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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

UNVEILING EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING IN POLICY: INSIGHTS FROM AN ITALIAN CASE STUDY

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1. Introduction

This thesis explores evidence-based decision-making (EBP) within the public policy context. EBP involves the dynamic process of acquiring, interpreting and using evidence as a basis for effective decision-making. Although its origins are rooted in healthcare as evidence-based medicine, the influence of EBP has extended to policy and various other sectors. Its importance is based on the premise that incorporating in-depth and reliable information improves the quality of decision-making and promotes better policy outcomes. EBP is particularly valuable in the current context of limited resources, as it optimizes their allocation and avoids wastefulness in ineffective policies. The European Union actively promotes and supports the adoption of EBP at national and local levels through initiatives aimed at agencies, governments, researchers and policy makers. Although tools are available to facilitate the implementation of EBPs, challenges persist, making facilitators of their use necessary. The symbiotic relationship between policymakers and technical-administrative bodies is crucial in EBPs, and requires effective communication and governance for successful implementation.

2. Research objectives

The evidence-based approach to policymaking presents numerous advantages. Consequently, it would be desirable to have wider adoption of it. Therefore, one of this thesis's objective is to make a contribution to the identification of the information, training and facilitation needs of public administrators in their role as policymakers, with the aim of improving their ability to use evidence-based policies effectively. To do so, this study considers a real case study that took place in small local context in Italy. So far, in the literature there are no analysis of Italian case study about EBP focused on potential facilitators. The results of the qualitative analysis, which included 56 questionnaires and 6 interviews, shed light on several crucial factors influencing the use of evidence in decision-making processes. The second objective of this dissertation is to gain insights about sources of evidence.

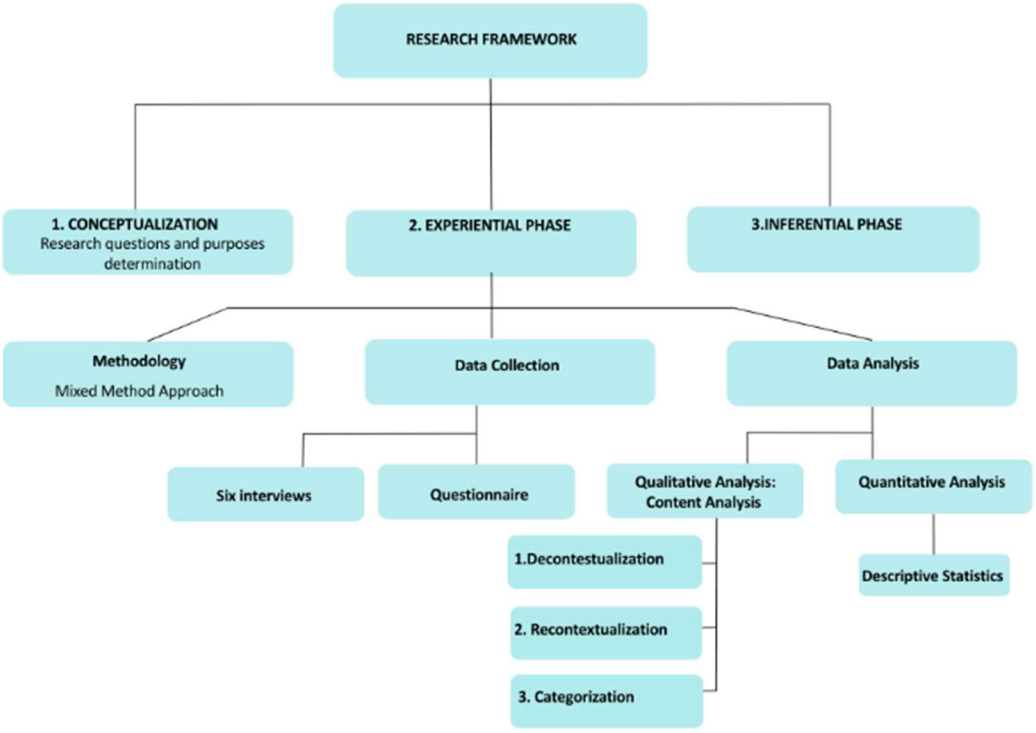
Policymakers have access to a multitude of sources from which they can draw evidence to inform their decisions. During their activities, they are tasked with the responsibility of determining which sources to consider. Among the several potential initiatives that can be employed to facilitate the adoption of evidence-based policies, it would be needed to make it easier for decision-makers to access and utilise these sources. Nevertheless, even if this topic is relevant, it is not studied in the existing body of literature. This dissertation aims at studying factors that influence choice and use of sources of evidence by policymakers.

Finally, this study has also the goal to study the relationship between policymakers and municipal technical offices in the evidence-based policy context. Administrative apparatus assists decision-makers in researching, collecting, analysing, and interpreting evidence. On the other hand, administrative employees need clear guidance and communication from policymakers to better assist them.

Despite the relevance of this topic, in literature there are few studies about EBP that consider or mention technical offices within a municipality. One of the goal of this thesis is to fill this gap. More precisely, the objective is to study whether there are factors, and if so what they are, that hamper an efficient and proficient relationship.

3. Research design and methodology

To meet these research objectives, a case study of a project implemented in a municipality in Northern Italy, was analysed, we will refer to the analysed project as the pseudonym "SOLITUDE," chosen to safeguard the privacy of the involved municipal entity and the individuals contributing to its implementation. The case study was conducted through an internship at the Municipality's EU Policy Office, which provided a unique context for data collection and analysis. The following chart summarizes the research framework adopted to conduct the study:



3.1 Conceptualization phase

During the conceptualization phase gaps in the literature have been identified and research questions guiding the study have been subsequently formulated.

Since up to now, in the literature there are no analysis of Italian case study about EBP focused on potential facilitators, one of the thesis's objectives is to investigate, within a local context using a case study, potential facilitators for a successful implementation of EBP. Thus, the first research question is:

What are the potential information, training needs, and facilitators for public decision makers to improve their ability to use evidence in their role as policy makers?

The second objective of the thesis is to bridge the gap of literature about the factors that exert influence over the selection and utilization of sources of evidence by policymakers. Therefore, the second research question is:

What are the criteria influencing the choice and use of the sources of evidence by policymakers?

Despite the relevance of the administrative apparatus in the context of EBP, the focus of scholars is more on researchers and policymakers, and only few academic papers cite administrative workers. In the literature only two factors are mentioned that may hamper a proficient relationship between policymakers and administrative employees. Nonetheless, to facilitate evidence-based approaches, it would be beneficial to study whether there are other some factors, hence, this dissertation aims

to fill this gap, too. Then, the last research question is:

In the context of evidence-based policy, are there factors, and if so what are they, that hinder a proficient and efficient relationship between policymakers and municipal technical offices?

3.2 Experiential phase

This phase includes decisions about research methodology, data collection and analysis.

First of all, a mixed methodology has been implemented for the purpose of triangulation, i.e. to improve the validity of the inferences by searching for convergence between the results obtained from various methods, and complementarity, i.e. to achieve a more complete understanding of a complex phenomenon by using a variety of methods to investigate its different facets.

Second, with reference to data collection, six interviews were conducted to policy makers and an administrative employee of the considered municipality, and a survey has been submitted to 187 policy makers of the same municipality.

Finally, for data analysis, a content analysis was conducted on the qualitative data collected through the interviews and questionnaires and a quantitative analysis, using descriptive statistics, on the quantitative data collected through the survey.

Content Analysis has been divided in three stages:

1) Decontextualization: after familiarizing with the text it was divided into smaller meaning units and each one was assigned a code. This process is commonly referred to as "open coding process". Coding was done manually, with three coding methods: descriptive coding, magnitude coding, and simultaneous coding.
2) Recontextualization: The original text was revised along with the final list of meaning units. The unmarked text was evaluated to determine its relevance for inclusion; if it does not provide some answers to the research question, it should be incorporated into the analysis; otherwise, not.
3) The categorization: In the categorization process, the codes were reorganised to develop a shorter list of categories. Some codes were merged together because they were conceptually similar and infrequent codes were evaluated for their relevance. The codes identified must be internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous, meaning that no data should fall between two groups or in more than one group.

3.3 Inferential Phase

In this last phase, the goal is to develop inferences, explanations, conclusions and potentially emerging theories. Thus, this step ensures that quantitative and qualitative data are integrated into a coherent set of understanding.

4. Findings

The key findings obtained during the inferential phase are divided into three

parts, each one corresponding to a research question:

Concerning the first research question, the results of the qualitative analysis, which included 56 surveys and 6 interviews, point to several key elements influencing the integration of evidence in decision-making procedures.

A major obstacle to the use of evidence, especially in smaller municipalities, is the absence of personal training among public administrators. However, the presence of trained and competent staff alone is not enough; governance assumes a crucial role. It becomes essential to have dedicated staff and adequate tools to supervise the use of data, especially in the context of project implementation.

Moreover, increased data availability is a key element for well-informed decision-making, including socio-economic data for societal impact assessment. Stakeholder participation, transparent information sharing, and collaborative efforts also contribute to raising the quality of evidence-based decision-making.

Effective communication of evidence, from the perspective of decision-makers, plays an essential role in their practical application. This has the potential to mitigate the challenges posed by time constraints, which hinder the use of evidence and the evaluation of results both during and after projects.

Finally, the promotion of an evidence-centred culture, both within municipal authorities and among partners, is a substantial contribution to embedding evidence into the fabric of decision-making processes.

From the analysis of data collected to answer to the second research question, 14 criteria emerged. Reliability and knowledge of the source, that is about reputation of the sources of information and the effective knowledge of them by policymakers, and competence, intended as ability to use these sources as well as mastery of subject at hand, are the factors that holds the greatest influence on policymakers' choice.

The third most important criteria is "Functionality, pragmatics, and purpose versus objectives", meaning that sources that directly contribute to address policy objectives and their needs are preferred by policymakers. The easiness of access to sources and information therein, availability of time, plurality of viewpoints investigated, that refers to the practice of considering multiple perspectives in a source, and simplicity, immediacy, and understanding of information available in the source are all considered quite influential.

Two more factors were identified only by the interviews: incentive or obligation associated with a source's use, and lack of proper sources themselves of course negatively affects the utilisation by policymakers.

Furthermore, in the survey it was asked to rate the usage of each source, from a list of 13 sources, in the policy decision-making process, on a scale ranging from "never" (1 point), to "always" (5 points). From this questions, it is possible to conclude that the utilisation of "Autonomous research on practices and best practices from other territories", "Press articles", "Public debates, opinion sharing" as well as "Information collected from informal relationships and social groups" is significant.

"Perceptions", "Learning from personal training/organized periodic updates", "Cost/benefit analysis of possible alternatives" and "Legislation and planning instruments of local authorities" are instead taken into account only sometimes, whereas "Studies, research, and publications from universities and research institutes" and "Open Data, reports, and statistical surveys" are employed less frequently. Ranked last, "Legislation and planning tools of the European Union" received a store that indicates a rare consideration.
The category "other sources" got both a low score and a low standard deviation. Thus, it is possible to conclude that no sources of evidence, different from the ones above mentioned, were considered by policymakers.
Thanks to the survey, it was possible to get data about the usage of instruments, from which gather evidence, used to assess and monitor policies. Feedbacks from stakeholders are considered by around 75% respondents, whereas Socio-economic/financial/environmental indicators by less than 40% and open data by 30% people. In the last position, there is cost/benefit analysis, being taken into account only by 16% decision makers.
Finally, the analysis of data concerning the last research question identified 12 variables that act as a barrier.
Lack of personnel, leading to an excessive workload, as well as slowness, resulting in delays to answer to request from decision-makers, are two factors. The low level of competence of administrative employees and their lack of motivation play a negative role in this relationship.
Administrative apparatus has also a self-referential attitude, having a focus on safeguarding the bureaucratic machinery rather than actively seeking ways to improve services. Furthermore, complex regulation, procedures and bottlenecks of the bureaucratic machine are not helpful. In the municipality also there are not an internal structure and internal processes designed purposefully for supporting evidence-based policies.
Low level of digitalisation provides an additional barrier, as well as does the struggle of policymakers to access the necessary information from the technical/administrative apparatus. There is a lack of comprehensive vision and of communication both toward policymakers and among technical offices. Finally, policymakers have a low level of knowledge about various aspects of the technical/administrative apparatus, making more difficult for them to send requests to the appropriate person or office.

Potential solutions to improve this relationship were not the goal of this dissertation.

5. Conclusions and future developments

The exploration of evidence-based decision-making (EBP) in the context of policy-making reveals a number of benefits that underline the case for its wider adoption. This thesis has contributed significantly by identifying the information, training and facilitation requirements of public administrators in their role as policymakers, with the aim of improving their ability to effectively implement evidence-based policies. The investigation focused on a real case study

within a small Italian local context, a dimension that has remained largely unexplored in the existing literature on EBP and its potential facilitators.

The qualitative analysis, which included 56 questionnaires and 6 interviews, highlighted critical factors influencing the integration of evidence into decision-making processes. The first of these is the scarcity of training for public administrators, which is particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities and represents a fundamental obstacle to the use of evidence. However, having trained and competent staff is only a starting point; the governance structure is crucial. Dedicated staff and adequate tools for supervising the use of data during project implementation are crucial for the effective incorporation of evidence. Improved data availability emerges as a cornerstone for informed decision-making, extending to sociological data for socio-economic impact assessments. Collaborative measures, stakeholder engagement and transparent information exchange further contribute to sound evidence-based decision-making.

Effectively communicating evidence from the perspective of decision-makers is a key element in their practical application, potentially alleviating time constraints that hinder the use of evidence and the evaluation of results. Cultivating an evidence-centred culture not only within municipalities, but also among partners, emerges as a significant catalyst for the integration of evidence into decision-making processes.

Furthermore, this research delved into the little-explored realm of research and policymakers' use of information for evidence-based policies. In the absence of previous exploration on this front, this thesis fills a critical gap in the existing literature. Quantitative analysis indicated the main sources of information, while qualitative interviews shed light on the criteria that influence their selection and use. Fourteen criteria emerged that influence the selection and use of information sources. These criteria ranged from reliability and knowledge of sources, competence in using sources, factors related to accessibility, plurality of viewpoints and practical relevance.

The research also clarified the intricate relationship between policy makers and municipal technical offices, shedding light on barriers and potential solutions. Twelve factors that hinder a productive relationship were identified, including staff shortages, bureaucracy and difficulties in accessing necessary information. The results underline the need to invest in staff training and digitisation, to streamline bureaucratic processes and to optimise communication channels.

It is crucial to recognise the limitations of this study. The focus on a single case study and the relatively small sample size, together with the potential social desirability bias, reduce the generalisability of the results. Future directions could include case comparisons and longitudinal studies to validate and extend the insights of this thesis.

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