack of family-based quality services, domestic violence, trafficking of human beings, and the increase of the number of individuals under the social aid scheme. This description is often based on figures that reveal the severity of the problem. The following example is taken from the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection: “Even though Albania has the youngest population in Europe, the proportion of the population over 60 years of age is growing gradually. It is expected that it will rise to 12.2% of the entire population until 2010 from 10.4% in 2000. It is estimated that about 37,000 people over 66 years of age live under poverty line. All citizens who have paid contributions are entitled to retirement pension. Yet, this pension, particularly the one of the rural areas, is low or equal to 20% of the consumption of poorest rural households” (p. 17). This is a typical description of the situation.

Similarly, the data published in the Annual Bulletin of the State Social Service (2011) contain figures that describe the situation, such as the number of people employed in the private and public sector, number of people employed by industry, and number of people attending

vocational training courses. The data are similar with the ones reported by the Institute of Statistics.

*Focus on the Number of Beneficiaries and Amount of Spending, not on the Program Effectiveness*

The official documents use two success indicators for social programs: a) increase of the number of beneficiaries; and, b) realized expenditures. For example, the Social Service Strategy states that 4.7 billion ALL has been made available to people with disabilities in 2004 when compared to 2.3 billion ALL in year 2000. Similarly, the indicators in the monitoring report of the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection focus on the change of number of beneficiaries and budget over time. There are two examples below: the first example highlights the number of women who have been victim of or are vulnerable to human trafficking and that have received services: “The number of women who have been victim of or are vulnerable to human trafficking and that have received services from public and non-public operators dropped by 15%. Thus, 3,603 girls and women have received service in 2008 and 3,035 women and girls in 2009. For year 2007, this information is only complete for public operators who have provided their service to 107 women and girls.” (Monitoring Report of the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection, 2010, p. 11) The second example focuses on the people with disabilities: “The proportion of people with disabilities enrolled in the payment scheme, because of their disabilities, has grown by 2.3% and 8% for years 2008 and 2009 respectively, compared with 2007. The percentage of caregivers of the people with disabilities entitled to benefits has increased by 14.5% during 2007-2009” (p. 13). The increase of the number of beneficiaries is an indicator success in the second example as compared to the first instance.

These two indicators – number of beneficiaries and realized expenditures – have several advantages. Firstly, they are easily measurable. Secondly, they can be used for electoral purposes, to point out that the current government is performing better than the previous one. This is clearly noticed in one of the latest bulletins of the State Social Service (2014). This

bulletin emphasizes that the budget has “increased by 100 million ALL or by 34% with respect to last year” (p. 2). While the previous government featured “sporadic partnership with the civil society”, the current government has established “steady collaboration” with several civil society organizations (p. 4). These indicators do not, however, provide information on program effectiveness. Budget increase does not necessarily translate into better services. Also, the increase of the number of beneficiaries in a context where informal market is predominant can be regarded with skepticism. In other words, the new beneficiaries may not necessarily be legally entitled to this benefit.

*Focus on the Lack of Service, not on the Quality of Service; However, this has Changed.*

In general, the analyses highlight the lack of services. Let us take an example from the Sectors Strategy for Social Protection. The analysis of the situation of children with disabilities focuses, among others, on the lack of psycho-social service for the families and of special equipments. Placing the focus on the number of services during the transition period is understandable. Confronted with the lack of services, the service providers have made efforts to increase the number of and to diversify the services. More relevance has been given to the quality of service over time. One of the major objectives of the State Social Service (2008) is to “increase the quality of service by implementing established standards, inspection, and licensing of social service providers” (p. 1). Moreover, the deinstitutionalization and development of community services constitute the attempts for the improvements of the quality of services.

*Focus on the Number of Services, not on the Impact of Services*

Certainly, little attention is paid to the effects of social services or programs. The Social Service Strategy presents programs in support of victims of human trafficking, such as the awareness and re-integration through social services. Which is the effect of these awareness programs? Do they lead to a change of attitudes and beliefs? The Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection states that residential and re-integration centers for the human trafficking victims have been established in

Tirana, Vlora, and Elbasan. It also points out that to part of the women have been provided employment. The focus on the number of employed women should be further expanded in order to examine the effect of employment in the quality of their life.

Another example comes from the Social Service Strategy, where the “care for orphan children has increased. The number of orphaned or abandoned children that have found social families through adoption has increased. In the last four years, on average every year, the following numbers have been adopted: 32 children within Albania; 33 children outside Albania, and a further 28 children within their own family” (2005, p. 18). In this case, the increase of care is based on the increase of the number of children that have found a social family. No information is provided on the quality of these children’s life, how their life has changed once these children have found a social family. This type of data would help to show the program impact.

The weekly newsletter of the State Social Service shows cases of intervention that have been carried out in various areas. Nevertheless, the impact of the interventions in individual cases cannot be generalized. In addition, it is important that these cases should be addressed in the long term. The resolution of an urgent case does not necessarily mean that the situation will not reoccur in the future or that the marginalized group or individual will overcome the difficult situation. The program impact should be measured for a longer period of time.

### *Skepticism about the Data provided by the Civil Society Organizations*

The officials are skeptic of the data collected by the civil society organizations. This comes out in two forms: firstly, the research conducted by the CSOs is not cited. Secondly, the data are not considered reliable. It is not clear whether this stance reflects the officials’ perceptions of civil society organizations or the quality of the research that the latter conduct. The Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection states: “The data on street children, abused children, unaccompanied children sent overseas, trafficked children, working children, and those besieged due to blood feuds, etc. are not official. There are figures from NGOs but often they are contradictory and overestimated.” (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2005, p. 20) The data collected by the

civil society organizations should not be neglected, but rather, the methodology of the research and the reliability of their results should be examined carefully. Moreover, other studies should examine if the stances have changed over time.

### *Difficulties in 'Translating' Evidence into Programs and their Implementation on Site*

Even when evidence is available, it is not used to its full extent. This is particularly the case when evidence suggests the undertaking of steps that are financially or politically costly. This is clearly seen in the case of the economic aid in the Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection. In this regard, the Strategy states: “If it was followed the criteria of determining the economic aid to 250% of the basic unemployment payment of 2005, the maximal rate of economic aid would be 13,100 ALL.” (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity, 2008, p. 7) Meanwhile, the monthly economic aid for the period under consideration was 6,500 ALL per household.

Other obstacles may come as a result of bureaucratic problems or lack of coordination among various tiers of governance. This is highlighted in the electricity compensation program, which started to be implemented in 2003. The goal of this program was to support poor households in affording the increase of electricity price. This is how the program implementation is described: “The implementation of the scheme did not yield the expected impact. Out of 191,500 households foreseen to be incorporated into this program, only 37,000 households or 20% were enrolled in the scheme and obtained reimbursement for the increase of power bill price.” (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2008, p. 10) Furthermore, “the administrative mechanism of this scheme faced problems. Only 25% of beneficiaries with power bill contract enrolled in the program reconciled with the data available to the Albanian Power Corporation. The delays in producing and disseminating the information among institutions charged with the implementation of this scheme (including local government units, Health Insurance Institute, Social Security Institute, and Albanian Power Corporation) brought about difficulties in disbursing the funds” (p. 10).



In several cases, there is contradicting evidence. For example, there is a discrepancy between the figures provided in the Living Standard Measurement Survey (LSMS) and the households that have obtained economic assistance in 2007. In concrete terms, “in urban areas, the number of households under the poverty line according to LSMS is 39,586 out 48,830 units according to administrative indicators, or some 9,244 households less” (p. 24). It is not known how this discrepancy was addressed.

### *Restricted Data for the Description of Situation and Inspection of Policies*

In the examined documents, the concept of data is limited to the collected information with the aim of describing the situation and inspecting the policies.

In the Social Service Strategy, the term ‘data’ is used in the following context: creation of an information system with data on services allocated at local level; provision of statistical data and its analysis by the service providers and preparation of periodic reports; analysis of inspection data, assessment of policies and preparation of an annual report on the progress and quality of service (p. 49). If the idea of using evidence in the policymaking was embraced, the ‘data’ concept would be expanded further. This issue is addressed in the section of conclusions and recommendations.

### *Weak Monitoring and Evaluation Capacities*

In general, the capacity building programs are focused on the improvement of skills in order to implement the programs effectively. For instance, the Social Service Strategy underlines that the capacity increase relative to implement social service standards, application of new technology in the inspection of social services, and support to decentralization and deinstitutionalization (p. 12). The Strategy pays attention to the improvement of skills so as to inspect the applicants, identify the documentation deficiencies and illegitimate the payments, as well as verify the social and economic situation of households that apply for economic aid (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2005; Social State Service, 2014).

Over time, the importance of monitoring and evaluation has been highlighted. The capacities are, however, weak. The Sectoral Strategy for Social Protection pointed out the lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. For instance, the impact of the economic aid program and the power bill subsidy is neither determined nor estimated. It is necessary to enhance the monitoring and evaluation capacities of both central and local government units. The latter have the responsibility to collect and analyze the data, as well as communicate them to the regional and central institutions.

### **Civil Society Representatives' Perspectives on Scientific Evidence-Policymaking Relationship**

The discussions with CSOs' representatives revealed the following concerns:

Firstly, the CSOs place many efforts in collecting the data. Yet, these data focus in the dimension of the issues addressed by the organizations (such as number of marginalized people who receive social services compared to those who need social services) and not on the impact of the programs that they implement. The organizations lack the capacities to undertake research that measures the program impact.

Secondly, the organizations and new movements have little evidence. They rely on focus groups, personal testimonies and European average rates. Nevertheless, the use of the European average rate was criticized by many participants, because it may be far from the Albanian reality.

Thirdly, the civil society organizations' representatives do not notice changes in the quality of evidence over the last few years. As already mentioned by one participant, “[the situation of evidence] is not that different from what it was five years ago”.

Fourthly, the existence of evidence per se is not sufficient; the evidence must be accompanied with the pressure of the international community and civil society organizations.

Fifthly, the access to official data is problematic. Concretely speaking, the evidence produced by the state institutions is accessible only to those that are part of the policymaking network. The officials truncate the evidence communicated to them (as stated in the case of the creation of social service map); and the officials “do not take on an initiative to search and produce evidence”.

Sixthly, the coordination of evidence reported at central and local levels is very weak. Often there are discrepancies between the reported evidence at both tiers of governance, leading hence to low data reliability levels.

The participants considered the political will as the key of the success of the integration of evidence in the decision-making. The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth was characterized as ‘open to evidence and communication’. In addition, participants mentioned that there is an improvement over time. In the past, the activists had to convince the officials about the problems they were encountering on the ground, whereas now they have just to inform the officials. Nevertheless, indifferent stances are still random. One of the participants shared her experience with an official who questioned: “Why do I have to write a [research] letter for this [issues]?” Moreover, the experience with the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth varies according to the organization and topic. One of the participants said that his organization did not collaborate with state institutions at all: “We have sent invitations and requests, but have had no cooperation whatsoever with the government.” Furthermore, he mentioned that the “new organizations are not approached by the government” and that the “old organizations see the new ones as ghosts”.

Even though the ministry was characterized as ‘open to evidence and communication’, several problems came up. In concrete terms, the participants stated that the Ministry – and the government in general – appeared to be open, because they wanted to simply ‘check’ the empty slots and meet the conditionality criteria on the integration to the EU. The officials feel the pressure of the international organizations; therefore, they want to be seen as open. This does not necessarily mean that they are really open. In addition, participants stated that the government’s

program is of a political nature, which implies that the interventions made in and stemming from this program are simply political.

The civil society organizations' representatives identified two major moments: the initial discussion of problems and, then, the budgeting for the identified problems. The Ministry mobilizes the civil society organizations in the first moment but not in the second one. "All these nice laws and great action plans. When it comes to discussing the budget before going for adoption to the Parliament, no one is invited for discussions," said one of the participants. This participant went on saying: "We are just being used, because we are not considered at all during the budget allocation phase." Another participant added: "Civil society is manipulated. They invite us, but then they do whatever they want. They consider us a party in important laws, because they do not want it to become a boomerang." In addition, participants said that the officials disregard monitoring and evaluation, because the results would hold them accountable. One participant stated: "They are not interested in, because evidence requires monitoring and evaluation, but the politicians do not want this."

Another topic of discussion included the role of donors and the importance they place to evidence. The participants pointed out that oftentimes the donors' priorities do not relate to the reality of the community. They bring in models from other countries and seek to fulfill their preferences. Even though the organizations might have quite good knowledge of the community, they have to implement the interventions proposed by the donors. Participants mentioned the example of the new scheme of economic aid, which was labeled as 'a failure', because it was implemented without examining properly the situation. One of the participants considered the efforts to implement other countries' models in Albania as "a new habit in an old village". He went on adding: "You want to implement the project exactly the same in Macedonia and Albania. In these cases, you either have to lie about it or refuse to do it, or you have to find another form". The participants suggested that the central government should have alternative funds to avoid donor dependency.

## **Importance given by Social Works to Scientific Evidence-Policymaking Relationship**

The teaching curriculum of the Department of Social Works and Social Policy emphasizes the use of scientific evidence, its accurate understanding, and the criteria to be met by the latter in order to classify it as scientific evidence. The selected methodology, the strict abidance to scientific criteria in every step of the research, and the data analysis are key elements that affect the reliability and validity of the scientific evidence.

Emphasis is put on the methodology of conducting scientific research and evaluation of scientific evidence, particularly in the Research Methods course. The considerations on the understanding of the theoretical perspectives on the selection of research methods/strategies as compared with the well understanding of what constitutes scientific evidence remain still a challenge. Through the usage of scientific research examples, the students should enhance their difficulties' evaluation skills that are encountered during the research process and scientific methodology – even when the latter may not be considered as such – by means of using examples of and improving their capacities in conducting a scientific research. Yet, as will be analyzed below, with regard to these courses, the teaching curricula should initially provide to the students the scientific knowledge as well as the practical skills. It is still challenging to learn that the scientific evidence in our country is still deficient and in the social science domain, some of its methodology neither accomplishes and nor abides to the scientific standards.

When students are lectured about scientific evidence, the emphasis is placed on its link with the process of evidence collection, as well as to how rigorous and scientific the process should be. The students are familiarized with the qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, including the experimental and non-experimental studies, surveys, and research on the ground, as well as with the use of secondary data. The latter is very important, because it can serve as evidence for students to rely on when developing their studies further. The students are also taught about evaluating and analyzing the social policies, which are explored in details in the course on Social Policy. In addition, special importance in this course is also given to the techniques of data research, analysis and statistics employed in the interpretation of the results.

The importance on use of scientific evidence as a manner to justify the application of certain social policies is also given in the courses of Scientific Evidence-Based Social Policy and Social Policy. These courses seek to familiarize the students with the critical role of the international social policies. Likewise, these courses provide the students with skills and capacities required for understanding the social policy as a discipline and practice, as well as for analyzing the social problems. For this reason, the constant provision of examples on the scientific evidence supporting certain social policies is very important during the teaching of these courses. The students should now understand that the undertaking of certain social policies and the necessity to implement them. Unlike the Research Methods course, where the emphasis is placed on the better understanding of the scientific criteria of evidence, the course on Social Policy underlines the understanding of social policies, their context and relevance, as well as their relationship with the scientific evidence.

A careful examination of the curricula and of the teaching experience of one of the authors of this study, in Research Methods course, has identified the following problems:

#### *Lack of Comprehensive Scientific Evidence-Based Studies conducted in our Country*

This finding has been pointed out by the academic staff of the Department of Social Works and Social Policy. A considerable share of the scientific evidence is not relevant to our country, as it comes from studies conducted in other contexts, and consequently, it can be used only for comparative studies, which would also require evidence collected and analyzed in the context of our country. This would help to explain to a certain extent the relatively small number of meta-analysis-based studies.

The teaching curricula of Research Methods are mainly based on the preparation of students, who will collect the data on their own (primary data-based research), and for this purpose, they are taught to become researchers and prepare their own instruments, define the research questions, conduct reliability tests, and so on. On the other hand, the preparation and

prioritization for other researches, to be used as their meta-analysis methodology, would be similarly useful to students who have deficiencies and difficulties in preparing measuring instruments and conducting relevant tests.

The course on Scientific Evidence-Based Social Policies is provided only to students that attend master programs in Social Work (specialization in Social Policy). This course is also provided to students that attend other study programs, such as Gender, Communication for Changing Conduct, Administration of Social Services, and Social Work. In all these study programs, it is important to understand the scientific evidence and its role in improving social policies so as the latter will match the context and meet the needs.

The Research Method curriculum puts emphasis on the concept of experiment as a research methodology/strategy. Yet, this curriculum should provide a more thorough and deeper explanation of the experiment as a means to link research with social policies. It is necessary to elaborate more on the social experiment (a research strategy that develops in natural conditions rather than in isolated environments) as a research strategy that combines experiment with the policy or with the impact that certain policies may have on individuals, as measured by means of social experiments, and its relationship with the policymaking.

Finally, one of the identified problems relates to students' lack of access to consulting scientific evidence-based studies due to the scarcity of evidence-based studies conducted in Albania.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study focused on features of evidence-policymaking relationship in Albania. It pointed out several issues. Firstly, the official documents lack the sources of information and the related specification. Secondly, the analyses focus on the description rather than explanation of the problems. Thirdly, the policy success indicators refer to the number of beneficiaries and expenses incurred rather than the policy impact on individuals, households or communities. Fourthly, the officials are skeptic about the data collected by the civil society organizations.

Fifthly, the ‘data’ concept is limited to description of the situation and inspection of policies. Sixthly, the policy monitoring and evaluation capacities are weak.

The civil society representatives are skeptic about officials’ intentions. They stated that the officials faced the international organizations’ pressure and as a result, they want to show as transparent. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that they are transparent. In addition, it supports the findings of studies conducted in other contexts: the officials are strategic-oriented and their stances reflect their political interests (see, for example, Harding, 2008; Manski, 2014). A better knowledge of the policymaking process requires a follow-up of the process of policies’ designing over time, such as the oversighting of the interaction between officials and civil society representatives. This was not possible to be undertaken in the course of this paper, since we focused on the policies designed in the past. A more comprehensive analysis is required to measure the perceptions and stances of the officials towards evidence. To this end, interviews with officials involved in the process of designing current strategies must be carried out.

Another finding of this paper relates to officials’ efforts to mobilize civil society in the course of designing the policies, which do not necessarily strengthen the links between the parties. Indeed, they may have an opposing effect. The civil society representatives mentioned that they feel “exploited” by the officials for two reasons: firstly, they are called in to help officials but their opinions are ignored or their data are truncated. Secondly, they are not called in at the most important moment – the discussion of the budget.

These findings suggest that more efforts should be done so as to use evidence as a means to enhance transparency and empower democracy. The paper’s results suggest that the following steps should be undertaken:

- Reliance of the strategies on the conducted studies, which are not limited to the research performed by government institutions or international organizations;
- Shift of focus from the description to the explanation of the situation and to the examination of options of interventions that can address the causes of the identified problems;



- Increase of access to scientific research that focuses on the measuring of the effect of policies, programs or social services;
- Undertaking of studies that seek to measure the effect of policies over time;
- Measuring program effectiveness according to disadvantaged/marginalized groups; these efforts may encounter numerous obstacles not only due to the lack of capacities but also due to the political importance of the results. Measuring program efficiency may lead to undesirable results and, therefore, harm the popularity of the ruling political party/coalition.
- Decrease of skepticism about the data provided by the civil society organizations; this can be addressed in several ways, such as the presentation and discussion of study findings in public forums and the examination of study methodology, as well as the reliability of results.
- Designing of programs with the aim of strengthening the monitoring and assessment capacities. These programs should have a broader application; they should focus not only on central and local officials, but also on the civil society. Evidence-policymaking relationship must be an integral part of these programs; importance of evidence should be underlined in order to understand which policies work, how they work and the conditions they perform in.
- Development of programs that combine production of evidence with the methods of using this evidence for advocacy purposes;
- Coordination of evidence between the central and local tiers of governance;
- Establishment of ‘statistical columns’ in the state institutions; these columns should be limited to the number of beneficiaries; rather, they should focus on the description of characteristics the individuals that benefit from social programs and services.
- Establishment of collaboration between state institutions and civil society organizations to conduct studies and research; civil society representatives may contribute with their experience and network of collaborators in the communities.
- Involvement of civil society organizations during budget discussions;
- Allocation of a budget share to monitoring and evaluation; social programs should have a separate fund for their monitoring and evaluation.

- Integration of evidence in donors' programs; donors should support the collection of evidence for interventions under their funding; also, they should support interventions that evidence shows to be effective.
- Promotion of an organizational culture that highlights the importance of evidence; Ham et al. (2005) suggest that official documents should point out the evidence that supports their proposals. The promotion of the organizational culture must be coupled with the increase of access to evidence.
- Application of various government grant schemes, such as grants focusing on the collection of evidence on successful programs or on the replication of practices at national level; This can, however, be achieved once the organizational capacities on conducting evaluations and assessments have been empowered.
- Encouragement of best practices of organizations in the community and their replication across the country in cooperation with government institutions;
- Communication of the monitoring and evaluation results by government agencies in their websites;
- Increase of access to secondary data made available by the government institutions; this could be administrative data that may lead to a better understanding of the characteristics of the programs and beneficiaries.

The higher education system in Albania is undergoing a radical reform, which seeks to increase the quality of university curricula. To achieve this goal, one of the reform pillars is the scientific research with its two major forms – basic research that aims to enhance knowledge about various problems and applied research that aims to give solutions to problems concerning the society. Both forms of the scientific research rely essentially on the scientific evidence.

It remains to be seen whether the importance given to scientific research in the reform of the higher education will lead to the strengthening of the scientific capacities and cooperation with the aim of accomplishing research projects.

The role of the social work in strengthening the evidence-policymaking relationship is elaborated below.

- Design curricula that pay more attention to the explanation of scientific evidence; this fact is also identified in the curricula of the Social Policy Study Program, which is based on three theoretical course and on the Research Method Curricula, including theory and practice coupled with visits to institutions working in the collection and analysis of scientific evidence, such as the Institute of Statistics.
- Increase the number of evidence-based studies; the difficulties to access scientific evidence, particularly raw data required by researchers to process them for their research, hinder the development of secondary evidence-based studies. The same situation applies to the academic staff.
- Funding research projects based on the collection and analysis of scientific evidence should implicate issues relative to the allocation of the necessary fund to undertake evidence-based studies, especially for those studies that definitely impose work on the ground. The practice to date reveals the university's inability to fund this type of research, particularly those involving students' overnight travels. This makes students spend most of their time on the theories of evidence-based research. Even when students work on their dissertations and have more available time, the financial aspect becomes a barrier, notably when results seek representation.
- Create and strengthen the partnerships between the Department of Social Works and Social Policies and various institutions; for this purpose, the academic staff should focus on the identification of the potential actors that work and conduct evidence-based research, and on the creation of networks with partners that may continuously engage the students, in cooperation with the academic staff, in carrying out evidence-based research. The students and the academic staff may contribute with expertise and human resources.

## References

- Baker, Bruce, & Welner, Kevin G. (2012). Evidence and Rigor: Scrutinizing the Rhetorical Embrace of Evidence-Based Decision Making. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 98-101.
- Choi, Bernard, Pang, Tikki, Lin, Vivian, Puska, Pekka, & Sherman, Gregory. (2005). Can Scientists and Policy Makers Work Together? *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 59(8), 632-637.
- Ham, Chris, Hunter, David J, & Robinson, Ray. (1995). Evidence Based Policymaking. *BMJ*, 310, 71-72.
- Hansen, Hanne Foss, & Rieper, Olaf. (2010). The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy-Making: The Case of Denmark. *German Policy Studies/Politikfeldanalyse*, 6(2), 87-113.
- Harding, Don. (2008). Fuelwatch: Evidence-Based Policy or Policy-Based Evidence? *Economic Papers*, 27(4), 315-328.
- Liebman, Jeffrey B. (2013). Advancing Evidence-based Policymaking to Solve Social Problems. *Issues in Science & Technology*, 30(1), 47-55.
- Manski, Charles F. (2014). Evidence-Driven Policy. *Issues in Science & Technology*, 30(4), 5-6.
- Ministria e Punës, Çështjeve Sociale dhe Shanseve të Barabarta. (2008). *Strategjia Sektoriale e Mbrojtjes Sociale*. Tiranë: Ministria e Punës, Çështjeve Sociale dhe Shanseve të Barabarta.
- Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. (2005). *The Strategy of Social Services*. Tirana: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- Oakley, Ann. (2002). Social Science and Evidence-Based Everything: The Case of Education. *Educational Review*, 54(3), 277-286.

Ravallion, Martin. (2009). Should the Randomistas Rule? Retrieved January 5, 2015, from [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVRES/Resources/477227-1142020443961/2311843-1229023430572/Should\\_the\\_randomistas\\_rule.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVRES/Resources/477227-1142020443961/2311843-1229023430572/Should_the_randomistas_rule.pdf)

*Raport Monitorimi i Strategjisë Sektoriale për Mbrojtjen Sociale 2007-2009.* (2010).

Shërbimi Social Shtetëror. (2008, 2011, 2014). *Buletin Informativ.* Tiranë: Shërbimi Social Shtetëror.

Stilgoe, Jack, Irwin, Alan, & Jones, Kevin. (2006). *The Received Wisdom: Opening Up Expert Advice.* London, UK: Demos.

Thyer, Bruce A. (2008). The Quest for Evidence-Based Practice?: We Are All Positivists! *Research on Social Work Practice, 18*(4), 339-345.

Uneke, Chigozie J., Ezeoha, Abel E., Ndukwe, Chinwendu D., Oyibo, Patrick G., & Onwe, Friday. (2012). Promotion of Evidence-Informed Health Policymaking in Nigeria: Bridging the Gap Between Researchers and Policymakers. *Global Public Health, 7*(7-8), 750-765.

Vohnsen, Nina. (2013). Evidence-Based Policy: Some Pitfalls in the Meeting of Scientific Research Politics. *Anthropology Today, 29*(5), 3-5.

Young, Ken, Ashby, Deborah, Boaz, Annette, & Grayson, Lesley. (2002). Social Science and the Evidence-Based Policy Movement. *Social Policy and Society, 1*(03), 215-224.

Zardo, Pauline, & Collie, Alex. (2014). Measuring Use of Research Evidence in Public Health Policy: A Policy Content Analysis. *BMC Public Health, 14*(1), 771-790.

Zlotnik, Joan Levy. (2007). Evidence-Based Practice and Social Work Education: A View From Washington. *Research on Social Work Practice, 17*(5), 625-629.



The Regional Research Promotion Programme Western Balkans (RRPP) is run by the University of Fribourg upon a mandate of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The views expressed in this briefing paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent opinions of the SDC and the University of Fribourg.