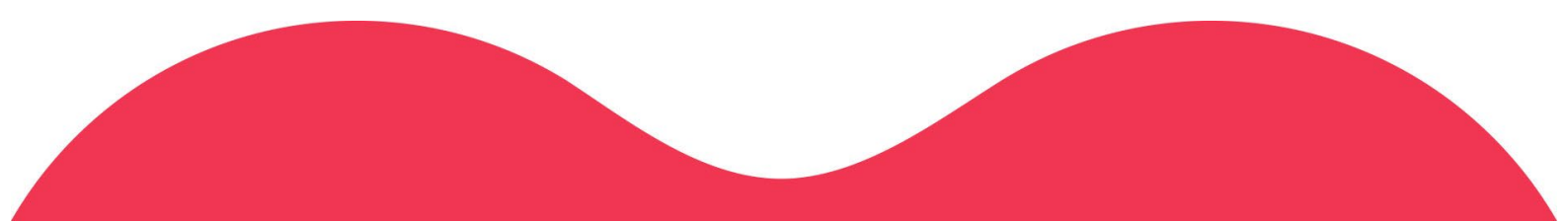


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# **Data on Philanthropy – By Us, for Us: Making Use of Evidence for Good**

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## Introduction

Looking at the title of the event, “Making Use of Evidence for Good”, two key questions come to mind: 1) What do we know about philanthropy’s role in public policymaking? 2) What is needed to strengthen an evidence-informed approach to foundations’ involvement in the policy process? Philea, in collaboration with the European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP) hosted a webinar on using data collection and research evidence for influencing social policy, strategic decision-making, and implementation of programmes on 13 September 2022.

Based on a critical overview of the field, which was provided by Tobias Jung, Director and Founder, the Centre for the Study of Philanthropy and Public Good and reflections on good practices and lessons learned, which were kindly shared by Cristina Chiotan, Director, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, European Climate Foundation and Rein Terwindt, Senior Evidence Specialist, LEGO Foundation, this follow-up piece summarises some of the key issues raised during the online event and provides a basis for foundations to further reflect on the roles that they can play in public policymaking and how to approach these.

### What can be defined as evidence?

The answer to this question is straightforward: There is no standard, universally accepted definition of what constitutes evidence – a “smorgasbord” of options presents itself. In the context and remit of the conversation that took place, evidence was seen in a broad, all encompassing, way. Alongside traditional perspectives that see evidence as predominantly rooted in “scientific research”, a whole set of sources that foundations already work with and utilise should be considered as constituting evidence: from expert knowledge and published research to stakeholder consultations, public sentiment analyses, policy evaluations and internet consultations.

Alongside specific expectations of what constitutes evidence within and for different foundations, sits a more emergent approach. This accepts and embraces the reality that different organisations will emphasise and value different forms of evidence. Based on premises of partnership and collaboration, this approach provides opportunities for working closely with partners to co-produce relevant variables, measures and indicators – a process, which in turn, offers the chance for mutual reflection, education, and skills development.



## What do we mean by evidence-based approaches and engagement with public policy?

The evidence-based policy and practice field is rooted in the evidence-based medicine movement that started across the Anglophone world in around 1992. This movement had the underlying idea that one should go through a systematic process of identifying, examining and using research findings as a basis for clinical decision-making. From acute medicine, this rationale first spread to other areas within healthcare, before moving into the fields of education and social work, and finally, by the beginning of the 2000s, into all areas addressing public services and policy. Thus, with the idea of "evidence-based philanthropy" only gaining traction over the last couple of years, it appears that the philanthropy field is very much behind the curve. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the question is what lessons on evidence-based approaches can be drawn from other areas and then applied to the field.

Public policy and the policymaking process are commonly cast as a circular process. This "policy cycle" moves from agenda-setting to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. While this presents a useful model for understanding the different stages involved in public policymaking, reality is much messier. To reflect this, the idea of a "policy agora" has been put forward. Using the analogy of ancient Greek city states' agora, a public assembly or marketplace, this points to the diversity of players, perceptions, procedures and practices that come together to contribute to the policy process: from citizens and corporations to firms and foundations. To justify their participation in this process, these parties normally need to have certain qualities or resources that allow them to do so. This can take various forms, all of which can be covered by foundations:

- (1) Being a right-holder – those who participate due to being members of a relevant community
- (2) Being a space-holder – those who participate because they live or are placed somewhere affected
- (3) Being a share-holder – those who participate as they own part of the assets or resources that are or will be affected
- (4) Being a stake-holder – those who participate because they are affected by the issue
- (5) Being an interest-holder – those who participate in the name of certain constituencies



(6) Being a status-holder – those who participate due to being given a specific representative role by those in authority

(7) Being a knowledge-holder – those who participate because they have particular expertise regarding the matter concerned<sup>1</sup>

Based on these different role-holder functions and opportunities, foundations can be and are (in fact) very much intertwined in the policymaking process.

## **How can the differentiation be made between “good” and “bad” evidence?**

The differentiation is not straightforward or a binary choice, as it can depend on different factors. It can be dependent on the producer of evidence, the target audience, or individual and organisational preferences, therefore making it more of a subjective decision. It can also be contingent on the context, and what is relevant at specific points in time. This is also relevant considering the policymaking process and overall public sphere, as academics regularly conduct data analyses on trends relating to social media, society and public sentiment.

## **How can foundations engage with evidence-based policies in practice?**

Foundations can rely on evidence that has been gathered in-house, or indeed rely on other institutions, such as universities. However, since partners of foundations are often the source of evidence, foundations can play the key role of synthesising this evidence into lesson learning and provide guidance in terms of leadership. It can also take the form of bringing different partners together and help them to connect and learn from one another.

Additionally, foundations can support organisations (such as universities or think tanks) that are conducting research and support them in producing the scientific evidence that can then be disseminated or used by the foundation. In terms of research, a foundation can do more work on internal analysis, such as for monitoring, evaluation and learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitter, PC (2002) Participation in Governance Arrangements: is there any reason to expect it will achieve “sustainable and innovative policies in a multilevel context”? in Grote, J and Gbikpi, B (eds.) Participatory Governance. Political and Societal Implications, Leske+Budrich: Opladen, 51-70.

## **What are motivating factors for adopting an evidence-based approach?**

This answer can vary depending on the foundation and the goals and aims of the organisation. It can assist with skills development, academic learning and this can, in turn, increase the number of partners (and policymakers) which collaborate with the foundation.

In the context of evidence-based approaches and policy, the importance of evidence should not be understated. Indeed, in the remit of this conversation the following question arises: Can we do anything in policy without having evidence?

## **What is the role of academics from the practitioner point of view?**

Academics can play an indispensable role in bringing scientific evidence to a wider audience/philanthropic community. In other words, they can spearhead the evidence. It also fits in well with foundations adopting the role of “convenor”, where various different partners can be brought together for shared learning, including academics.

On the other hand, academics are often involved in the evidence-gathering processes. They can be included to gather the data or even analyse the data at the end of the process. However, this can be stymied by a lack of money and resources on the foundation’s side, and this often prohibits collaboration.

## **Concluding points**

From the discussion that took place in the webinar, it can immediately be concluded that foundations are a key component in and contributor to the policymaking process. This is supported by the fact that they can assume various different roles vis-a-vis other actors in the process. In engaging with public policy, foundations can adopt evidence-based approaches. With the understanding that there is no one single definition of “evidence”, foundations can partner with academics and respective institutions, thus highlighting the potential collaboration possibilities. In turn, this can help fulfil strategic aims and goals of different organisations.

