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The Politics of Evidence Use: Trust and Knowledge Hierarchies

Ernest Alang Wung

alangernestwung@gmail.com

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Gloria Akah Ndum Okwen

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Ntam Damaris Maih

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Andong Marian Engubia

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Mark Tata Kelese

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Kinlabel Okwen Tetamiyaka Tezok

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Tangang Andrew Tangang

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Nain Mirabel Yuh

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Pambe Miong Rigobert Hanny

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Ngem Bede Yong

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

Patrick Mbah Okwen

Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa

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The Politics of Evidence Use: Trust and Knowledge Hierarchies

ABSTRACT

Evidence is not always judged by how true or useful it is, but often by who says it, where it comes from, and whose interests it serves. In evidence-informed decision-making, power relations, institutional priorities, and socio-economic context strongly shape what counts as credible and legitimate knowledge. Despite increasing attention to the politics of evidence, there is still limited understanding of how these dynamics influence evidence acceptance and use in practice. This study examines how trust, credibility, power dynamics, and epistemic hierarchies shape evidence use and knowledge legitimacy across diverse evidence ecosystems. It draws on a cross-sectional survey of 242 respondents from research, policy, civil society, and development sectors, using descriptive and comparative analyses to assess perceptions of evidence credibility, trust in evidence producers, evidence use, and epistemic justice across Global South and Global North contexts. Peer-reviewed research was identified as the most trusted source of evidence (55%), followed by local to indigenous knowledge (16%), NGO reports (13%), and government reports (12%). 75.6% of respondents agreed that Global North studies are often considered more authoritative than global south evidence, while 80.2% reported that institutional reputation influences evidence uptake. Trust was highest for academic researchers and international research collaborations, whereas ministries, media organizations, and faith-based institutions received lower trust ratings. Global South respondents reported stronger perceptions of Northern bias and donor influence than their Global North counterparts. Trust, power relations, and institutional legitimacy significantly shape evidence use. Promoting more equitable evidence ecosystems requires recognizing diverse knowledge systems, reducing epistemic hierarchies, and strengthening inclusive approaches that support epistemic justice and evidence-informed policymaking.

Keywords: Trust, Evidence Hierarchy, Epistemic Justice, Evidence Ecosystem and Evidence Informed Policy Making.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, evidence-informed decision-making has become a central principle in policy, global health, and international development. Governments, funders, and multilateral organizations increasingly promote the use of evidence to strengthen policy effectiveness, and optimize resource allocation (Cairney, 2016; Oliver et al., 2014). Despite this growing

attention, the processes through which evidence is produced, valued, and utilized remain deeply political and socially constructed. Decisions about what constitutes credible evidence is sometime shaped by social, political, and institutional processes that influence how knowledge is produced, valued, and used (Head, 2016; Liverani et al., 2013; Parkhurst, 2017).

Through many policies and research settings, evidence is often valued according to who produced it, where it originated, and whether it aligns with dominant institutional norms, rather than its contextual relevance or practical utility. Consequently, peer-reviewed studies, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and data generated by institutions in the Global North are frequently privileged over local administrative data, Indigenous knowledge systems, practitioner experiences, and grey literature produced in the Global South (Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009; Head, 2016).

This unequal valuation of knowledge reflects broader epistemic hierarchies embedded within global systems of knowledge production. Parkhurst critiques the “evidence hierarchy” paradigm for privileging certain methodological traditions, particularly experimental and quantitative approaches (Liverani et al., 2013; Parkhurst, 2017). Indigenous knowledge systems, local administrative data, practitioner expertise, experiential knowledge, and grey literature are often considered less rigorous or less credible, regardless of their contextual relevance (Head, 2016). These patterns reflect broader epistemic hierarchies embedded within global systems of knowledge production. Although RCTs and systematic reviews provide important forms of scientific rigor, privileging specific methodological traditions can narrow understandings of what counts as valid evidence and marginalize forms of knowledge that are critical for addressing complex social, political, and cultural realities (Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009; Liverani et al., 2013; Parkhurst, 2017). Such tensions are particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where policy decisions often rely on diverse sources of knowledge, including community experiences, routine administrative data, Indigenous knowledge systems, and implementation-based learning (Chilisa, 2012; Wung et al., 2026). These forms of evidence frequently offer context-sensitive insights that may be unavailable through formal research alone, yet they often remain excluded from dominant evidence ecosystems because they do not conform to conventional scientific norms or publication standards (Adams et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2019). Within contemporary evidence ecosystems, different forms of knowledge are assigned varying levels of legitimacy, reflecting underlying power relations (Cummings et al., 2025). Peer-reviewed scientific evidence is typically positioned as the "gold standard" because of its standardized methodologies in policy

and decision-making processes (Ahuja, 2019). In contrast, indigenous knowledge systems, which are intergenerational, culturally embedded, and often transmitted through oral traditions and practice, are frequently dismissed as anecdotal or insufficiently scientific. Similarly, local knowledge, derived from lived experience and contextual understanding, is often perceived as informal and lacking methodological rigor despite its relevance to local decision-making (Guibrunet et al., 2024; Ijatuyi et al., 2025). Practitioner knowledge, generated through implementation experience and professional practice, is commonly regarded as operational rather than scientific, while administrative data produced by governments and public institutions may be overlooked because of concerns regarding data quality, standardization, or completeness. Grey literature, including reports, policy briefs, program evaluations, and publications from non-governmental organizations, also remains marginalized despite often providing timely, context-specific evidence that is highly relevant for policy (Canali & Lohse, 2024; Smith et al., 2018). These hierarchies are further reinforced within publishing, where many academic journals prioritize citations from peer-reviewed scientific publications while giving comparatively less recognition to grey literature, policy reports, and other non-traditional evidence sources (Guibrunet et al., 2024; Tezok et al., 2026). Although this practice aims to uphold scientific rigor, it may inadvertently exclude valuable contextual, practice-based, and locally generated knowledge from academic discourse. Consequently, the politics of evidence extends beyond methodological quality to encompass questions of power, authority, and epistemic legitimacy, influencing which forms of knowledge are recognized, trusted, cited, and ultimately incorporated into research and policymaking (Cummings et al., 2025).

The unequal valuation of knowledge has increasingly been conceptualized as a form of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals or groups are systematically disadvantaged in their capacity to produce, share, or have their knowledge recognized as credible (Tezok et al., 2026). Within global health and development, historical and postcolonial structures have contributed to a concentration of epistemic authority within institutions located in the Global North, while actors in the Global South are frequently positioned as data collectors or implementers rather than knowledge producers (Mbembe, 2016; Lawrence & Hirsch, 2020). These dynamics can shape research agendas, funding priorities, and policy decisions, reinforcing inequalities in whose knowledge is valued and whose expertise is trusted. Trust plays a central role in these processes where evidence rarely influences policy solely because of its technical quality; rather, its uptake depends on perceptions of credibility,

legitimacy, and institutional authority (Nutley et al., 2012). Policymakers and practitioners often rely on trusted professional networks, institutional reputations, and longstanding relationships when assessing evidence, making trust a key mechanism through which epistemic hierarchies are maintained (Lavis et al., 2003). International organizations, major funding agencies, and globally recognized research institutions therefore exercise considerable influence over which forms of evidence are prioritized, and which knowledge claims are considered policy relevant. While these actors have made important contributions to scientific advancement, their influence may sometime unintentionally privilege externally generated evidence and marginalize locally produced knowledge.

Recent findings from Cameroon suggest that evidence systems function as arenas of negotiation and contestation in which data serve not only as informational resources but also as sources of institutional power. Consequently, access to evidence is frequently shaped by political relationships, organizational incentives, and perceptions of legitimacy rather than by technical considerations alone. Understanding evidence use therefore requires attention to the governance arrangements that determine who controls data, who is trusted to produce knowledge, and whose interpretations are considered authoritative (Kelese et al., 2026).

Due to this, recent studies have called for more inclusive and equitable approaches to evidence production and use (Khan et al., 2021). Critics argue that dominant evidence systems often reproduce colonial patterns of authority by privileging Western scientific paradigms while minimizing Indigenous, community-based, and experiential forms of knowledge (Büyüm et al., 2020). Such dynamics can undermine local ownership of research processes, distort policy priorities, and reduce the relevance of evidence for the communities most affected by health and development interventions.

Despite growing recognition of the political nature of evidence, important gaps remain in understanding how trust, power, and institutional legitimacy shape evidence valuation in practice. Existing research has largely focused on methodological debates concerning evidence quality and hierarchy, with less attention given to the relational and political processes through which evidence acquires authority and influence. Limited research has examined how trust operates across Global North–Global South partnerships and how perceptions of credibility shape the acceptance or rejection of different forms of knowledge.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how trust influences production, valuation, and use of evidence within policy and research systems. Drawing on theories of epistemic trust,

knowledge justice, and postcolonial studies, the study investigates why certain forms of evidence are privileged over others and how epistemic hierarchies are constructed and maintained. It further explores the implications of these hierarchies for equitable and context-sensitive decision-making and considers how more inclusive approaches to evidence appraisal, co-production, and partnership can contribute to greater epistemic justice.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study Design

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional online survey approach to examine how trust, institutional power, and epistemic hierarchies shape evidence production and use within policy and research systems.

2.2. Study Population and Context

The study targeted individuals engaged directly or indirectly in evidence generation, evidence translation, evidence synthesis, policymaking, implementation, dissemination, and knowledge brokerage across international development, public health, academia, and governance sectors. Participants included policymakers, health practitioners, evidence users, researchers, academicians, ministry officials, NGO practitioners, donor representatives, knowledge brokers, consultants, and development practitioners operating across Global North and Global South contexts.

The focus on these actors was informed by literature demonstrating that evidence use occurs within interconnected policy and research ecosystems involving multiple institutional stakeholders with differing forms of authority, legitimacy, and influence (Liverani et al., 2013; Oliver et al., 2014; Parkhurst, 2017).

2.3. Ethical Consideration

The researchers applied for ethical clearance on March 20th, 2026, prior to the commencement of the study from the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa, Bamenda, Cameroon with registration number E43-58/L/MINSANTE/SF/DROS/CRC/NPN under approval code: eBASE IRB protocol #002/04/2026Exp. The approval for data collection ranged between April 06th and May 30th, 2026, this study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for social science and public health research including respect for persons, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and responsible data management. Prior to conducting the survey, all participants were provided with a detailed participant information statement outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, the type of questions included, anticipated risks and benefits, and the intended use of

study findings. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and they could opt out at any time without notification or consequences.

Informed Consent

An electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were required to indicate their consent by selecting "I agree to participate" option before proceeding to the questionnaire and participants who selected "I do not agree" were automatically excluded from the survey and no data were collected from them. Consent for publication of anonymized responses was incorporated into the electronic consent process. To protect privacy and confidentiality, no personal; identifying information was collected. Given the study's focus on power relations, institutional trust, and epistemic inequalities, particular attention was paid to minimizing potential professional or reputational risks to participants.

2.4. Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants with relevant expertise and experience in evidence production, interpretation, or use. Initial participants were identified through the researchers' professional and academic networks, and they were invited to participate in the online survey. Participants were subsequently encouraged to circulate the survey link within their professional networks, thereby enabling broader recruitment across policy, research, and practitioner communities. The survey was distributed through WhatsApp, email, Webinars, LinkedIn and during workshops. A total of 249 participants answered the study. Seven respondents declined consent and were excluded from the study. The final analysis consisted of 242 responses received.

2.5. Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed (see supplementary file) to examine perceptions of evidence credibility, institutional trust, evidence use practices, and knowledge hierarchies. Data collection was conducted electronically between April and May 2026 using KoboToolbox version 2025.3.3 (Wung et al., 2026). Participants accessed the survey through a digital link circulated via email, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. The online format enabled participation across multiple countries and institutional settings while reducing logistical barriers associated with geographical distance.

The questionnaire included Likert-scale items assessing trust in different actors and institutions, including researchers, governments, NGOs, donors, international organizations, and local communities. These questions explored perceptions regarding the credibility of

different forms of evidence, perceptions of Indigenous and local knowledge systems and inclusivity in evidence-informed decision-making. The survey instrument drew conceptually from existing literature on evidence use, epistemic injustice, trust in governance systems, and participatory knowledge production (Nutley et al., 2012; Parkhurst, 2017).

2.6. Pilot Testing

The survey questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of literature on evidence-informed policymaking, trust, epistemic injustice, postcolonial knowledge systems, and knowledge translation. Draft questionnaires were reviewed internally and informally pre-tested among individuals familiar with policy and research environments to assess clarity, relevance, wording, and interpretability. Feedback from the pilot process informed revisions to question structure and terminology. The final instrument was programmed into KoboToolbox to facilitate digital data collection, reduce missing data, and enhance data management efficiency.

2.7. Data Analysis

Quantitative data was exported from KoboToolbox into Microsoft Excel version 2026 for cleaning and analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and cross-tabulations, were used to summarize patterns of trust, evidence valuation, and perceptions of knowledge hierarchies across stakeholder groups within excel.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Participants profiling

Table 1 shows the respondents represented a geographical and linguistic diverse evidence ecosystem. Most participants were from Global South (88%, n = 213), while 12% (n = 29) were from Global North. English was the predominant first language (61.6%, n = 149), followed by French (19.0%, n = 46), other languages (17.4%, n = 42), and Spanish (2.1%, n = 5). Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with males accounting for 55.4% (n = 134), females 44.2% (n = 107), and one respondent preferring not to disclose their gender (0.4%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants by Region, Gender and Language.

Characteristics	Category	Size = n	Percentage
Region	Global South	213	88.0
	Global North	29	12.0

Language	English	149	62
	French	42	17
	Spanish	5	2
	Other	46	19
Gender	Male	134	55.4
	Female	107	44.2
	Prefer not to say	1	0.4

Together, these findings indicate that the study captured perspectives from a diverse population across regions, linguistic groups, and gender identities, strengthening the breadth of viewpoints represented within the study.

Table 2 shows that researchers constituted the largest respondent group (39.3%, n = 95), followed by teachers/practitioners (18.6%, n = 45) and NGO/CSO staff (17.4%, n = 42). Most participants were early-career professionals, with 47.5% (n = 115) reporting 0–5 years of experience, while 16.9% (n = 41) had more than 16 years of experience. Respondents were generally highly educated, with 41.3% (n = 100) holding a master's degree, 28.9% (n = 70) a bachelor's degree, and 26.9% (n = 65) a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy). These findings indicate that the sample was composed largely of highly educated professionals actively engaged in research, practice, and evidence-informed decision-making processes.

Table 2: Professional and Educational Characteristics of Respondents (N=242)

Characteristics	**Category**	**Size (n)**	**Percentages**
Role/Position	Researcher	95	39.3
	Teacher/Practitioner	45	18.6
	NGO/CSO staff	42	17.4
	University Staff	18	7.4
	Policy Marker	15	6.2
	Other	27	11.2
Years of Experience	0-5 years	115	47.5
	6-10 years	61	25.2
	11-15 years	25	10.3
	16 plus years	41	16.9
Educational Level	Bachelor's Degree	70	28.9

	Master's degree	100	41.3
	PhD	65	26.9
	Others	7	2.9
Total		242	100.0

Figure 1 shows the respondents field of specialization, and this disciplinary diversity reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary evidence ecosystems, where addressing complex social, health, educational, and development challenges requires the integration of multiple forms of expertise and knowledge. Recent studies emphasize that effective evidence-informed policymaking depends on collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and knowledge systems to enhance the relevance, legitimacy, and usability of evidence (Pratt & De Vries, 2023).

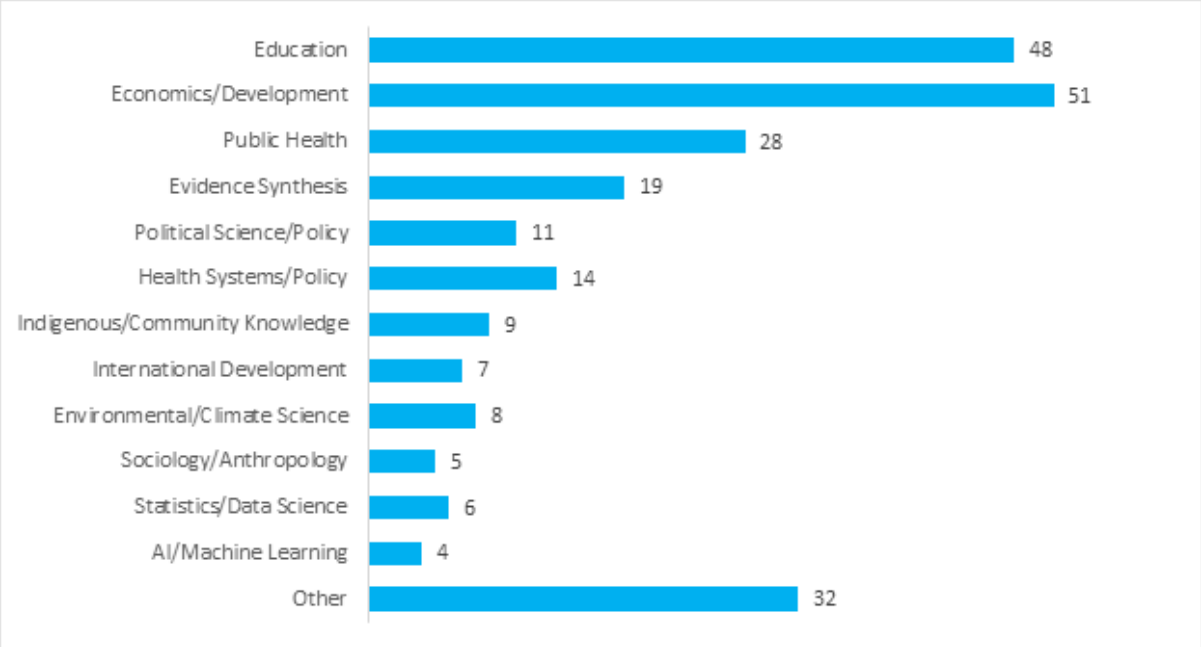


Figure 1: Respondents' field of specialization

The strong representation from development, education, public health, and evidence synthesis suggests that respondents are actively engaged in sectors where evidence generation and translation play a critical role in decision-making. Furthermore, the inclusion of participants from indigenous knowledge, environmental sciences, political science, and artificial intelligence highlights growing recognition of knowledge pluralism and the need to incorporate diverse perspectives when addressing complex policy challenges (Tezok et al., 2026; Wung et al., 2026). Such diversity strengthens the evidence ecosystem by promoting more inclusive, context-sensitive, and equitable approaches to knowledge production and use also supporting

the notion that high-quality evidence extends beyond single disciplines or methodological approaches (Nutley et al., 2012; Wung et al., 2026).

3.2. Knowledge Sources and Trust in evidence Use

Figure 2 shows that peer-reviewed research is the most trusted source of evidence among respondents (55%, n = 132), followed by local or indigenous knowledge (16%, n = 38), NGO/civil society reports (13%, n = 32), and government reports (12%, n = 30). These findings suggest that formal scientific evidence remains the dominant source of credibility within the evidence ecosystem, although respondents also recognize the importance of locally generated and practice-based knowledge. The results reflect the continued influence of evidence hierarchies that privilege peer-reviewed research while simultaneously indicating growing support for knowledge pluralism and the inclusion of context-specific forms of evidence.

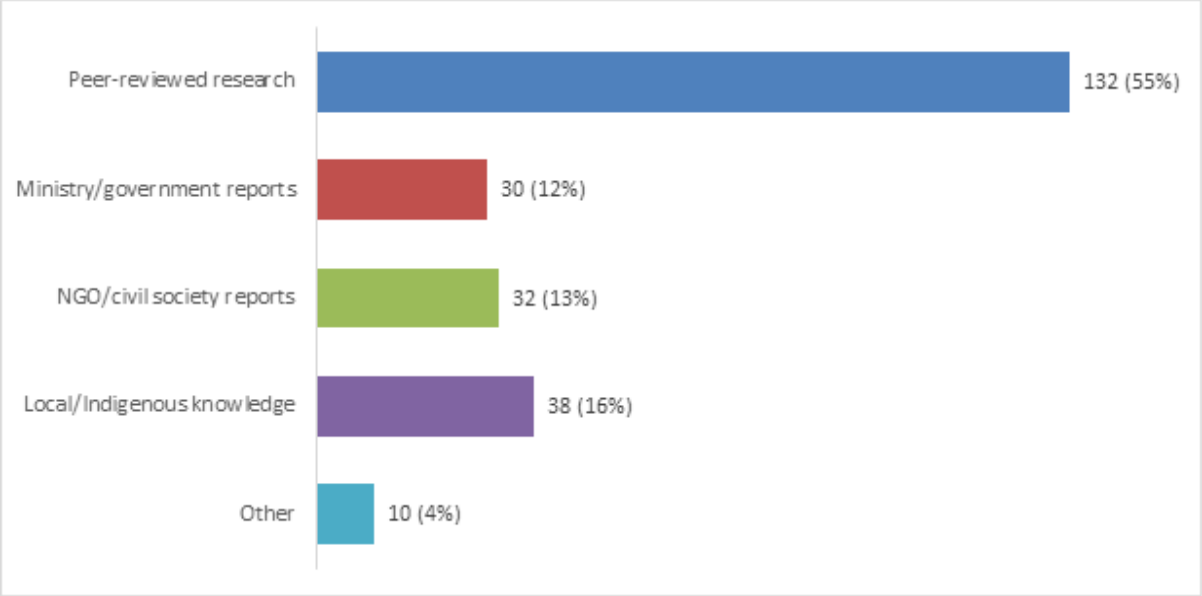


Figure 2: Most trusted source of evidence and evidence use

The dominance of peer-reviewed research may also reflect the institutional prominence of systematic reviews and evidence synthesis in development decision-making, where rigor and methodological transparency are frequently regarded as indicators of evidence quality(Waddington et al., 2012). However, recent studies emphasize the importance of integrating scientific, local, and experiential knowledge to improve the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of evidence-informed decision-making (Oliver et al., 2014; Pratt & De Vries, 2023).

The data represented in Table 3 above further suggests that institutional power and reputation act as key filters for evidence legitimacy. A large proportion of respondents (79.3%) agree that institutional reputation influences acceptance or use of evidence (M = 4.04), while 68.6% indicate that power dynamics determine which knowledge is considered in policy and research processes (M = 3.84). Similarly, donor and funding agency priorities are perceived to strongly shape what data is used (73.1% agreement, M = 3.89). These findings are consistent with the evidence ecosystem framing in which knowledge use is shaped by institutional, political, and funding structures rather than evidence quality alone (Cairney, 2016; Jeremy Shiffman et al., 2007; Liverani et al., 2013). They also reflect the broader argument that policy processes are embedded in power relations where evidence is selectively mobilized to align with institutional interests (Juntti et al., 2009; Morse, 2006).

Table 3: Knowledge Sources and Evidence Use

Statement	N	Mean	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree
Local or indigenous knowledge is undervalued compared to peer-reviewed research.	242	3.76	14.5%	16.1%	69.4%
International or Global North studies are considered more authoritative than local data.	242	3.92	11.2%	13.2%	75.6%
Dats produced by my organization or local institutions is often ignored by external stakeholders	242	3.25	25.2%	29.3%	45.5%
Participatory or co-produced research strengthens the reliability of data.	242	4.17	5.8%	10.7%	83.5%
Mistrust of data reduces its use in policymaking.	242	4.12	7.4%	13.2%	79.3%
Peer-reviewed publications are generally considered more credible than reports from government authorities or NGOs.	242	3.67	16.1%	22.7%	61.2%
Donor or funding agency priorities determine the types of data that are used.	242	3.89	9.9%	16.9%	73.1%
Power dynamics determines which knowledge is taken into account in research and policy-making processes.	242	3.84	8.7%	22.7%	68.6%
An institution's reputation influences the acceptance or use of evidence.	242	4.04	8.3%	12.4%	79.3%
Language barriers (for example, English versus local languages) limit the use of certain data sources.	242	3.90	10.7%	14.0%	75.2%
Political considerations sometimes outweigh factual data in policymaking.	242	4.12	5.4%	13.2%	81.4%
My organization has sufficient capacity to assess and use different types of data.	242	3.52	21.1%	25.2%	53.7%
Integrating indigenous and scientific knowledge leads to better public policy outcomes.	242	4.28	4.5%	11.6%	83.9%

A particularly important insight relates to the politicization of evidence use. Most respondents (81.4%) agree that political considerations sometimes outweigh factual data in policymaking (M = 4.12), reinforcing the idea that evidence use is not a neutral or purely rational process. This is compounded by mistrust of data (79.3% agreement, M = 4.12), suggesting that credibility is socially constructed and relational rather than solely technical (Cash et al., 2003; Giddens, 2012). These findings strongly support the argument that policymaking is inherently political, with evidence often serving as one input among competing interests rather than a decisive driver of action (Cairney, 2016; Langer et al., 2016).

Despite these constraints, the findings also highlight strong support for inclusive and participatory knowledge systems. An overwhelming majority (83.5%) agree that participatory or co-produced research strengthens the reliability of data (M = 4.17), and the highest level of agreement (83.9%, M = 4.28) is observed for the statement that integrating indigenous and scientific knowledge leads to better public policy outcomes. This reflects an emerging consensus in the literature that co-production of knowledge enhances relevance, legitimacy, and usability of evidence in complex systems (Chilisa, 2012; Norström et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2014; Wung et al., 2026). It also aligns with calls for plural epistemologies that integrate local, indigenous, and scientific knowledge systems to improve policy responsiveness in diverse contexts (Head, 2016).

However, the results also reveal capacity constraints within organizations, where only 53.7% of respondents believe their institutions have sufficient capacity to assess and use different types of data (M = 3.52). This suggests that even where there is recognition of the value of diverse evidence sources, practical limitations in skills, systems, and institutional support hinder effective uptake (Head, 2016; Langer et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2014).

Additional barriers include language and accessibility issues, with 75.2% agreeing that language barriers limit the use of certain data sources (M = 3.90), reinforcing structural inequities in global knowledge production and dissemination. This is strongly supported by evidence showing that language remains a major barrier to global scientific inclusion and knowledge exchange (Amano et al., 2016), contributing to unequal participation in global research systems. These findings strongly resonate with broader scholarship on evidence-informed policymaking, which emphasizes that evidence use is shaped by power, politics, and institutional constraints rather than linear rationality (Cairney, 2016; Langer et al., 2016; Morse, 2006). They also align with decolonial and plural epistemology perspectives that call

for recognition of diverse knowledge systems in global research and policy processes (Head, 2016; Tezok et al., 2026). Collectively, the results support the argument that improving evidence use in Africa requires not only technical capacity building but also transforming knowledge hierarchies, strengthening co-production systems, and addressing structural inequalities in global knowledge production (Cash et al., 2003; Head, 2016; Norström et al., 2020).

According to Figure 3, respondents were almost evenly divided on whether they had ever ignored evidence because they distrusted its source, with 49% reporting that they had done so and 51% indicating that they had not. This near-equal distribution suggests that source credibility is a significant determinant of evidence use, with almost half of the respondents acknowledging that trust, rather than evidence quality alone, influences whether evidence is accepted or rejected.

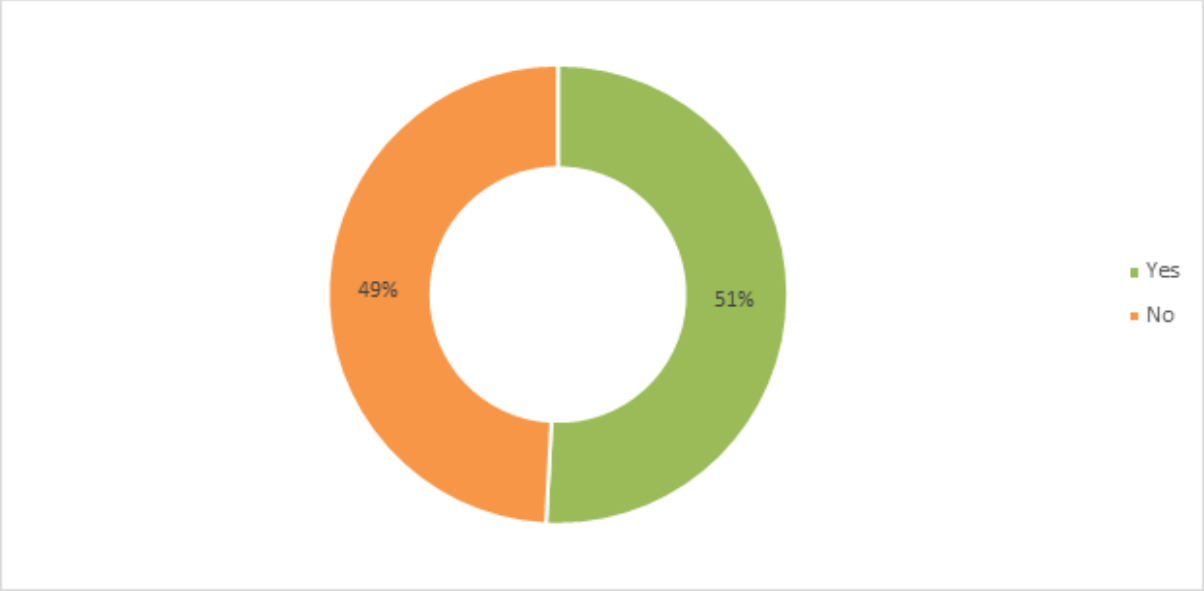


Figure 3: Ignoring Evidence due to Distrust

These findings reinforce the view that evidence use is fundamentally a social and political process rather than a purely technical one (Cairney, 2016; Morse, 2006). The willingness to disregard evidence due to distrust supports the argument that credibility, legitimacy, and trustworthiness are essential characteristics of usable knowledge (Cash et al., 2003). It also reflects broader evidence that policymakers and practitioners evaluate evidence through institutional reputation, relationships, and perceived neutrality, rather than methodological quality alone (Head, 2016; Oakley et al., 2005; Oliver et al., 2014).

3.3. Interpersonal and Institutional Evidence Use

In Figure 4, trust varies considerably across evidence producers. International research collaborations (75.6%) and academic researchers (74.0%) receive the highest levels of trust, followed closely by NGOs and civil society organizations (70.7%). In contrast, news organizations (41.3%) and faith-based organizations (47.9%) are the least trusted sources, while ministries, donor organizations, community-based organizations, and local communities receive moderate levels of trust ranging from approximately 51% to 60%. The pattern reflects enduring evidence hierarchies in which scientific and internationally recognized institutions are regarded as more credible than other knowledge producers (Giddens, 2012; Nutley et al., 2012). However, the relatively high trust placed in NGOs and local communities also suggests growing recognition of practice-based and contextual knowledge, consistent with calls for more pluralistic and co-produced evidence systems (Norström et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate that trust in evidence is shaped by both institutional authority and contextual relevance.



Figure 4: Trust in evidence producers

3.4. Epistemic Justice, Knowledge Hierarchies and power imbalances

Table 4 highlights a strong perception that knowledge systems are still structured by epistemic hierarchies and Northern dominance, although there is growing recognition of the need for more plural and integrated approaches. A majority of respondents (55.0%) agree that evidence hierarchies reflect Northern biases (M = 3.57), reinforcing longstanding critiques of knowledge production systems that privilege Global North epistemologies over locally grounded knowledge (Mutua et al., 2022). This reflects what Nutley et al. (2012) and Adams et al. (2017)

describe as persistent “hierarchies of evidence,” where scientific legitimacy is unevenly distributed across geographies and institutions.

At the same time, there is strong support for epistemic integration and co-production of knowledge. A large majority (79.3%) agree that integrating multiple knowledge systems strengthens policy relevance (M = 4.21), and 75.6% support the idea that local data can be standardized without losing contextual meaning (M = 3.98). This aligns with Norström et al. (2020) and Reed et al. (2014), who emphasize that co-produced and hybrid knowledge systems improve the legitimacy and usability of evidence in complex policy environments. It also reflects Head’s (2016) argument that evidence-informed policymaking increasingly depends on combining diverse knowledge forms rather than privileging a single epistemology.

Despite this openness to integration, the findings reveal that structural inequalities in knowledge valuation persist in practice. Only 32.2% of respondents agree that local or indigenous knowledge is considered equal to academic research in decision-making, while 69.0% still perceive peer-reviewed publications as more credible than locally produced reports. This reinforces concerns raised by Cash et al. (2003) and Giddens (2012) that credibility is socially constructed through institutional authority and expert systems rather than equal epistemic recognition. Additionally, 62.4% report that donor priorities shape what data is used, and 80.2% indicate that institutional reputation strongly determines evidence uptake, highlighting the continued influence of funding and global knowledge institutions in shaping evidence legitimacy (Cairney, 2016; Jeremy Shiffman et al., 2007; Liverani et al., 2013).

Finally, the results point to persistent systemic constraints and politicization of evidence use. While 64.0% agree that different types of data are valued in principle, only 47.1% believe their organizations have sufficient resources to critically assess diverse evidence types, and an equal proportion report that decolonizing knowledge is reflected in actual practice. Language barriers remain a major constraint (75.6%), echoing Amano et al. (2016), while 78.1% agree that political considerations often outweigh facts, reinforcing the argument that evidence use is deeply embedded in political processes (Cairney, 2016; Juntti et al., 2009; Morse, 2006). Overall, the table reflects an evidence ecosystem in transition where aspirations for epistemic justice and knowledge pluralism coexist with enduring structural, linguistic, and political barriers.

Table 4: Epistemic justice and knowledge hierarchy

Statement	N	Mean	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree
Evidence hierarchies often reflect Northern biases.	242	3.57	13.2%	31.8%	55.0%
Standardizing local data without losing context is both possible and useful.	242	3.98	8.3%	16.1%	75.6%
Integrating multiple knowledge systems strengthens the relevance of policies.	242	4.21	5.0%	15.7%	79.3%
In decision-making processes, local or indigenous knowledge is considered on the same level as academic research.	242	2.88	42.6%	25.2%	32.2%
Donor priorities determine which types of data are considered within my organization.	242	3.59	14.5%	23.1%	62.4%
Peer-reviewed publications are considered more credible than locally produced reports.	242	3.79	12.8%	18.2%	69.0%
Language barriers (for example, English versus local languages) limit the use of certain types of evidence.	242	3.88	11.2%	13.2%	75.6%
Institutional reputation strongly determines whether evidence is used (for example: WHO, World Bank, Campbell, Cochrane).	242	4.07	7.4%	12.4%	80.2%
In decision-making, political considerations sometimes outweigh facts.	242	4.00	9.9%	12.0%	78.1%
My organization has sufficient resources to critically assess different types of data.	242	3.41	20.7%	32.2%	47.1%
Efforts to “decolonize knowledge” are reflected in concrete research and policy practices.	242	3.36	23.6%	29.3%	47.1%
In my professional environment, different types of data (qualitative, quantitative, empirical) are all valued equally.	242	3.69	20.7%	15.3%	64.0%

As shown in figure 5 below, the majority of respondents perceive power imbalances as having a substantial influence on evidence use. Approximately 43% report that power imbalances strongly influence evidence use, while a further 12.4% indicate that the influence is very strong. Only a small minority perceive little or no influence, suggesting broad recognition that evidence production and utilization occur within unequal power structures rather than neutral decision-making environments.

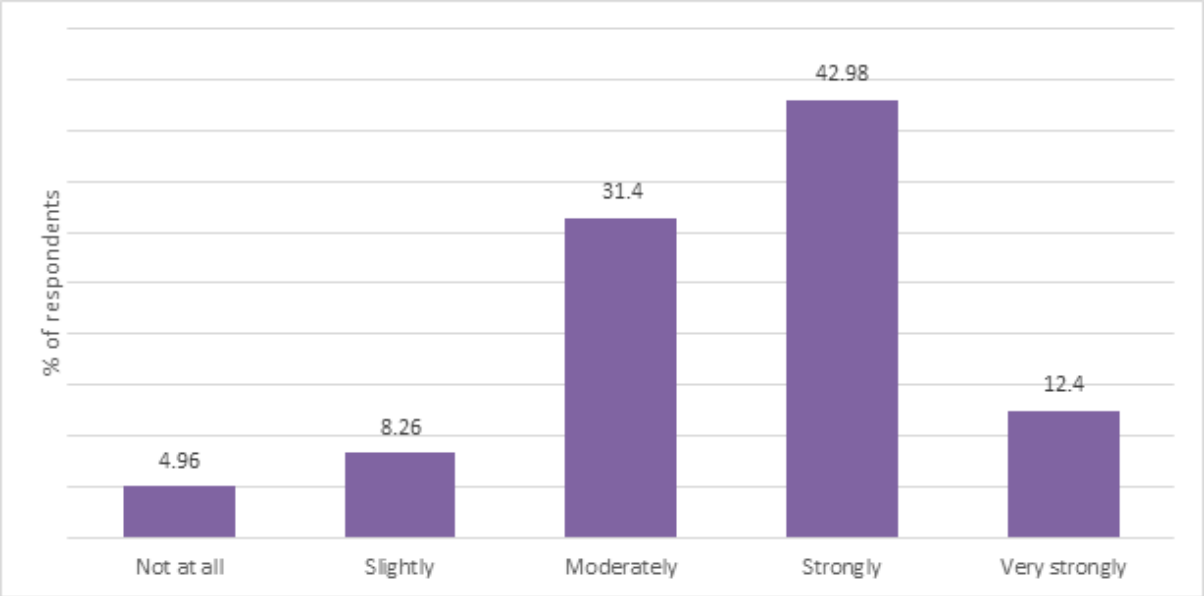


Figure 5: Influence of power imbalance on evidence use

These findings align closely with pas literature describing evidence-informed policymaking as inherently political, where power relations, institutional interests, and competing agendas determine which forms of knowledge gain legitimacy (Cairney, 2016; Juntti et al., 2009; Liverani et al., 2013). They further support decolonial perspectives arguing that global evidence systems continue to privilege certain institutions and knowledge traditions over others (Mutua et al., 2022).

3.5. Cross examination between both contexts

Table 5 shows that perceptions of evidence hierarchies are broadly consistent across Global South and Global North respondents, with only marginal differences across most statements. Both groups similarly agree that Global North studies are perceived as more authoritative than local data (3.9 vs 3.8) and that local or indigenous knowledge is undervalued relative to peer-reviewed research (3.8 vs 3.8). This overall convergence suggests a shared recognition of entrenched global knowledge hierarchies, consistent with arguments that evidence systems are

structurally shaped by institutionalized scientific authority rather than geography alone (Cash et al., 2003; Giddens, 2012; Nutley et al., 2012).

Table 5: Evidence use perception across context

Perception/statement	Global South (n=213)	Global North (n=29)	Diff. (S−N)
Global North studies are more authoritative than local data	3.9	3.8	0.1
Local/Indigenous knowledge is undervalued vs peer-review	3.8	3.8	0.0
Evidence hierarchies reflect Northern biases	3.6	3.2	0.4
Local/Indigenous knowledge treated equal to academic research	2.9	2.7	0.2
Peer-review more credible than govt/NGO reports	3.6	3.9	-0.2
Power dynamics determines whose knowledge counts	3.9	3.7	0.1
Decolonizing knowledge's efforts reflected in practice	3.4	2.8	0.6
Integrating multiple knowledge systems strengthens policy	4.2	4.2	0.0
Institutional reputation (WHO/World Bank) drives evidence use	4.1	3.9	0.2
Language barriers limit use of certain evidence	3.9	4.0	-0.1

However, notable differences emerge in how these hierarchies are experienced. Respondents from the Global South report stronger perceptions of Northern bias in evidence systems (3.6 vs 3.2) and greater influence of donor priorities in shaping evidence use. They also express slightly higher trust in NGOs and local/community-based knowledge sources, reflecting the more prominent role of non-state actors in Southern evidence ecosystems. These patterns align with literature on epistemic inequality and knowledge asymmetries, which highlight how Global South actors often experience more direct exposure to donor-driven and externally defined research agendas (Shiffman et al., 2007; Mutua et al., 2022).

In contrast, Global North respondents show slightly higher trust in academic and formal institutional sources, and marginally stronger reliance on peer-reviewed publications over government or NGO reports. Despite these differences, both groups strongly agree on the value of knowledge integration, with identical high scores (4.2) for the statement that combining multiple knowledge systems strengthens policy outcomes. This convergence reinforces the growing consensus in the literature that co-production and epistemic pluralism improve evidence relevance and policy effectiveness (Head, 2016; Norström et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2014). Overall, the findings suggest that while perceptions differ slightly by context, there is a shared structural recognition of hierarchical knowledge systems, alongside emerging agreement on the need for more inclusive and integrated evidence ecosystems.

Looking at Figure 6, respondents from both the Global South and Global North demonstrate remarkably similar perceptions regarding evidence hierarchies, the value of integrating multiple knowledge systems, institutional reputation, and language barriers. Nevertheless, respondents from the Global South consistently report stronger perceptions of Northern bias, greater influence of donor priorities, and slightly higher recognition of efforts to decolonize knowledge than their Global North counterparts.

The findings suggest that while evidence hierarchies are widely recognized across contexts, their practical implications are experienced more strongly within the Global South. This is consistent with scholarship highlighting persistent global inequalities in knowledge production, funding, and dissemination, where local evidence frequently competes with internationally generated research for legitimacy (Jeremy Shiffman et al., 2007). At the same time, the shared support for integrating multiple knowledge systems reflects growing consensus around epistemic pluralism and knowledge co-production (Norström et al., 2020).

Figure 6 also shows a clear pattern of relatively high convergence in trust toward formal academic and international research institutions, alongside more pronounced differences in trust toward locally embedded and intermediary actors. Both Global South and Global North respondents report similarly high trust in academic researchers (3.9 vs 4.2) and international research collaborations (3.9 vs 4.0), reinforcing the continued dominance of formal scientific systems as "trusted knowledge brokers." This aligns with Giddens' (2012) notion of reliance on expert systems and Cash et al. (2003), who argue that credibility in knowledge systems is strongly anchored in institutional legitimacy. It also reflects Nutley et al. (2012), who highlight

how scientific authority remains central in defining what counts as reliable evidence across contexts.

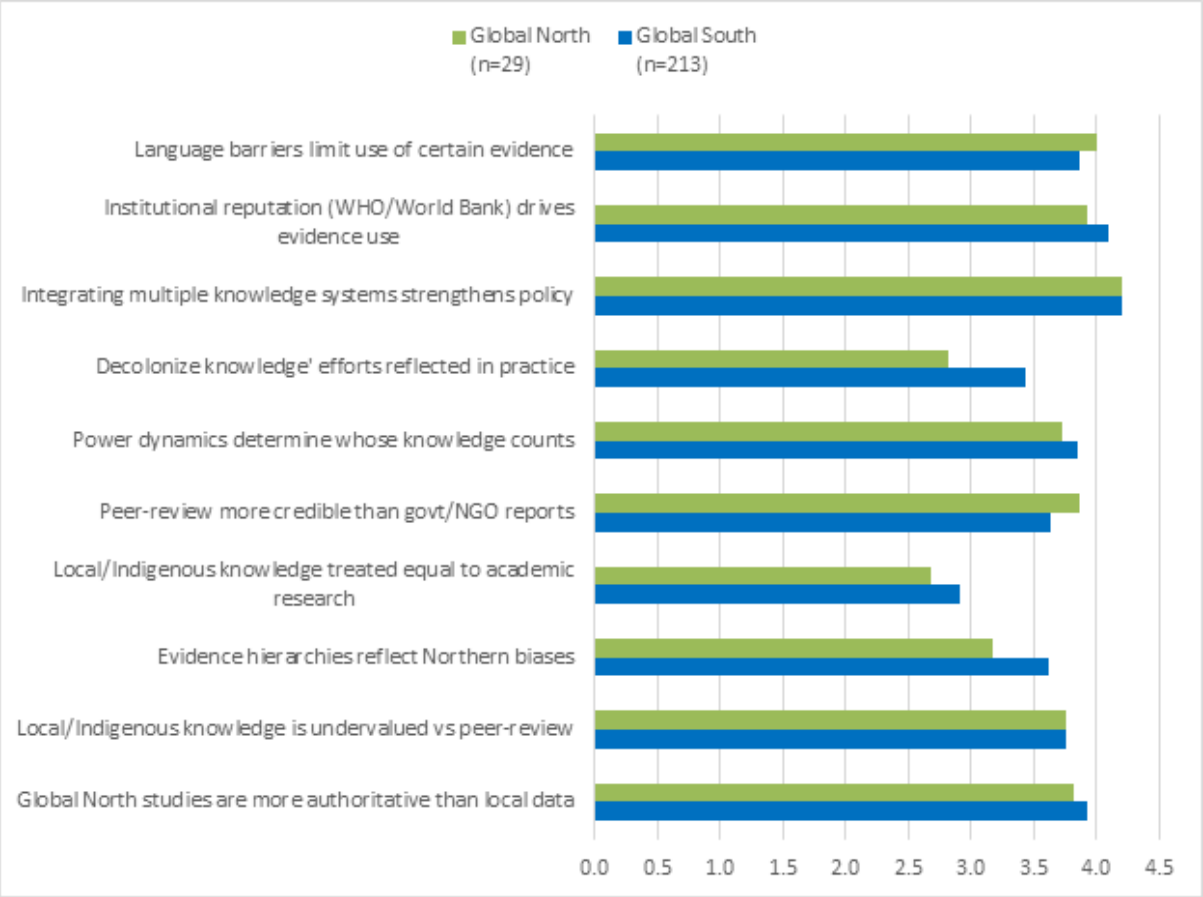


Figure 6: Context perception of evidence use

Figure 7 present participants' perceptions of evidence trust are broadly comparable across contexts. Approximately 69% of respondents in both the Global South and Global North consider peer-reviewed evidence more trustworthy than local, indigenous, or grey literature, while 48.4% of Global South respondents and 65.7% of Global North respondents report having ignored evidence because they distrusted its source. These findings indicate that although peer-reviewed literature enjoys widespread credibility, distrust in evidence sources remains a substantial barrier to evidence uptake, particularly within the Global North.

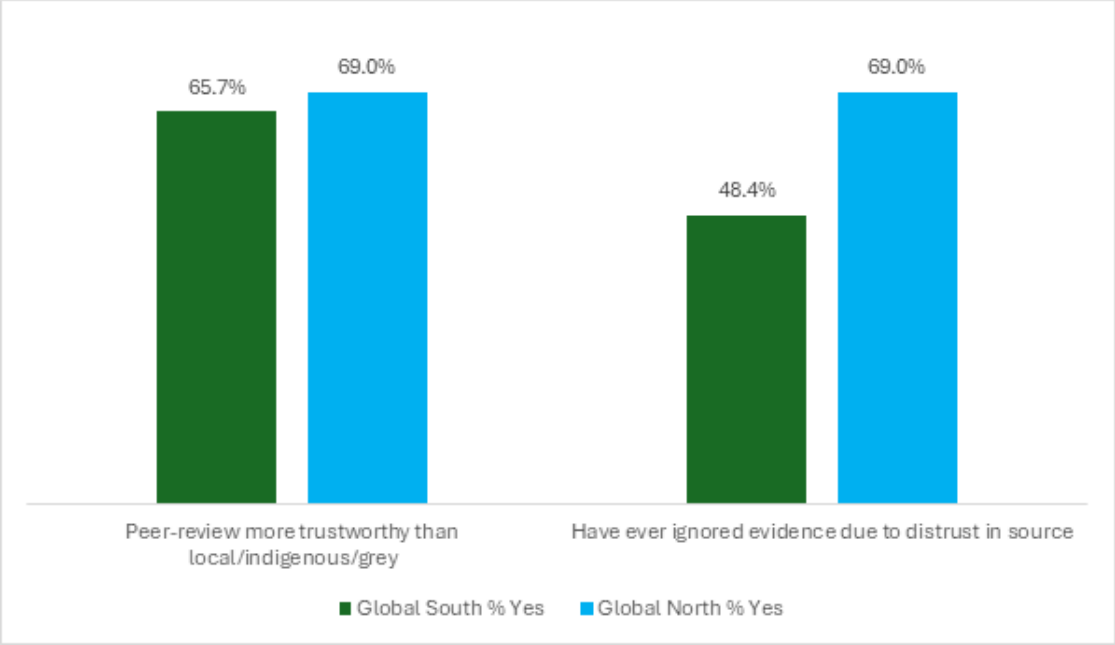


Figure 7: Trust within context on the use of evidence

The continued preference for peer-reviewed evidence reflects established evidence hierarchies documented in the literature (Adams et al., 2017; Nutley et al., 2012). However, the tendency to disregard evidence based on source credibility reinforces the argument that evidence use is governed by perceptions of legitimacy and trust rather than methodological quality alone (Cairney, 2016; Cash et al., 2003; Pawson et al., 2011). These findings underscore the need for evidence ecosystems that recognize high-quality grey literature and locally generated knowledge while strengthening institutional trust and transparent knowledge exchange (Adams et al., 2017; Reed et al., 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

This study suggests that trust is an important factor influencing evidence use within evidence ecosystems. Although respondents expressed strong support for the integration of scientific, local, and indigenous knowledge, the findings indicate that evidence is still perceived to be shaped by hierarchies that favor peer-reviewed research, Global North institutions, and highly reputed organizations. Respondents also identified institutional reputation, donor priorities, language barriers, and political considerations as important influences on what evidence is accepted and used.

While there is growing recognition of epistemic plurality and knowledge co-production among respondents, local and indigenous knowledge were still perceived as undervalued in decision-

making processes. Respondents from both the Global South and Global North acknowledged these hierarchies, although participants from the Global South reported experiencing their effects more strongly. Overall, these findings point to the potential value of fostering more inclusive and equitable evidence systems that strengthen trust, recognize diverse knowledge sources, and address structural barriers to evidence use and epistemic justice.

4.1. Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the evidence-informed policymaking literature by extending existing discussions of evidence use beyond methodological quality to explicitly consider the role of trust in shaping evidence legitimacy. The concepts of *trust asymmetry* and *trust equity* proposed in this paper offer a complementary theoretical lens for understanding why certain actors, institutions, and knowledge systems may receive greater epistemic legitimacy than others. While previous scholarship has highlighted the influence of credibility, legitimacy, and salience (Cash et al., 2003; Parkhurst, 2017), the findings of this study suggest that trust is unevenly distributed across evidence ecosystems and may represent one mechanism through which epistemic hierarchies are reproduced.

The concepts of *trust asymmetry* and *trust equity* proposed in this study provide an additional theoretical lens for examining how epistemic hierarchies may be created and maintained within evidence ecosystems. *Trust asymmetry* refers to the unequal distribution of confidence and legitimacy across different evidence producers and knowledge systems, whereby evidence generated by prestigious institutions or dominant knowledge traditions may be accepted more readily than equally relevant evidence produced by less recognized actors. Conversely, *trust equity* represents the conditions under which diverse knowledge producers are evaluated through fair, transparent, and context-sensitive processes.

By foregrounding trust as a relational and institutional process, this study contributes to understanding evidence use as more than a technical exercise involving evidence generation and uptake. Instead, the findings suggest that evidence legitimacy is shaped through interactions between knowledge producers, institutions, decision-makers, and communities. This perspective is consistent with broader scholarship on knowledge democracy and epistemic justice, which argues that power relations influence whose knowledge is produced, valued, and incorporated into decision-making processes.

4.2. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that strengthening evidence-informed policymaking may require a shift beyond the conventional focus on improving research quality or simply increasing the volume of evidence produced. Instead, the findings indicate that an important challenge is cultivating trust across diverse knowledge systems and reconsidering what counts as "valid" evidence in different policy contexts. Policymakers, research institutions, and development actors could therefore consider investing in participatory evidence generation and co-production approaches that bring together researchers, practitioners, and affected communities in the creation and validation of knowledge. Transparent validation processes, together with sustained engagement with local stakeholders, may help bridge the persistent divide between technical evidence and lived realities. In this sense, the findings support the view that evidence use is not merely a technical exercise but also a relational and political process shaped by credibility, legitimacy, and inclusion (Norström et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2014).

From a practice perspective, these findings suggest the value of institutional reforms that broaden the epistemic boundaries of evidence ecosystems. High-quality administrative data, practitioner insights, indigenous knowledge systems, and grey literature could be more systematically recognized alongside peer-reviewed research as legitimate inputs into decision-making processes, particularly in contexts where formal research is scarce or poorly aligned with local realities (Adams et al., 2017; Tezok et al., 2026). Achieving this would likely require not only methodological openness but also investments in institutional capacity to appraise and integrate multiple forms of evidence while avoiding the reinforcement of existing knowledge hierarchies. Similarly, reducing language barriers and strengthening intermediary roles that facilitate translation across knowledge systems may enhance the inclusivity and usability of evidence. More inclusive evidence ecosystems may, in turn, contribute to decisions that are not only technically robust but also more socially legitimate, contextually grounded, and broadly accepted by the communities they are intended to serve (Adams et al., 2017; Norström et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2014).

4.3. Implications for Evidence Synthesis and Knowledge Translation

The findings have implications for the future of evidence synthesis. Conventional evidence synthesis approaches have historically prioritized published academic literature, particularly English-language peer-reviewed studies indexed in major databases. While these approaches provide methodological rigor, they may also contribute to the underrepresentation of locally generated evidence, Indigenous knowledge, and non-English sources.

Evidence synthesis organizations could consider adopting more inclusive retrieval and appraisal strategies that recognize diverse evidence sources while maintaining methodological transparency. Potential approaches include expanding search strategies beyond dominant bibliographic databases, incorporating grey literature where appropriate, engaging local knowledge holders, and developing culturally responsive approaches to evidence interpretation. The findings also indicate that evidence synthesis may benefit from considering not only "what evidence exists?" but also "whose evidence is visible, trusted, and used?" Framing evidence synthesis in this way may help researchers better understand how methodological choices influence the visibility and use of different forms of knowledge and may contribute to ongoing efforts to reduce inequalities in knowledge production and access.

4.4. Implications for Global Knowledge Governance

This study highlights persistent structural inequalities within global knowledge governance systems. The continued prominence of Global North institutions, prestigious journals, and donor-defined research priorities may reinforce epistemic dependency and limit the recognition of locally generated knowledge. International funders, publishers, academic institutions, and research partnerships could therefore reconsider existing practices related to research agenda-setting, funding distribution, authorship recognition, publication standards, and evidence appraisal. More equitable partnerships may benefit from moving beyond extractive models of knowledge production toward approaches that support local leadership, institutional strengthening, and shared ownership of research processes.

Efforts to decolonize knowledge systems may benefit from focusing not only on increasing representation but also on examining the structures through which evidence gains legitimacy. Potential approaches include recognizing Indigenous and community knowledge systems, strengthening research capacity in low- and middle-income countries, supporting multilingual knowledge production, and promoting meaningful participation of Global South institutions in defining research priorities (Pratt & De Vries, 2023; Tezok et al., 2026; Waddington et al., 2012).

4.5. Capacity Strengthening and the Role of Evidence Intermediaries

The findings suggest that improving evidence use may require investment in individuals and institutions that facilitate knowledge exchange. Evidence ecosystems depend not only on researchers and policymakers but also on intermediaries who interpret, translate, and connect different forms of knowledge. Capacity strengthening initiatives could therefore extend beyond

technical skills in research methods and evidence synthesis to include competencies related to trust-building, stakeholder engagement, Indigenous knowledge integration, communication across cultural and linguistic contexts, and ethical approaches to knowledge sharing.

In many Global South settings, intermediary organizations may represent an important component of the infrastructure that supports evidence-informed policymaking. Supporting these organizations may help strengthen locally embedded mechanisms for evidence translation and may contribute to reducing institutional inequalities by enabling decision-making processes to draw on knowledge that is both globally recognized and locally relevant.

4.6. Study Limitations

Although this study provides important global insights into trust, evidence legitimacy, and knowledge use within evidence ecosystems, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, despite including respondents from multiple countries and sectors, the study was based on a relatively modest sample of 242 participants. Given the global scope of the research, this sample may not fully capture the diversity of experiences, institutional contexts, and cultural perspectives across different regions, particularly among underrepresented stakeholder groups. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than globally representative.

Second, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling strategies, which are appropriate for reaching specialized populations but may have introduced selection and network biases. Participants who are already engaged in evidence-informed policymaking or professional evidence networks may hold different perspectives from those who are less connected to such communities. In addition, the voluntary nature of participation may have resulted in self-selection bias, whereby individuals with stronger interests or opinions regarding evidence use were more likely to participate.

Third, the study relied primarily on cross-sectional, self-reported survey data. Although this approach enabled the collection of perspectives from a geographically diverse sample, it limits the ability to establish causal relationships between trust, evidence legitimacy, and evidence use. Furthermore, respondents' perceptions may have been influenced by recall bias, personal experiences, institutional culture, or social desirability bias, leading participants to report views that align with prevailing norms surrounding evidence-informed decision-making rather than actual organizational practices.

Fourth, while the study intentionally focused on quantitative evidence to identify broad patterns across evidence ecosystems, the absence of complementary qualitative methods limited the depth of contextual understanding. Interviews, focus groups, or case studies could have provided richer insights into why trust asymmetries emerge, how they are negotiated within institutions, and how contextual factors shape the acceptance or rejection of different forms of evidence. Future mixed-methods research would therefore strengthen understanding of the mechanisms underlying the patterns identified in this study.

Finally, although the survey captured perceptions across multiple stakeholder groups, it did not examine how trust and evidence legitimacy vary across specific policy sectors, governance systems, or cultural contexts. Nor did it directly assess actual policy decisions or institutional practices, relying instead on participants' perceptions of evidence use. Future research should therefore investigate how trust influences concrete policymaking processes, implementation outcomes, and knowledge translation across different sectors and geographical contexts. Comparative longitudinal studies would also help examine how trust in evidence evolves over time and in response to institutional reforms, capacity-strengthening initiatives, or changes in the broader evidence ecosystem.

Despite these limitations, the study provides one of the first empirical examinations of trust as a central determinant of evidence legitimacy across diverse evidence ecosystems. The findings offer a valuable foundation for future research aimed at developing more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive approaches to evidence-informed policymaking while advancing debates on epistemic justice, knowledge co-production, and global knowledge governance.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers applied and obtained ethical approval for this study from the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Effective Basic Services (eBASE) Africa, Bamenda, Cameroon (Registration Number: E43-58/L/MINSANTE/SF/DROS/CRC/NPN) under approval code: eBASE IRB protocol #002/April/2026Exp. The approval for data collection ranged between April 06th and May 30th, 2026, this study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for social science and public health research including respect for persons, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and responsible data management. Prior to conducting the survey, all participants were provided with a detailed participant information statement outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, the type of questions included, anticipated risks and benefits, and the intended use of study findings. Their

participation was entirely voluntary, and they could opt out at any time without notification or consequences.

Informed Consent

An electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were required to indicate their consent by selecting "I agree to participate" option before proceeding to the questionnaire and participants who selected "I do not agree" were automatically excluded from the survey and no data were collected from them. Consent for publication of anonymized responses was incorporated into the electronic consent process. To protect privacy and confidentiality, no personal; identifying information was collected. Given the study's focus on power relations, institutional trust, and epistemic inequalities, particular attention was paid to minimizing potential professional or reputational risks to participants.

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Authorship Contribution

E.A.W: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Data curation, Data analysis, Investigation, Validation, Project administration, Writing – original, writing – review and editing; **G.A.N.O**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original, writing – review and editing; **N.D.M:** Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original, Writing – review and editing, validation; **M.T.K:** Methodology, Data curation, Data analysis, Validation, Writing – original, Writing – review and editing; **A.M.E:** Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original, Writing – review and editing, validation; **K.O.T.T:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – original, Writing – review and editing; **T.A.T:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing; **N.M.Y:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, **P.M.R.H:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing , **N.B.Y:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing ,

and **M.P.O:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Project administration, Writing – original, writing – review and editing

Competing Interest

All authors declare no competing interest in the findings of the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used for analysis can be provided by the corresponding author upon a reasonable request.

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