

# **Critical perspectives on understanding scientific research uptake into South African policy-making<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The South African academy is committed to addressing topics and issues affecting the nation's well being (ASSAf, 2006). While translating scholarly research into policy is essential in achieving this goal, few have critically considered the processes and politics of doing so. This article finds a dominant perception among study respondents that some researchers have been coopted by policy-makers to serve political interests. Their research is perceived by them as flawed, yet it was used to inform amendment of the Immigration Act (2002) in 2014 and the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act (2013). This article argues that the uptake of scientific evidence on immigration and human trafficking into South African policy-making vacillates between marginal, none at all and expediency. Realising this, translated into practice, the emerging focus on "bridging the science-policy interface gap" to improve the efficacy of research uptake has generated an undue narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the South African policy processes. The article concludes that there is need to recognise and address the mistrust and polarisation among the research community.

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## Introduction

On 6 June 2016, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) former Chief Operations Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng gave an interview to Jacaranda FM<sup>2</sup>, defending his policy to show less violence on the national broadcaster's stations. He argued that, "I interact with the audience and it is clear that people do not want to see more violence as it leads to more violence". When challenged on the etiology of violence, he responded that, "I don't believe in scientific research." More recently, Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba made statements that; foreign nationals who are in Johannesburg without documentation are linked to criminal activity (*Mail & Guardian*, 7 December 2016). No evidence or data was produced to support these claims.

Demonstratively, the anti-intellectualism, anti-empirical bases of political discourse in South Africa and elsewhere in the world – some describe Donald Trump's campaign as creating a "fact free environment" – questions scientific knowledge's potential influence on policy-making. While scholars continue to carefully collect data, sometimes policy is made by people who show little concern with such matters. In Groote's words, "It's not just that [policy-makers] are dissembling the truth, it's that they are lying outright and getting away with it" (*Daily Maverick*, 7 June 2016). Indeed, South Africa, as elsewhere, has a number of political figures saying scientifically "untrue" statements.

The minimal use of existing scientific evidence in policy, debates and decision-making forms the point of departure for this article. Amid the global flurry of excitement surrounding evidence-based practice, the article considers critical challenges for research into immigration and human trafficking in South Africa. South Africa is a compelling case study because it is emblematic of a "southern" politics found mostly in new democracies where policy-making remains less technical in some areas. In comparison to more politically "advanced" or mature environments found in most parts of the "global-north", the country's civil society

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<sup>2</sup> See interview here: <https://www.jacarandafm.com/news-sport/news/hlaudi-motsoeneng-sabc-needs-serve-public/>

has limited policy expertise, the media often have limited background knowledge on the policy issues they are reporting on, and the public is less engaged on issues of policy-making, especially because there are limited (often elitist) public forums for citizens to question whether (the best) evidence has been used in decision-making. Overall, research and evidence are used by policy-makers and civil society in ad hoc and limited ways (Palmary and de Gruchy, 2016: 34), partly resulting in a policy apparatus that draws its legitimacy on mythology and symbolic political action.

This article argues that the uptake of scientific evidence on immigration and human trafficking into South African policy-making vacillates between minimal or marginal, none at all and expediency. Meanwhile, extant research uptake models and “Theories of Change” (Weiss, 1995; Bryne, 1998; Anderson, 1999; Marion, 1999; Hennink, 2005; Sanderson, 2006; Datta, 2012; Harvey et al., 2012; IDS, 2013; Valters, 2014; 2015) have a presumed kind of politics which conceives that policy-making institutions are primarily concerned with using the best scientific evidence. Yet, few have probed the extent and nature of this demand in relation to immigration and human trafficking.

## **Setting the scene**

This section intends to position the argument within existing studies; contextualizing the study and defining concepts used. The South African academy, like many others, is committed to addressing, “topics and issues that affect the well-being of the nation” (ASSAf, 2006: iii). At the 2006 Academy’s Double Symposium on the “Nature of Evidence” and “Science-based Advice for the Nation”, then Minister of Science and Technology, Mr M. Mangena made this role clear. He highlighted the importance of the symposium in, “exploring the urgency and growing importance of evidence as the basis for making informed policy and practical decisions across the world” (ASSAf, 2006: iii). Almost a decade later, in the fields of immigration and human trafficking, this commitment is far from being realised. Nonetheless, pressure by donors and “powerful voices” on researchers to produce and supply evidence for “pro-poor” policy development and implementation is increasing (Hammersley, 2005). Several scholars argue that,

without contemplating its relevance to society, social science is meaningless (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006: 109). From this perspective, its purpose is to help citizens and policy-makers understand the world better “with an eye to changing that world” (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006: 110).

Research uptake is one method of translating social science into “digestible” information for a vast and diverse audience including policy-makers, the public, scholars, and practitioners. In this article, it is the process whereby research findings enter the “domains” of intended and unintended multiple audiences (Boshoff, 2012). For many, the possibilities of positive policy outcomes are greatly enhanced when informed by scientific evidence. The potential of research to help improve policies and their outcomes is undeniable. However, due to the politics of evidence (Parkhurst, 2016), complexities of policy formation and implementation, it is also difficult to realise. This is compounded by limited understanding of why policy changes (Bennet and Howlett, 1992) and of the research-policy interface, particularly in low and middle income areas (Burris et al., 2011). Therefore, debates continue on which approaches to use in mediating the research-policy interface in low and middle income areas.

Those that have studied the uptake of some scientific research into policy-making have rightly observed that there is mistrust between researchers and policy-makers (Godfrey et al., 2010). For example, while the Ministry of Science and Technology uses science, technology and innovation (STI) advice from advisory bodies such as the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), there has been a challenge in getting STI researchers and advisors to work cordially with policy-makers, creating mistrust. As such, the knowledge brokering model has been proposed by Godfrey et al. (2010) for South Africa to establish stronger links, trusting interaction and dialogue between researchers and policy-makers. They argue for the need to stimulate an environment of evidence pull by the policy community from the research community to support the uptake of evidence into policy. These scholars have expressed confidence in the potential efficacy of “bridging the science-policy” interface gap by arguing that:

[...] current institutional arrangements in research institutions do little to bridge this gap between research and policy. A reason for this problem of policy-makers not using research to feed into the policy-making process is because the links between research and policy have not been sufficiently established. Uptake of research can only succeed if policy-makers and researchers work more closely together by means of established, regular and trusting interaction and dialogue. (Godfrey et al., 2010: 5).

They propose a model of knowledge brokering as an approach to address the problem of “unidirectional push” of evidence by researchers to policy-makers. The model looks at the need to build, “institutional mechanisms, such as knowledge-brokering offices, both within research organisations and government departments”. It also highlights, the need for researchers to involve policy-makers from the onset of their research process, “with a continuous dialogue between the two parties, both during and after the research, as a means of increasing the likelihood of research uptake”.

## **Methodological issues**

Methodologically, this article is based on a one-year qualitative study. The approach taken was exploratory, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect data. Interviews were conducted with twelve professionals (researchers and practitioners) working on immigration and human trafficking issues in South Africa. The strategy was complemented by interviewing two key informants. The small sample had a number of limitations, but it provided findings that can be used as a basis to inform future large-scale data-collection and analyses (see Dargouth et al., 2006).

Participants were mainly asked about their experiences engaging with immigration and human trafficking policy-makers on the Immigration Act Amendments (IAA) (2014) and Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act (TIP) (2013) using scientific evidence. Through open coding, the direct quotes from the interviews were used as a source of raw data (Patton, 1980) and analysed thematically. The similar responses from the chosen sample were

taken to suggest a coherence of views and saturation in data. The empirical data collection was complemented by a literature review and analysis of existing policies.

For ethical purposes, all interviews were conducted with written informed consent. Ethical clearance (Protocol number H15/07/53) was provided by the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical).

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Selective uptake: Marginal, expedient or none at all**

A majority of this study's participants alleged that South Africa's landscape of populist politics had created a fact-free policy environment for immigration and human trafficking. However, the dominant view was that, because of increasing demands to show that evidence had been used in policy-making, policy-makers resorted to ideological reasoning not amenable to *robust* scientific critique. In their view, concerns of national interests and populism had subverted transparent uptake of scientific evidence into policy-making. There was thus a perception among respondents that some researchers working on immigration and human trafficking had been coopted by politicians, which created mistrust among the research community.

Respondents stated that their evidence, which they felt did not suit the interests of those in power, was either totally ignored, used minimally or expediently. Therefore, there were variations in this perception. Some actors saw themselves and their research as entirely marginalized (ignored) from South Africa's human trafficking policy process towards TIP. As one researcher opined:

*I think trafficking is a good example where policy-makers ignore the evidence and rather focus on the sensationalism and the severity of trafficking to extrapolate and make it as if it's a big problem whereas it's not. [...] It's clear from the type of workshops that the Department of Social Development*

*would have with the National Prosecuting Authority, and the policy and law response that they have towards trafficking is based in the understanding that trafficking is a major problem. And a group of research, which ACMS<sup>2</sup> is a lead on shows, that trafficking is not a major problem. That is ignored.*

The above respondent felt overtly excluded from the drafting of TIP, whereas others, not entirely. For instance, another respondent also involved in TIP opined:

*It's a process really of compromise, isn't it? You've got a number of submissions, some making similar points, some making quite different contradictory points, and then it's up to the [parliamentary] sub-committee to decide what they want with that. Some of our submissions and recommendations, the points we made during submissions, were taken up and did result to the changes in legislation, others not [...] in the Act that now exists.*

This response suggests some form of inclusion. But, it also portrays an expression of frustration that not all of the researcher's submissions and recommendations were taken. By suggesting minimal use of evidence, this contrasts markedly to the first respondent's views of exclusion.

Others argued that there was ambiguity in the demand for evidence by policy-makers. They described the demand for evidence as ever-present, but its use as expedient and selective. As one respondent argued in reference to immigration:

*[...] they possibly don't [use evidence]. They don't, but they demand it at the same time. So if you say anything, they will ask you, you know, "Numbers! Where, how many, where is the evidence?" But at the same time if you produce them they wiggle out a bit. [...] They demand it but at the same time they are able to disregard it if it's not what they want to see. So it's a funny situation in that sense.*

Considering the above response, it is plausible to say that there is another perception that scientific evidence was instrumentally exploited to serve the interests of power.

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<sup>2</sup> ACMS is the African Centre for Migration & Society, a research institute that generates empirical research on migration issues at Wits University, Johannesburg. Through its research, it was also involved in challenging the dominant trafficking discourse at the time.

In sum, these responses suggest that research uptake into immigration and human trafficking policy-making vacillated between minimal or marginal, none at all and expediency. Research uptake on these issues was largely seen by respondents as window-dressing that served political objectives.

### **Positionality: “insiders by choice” and “outsiders by delegation”**

Essentially, respondents identified their positionality in the policy process and polity as critical to the efficacy of their research uptake. The politics of inclusion-exclusion (already mentioned above) were contingent on institutional positioning within the knowledge production system. The research actors I interviewed identified themselves as possessing the best scientific evidence at the time of TIP and IAA, in contrast to other actors positioned differently, whom they saw as dubious and coopted. There appeared to be some divisions in the research community and suspicions of each other’s data.

Respondents perceived themselves as “outsider by delegation”. They argued that policy- and decision-making on TIP and IAA drew on dominant stereotypical positions, moral panic and mythologised ideas enforced by the views of important constituents and “unscientific” data generated by “other” researchers who were coopted; whom they saw as “insiders by choice”. There was constant querying of methodologies these “insider” researchers used and the validity of their data.

In the first case, respondents saw their own research methodologies as superior than those used to inform (TIP). In this section, the study complemented interviews with desktop research that was done to substantiate and contextualise some of these claims. For example, in 2005, the study found that the Molo Songololo delegation provided recommendations which argued that human trafficking was increasing in South Africa, with 30,000 persons trafficked in a year. Molo Songololo argued that one of the root causes of the supposed increase in human trafficking was that border controls had been relaxed.<sup>3</sup> Also, the Human

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<sup>3</sup> These recommendations were presented to the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women Joint Monitoring Committee meeting on Human Trafficking

Science Research Council's (HSRC) Tsireledzani Report (2010) (rubbed by one respondent as "a shocking piece of work") commissioned by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) produced similarly "controversial" findings based on what my respondents felt were flawed methodologies and over-generalisations. Molo Songololo and HSRC were accused of colluding with the Department of Home Affairs' (DHA) migration policy unit and the NPA by way of producing "falsified" and "inflated" numbers of trafficked children per year, which they presented as 30,000 based on the "evidence". One respondent stated:

*The research was based on somewhat anecdotal research and it followed the pattern of interviewing NGOs that had been working with victims of trafficking in one way or another and trying to determine the extent of trafficking from that, which seemed to be a major methodological flaw.*

The following respondent claimed that she had conducted mixed-methods research from 2006 to 2008 to understand the extent and nature of human trafficking in South Africa. She stated:

*We interviewed brothel owners. We interviewed sex workers both on the street and working indoors and, you know, in all different parts of the sector, and then we also did a survey of sex workers in indoors and outdoors, and we made a distinction between those two areas. And what we found was that there was very much less evidence of human trafficking than had been suggested by previous reports.*

Again, there appeared to be some superiority-complex in how the respondent perceived her methodology compared to the likes of Molo Songololo and HSRC. Yet, because of positionality in the polity, the latter's research was seen as more influential.

Labelling was identified as a strategy that the TIP policy-makers used to ostracise researcher who stated that they were often labelled "trafficking denialists". One researcher who proactively challenged these numbers at the time - through academic papers and policy roundtables - confided:

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in 2005. The minutes can be found on: <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/5286/>

*There were outcries..... Often from us. So much so that IOM wrote about us as trafficking denialists in their "Eye on Trafficking" report.*

In the second case, research uptake into immigration policy-making also appeared to share similar characteristics in as far as the respondents were concerned. Policy-makers were accused of typically quoting the HSRC's (1995) "flawed" and "inflated" statistics on immigration to inform IAA, long after they were discredited and disproved by the HSRC itself. Based on the HSRC's report, policy-makers had for example argued that there were 5,000,000 foreign migrants in South Africa. According to my respondents, these numbers, which were published in 1995 but officially withdrawn in 2001, continue to be cited by policy-makers until today. Like the case with trafficking, respondents expressed some superiority of their methods over the HSRC's methods, yet, they alleged, the HSRC received no critique from government or policy-makers.

Despite what another respondent described as "good level research" showing the positive economic benefits of international migration to South Africa, there was consensus that South Africa's IAA did not adequately harness and maximise the potential benefits of migration to national and regional development. Rather than regional development and human rights, there was a view that concerns about economic and physical security dominated policy-making. One respondent was concerned with this development, as he stated:

*You could at the moment mount whatever argument you like about the economic benefit of refugees in South Africa. [...] You could argue that very strenuously but you are arguing it to a government elements of whom I would say probably carry a fair bit of prejudice or even racism. [...] You are not dealing with a rational process.*

The issue of alleged racism was not peculiar to this respondent only. Race was also cited as a critical determinant that positioned researchers on these issues differently when presenting their findings to policy-makers; also creating mistrust. Given South Africa's history of racial segregation, one white respondent made reference to race-identity politics in South Africa's parliament; a key policy-making institution. In her view:

*[...] where research is being presented by highly educated white people it's heard in a particular way. And that's just how it is [...]. We need to understand what we represent and how sometimes what we represent is quite unpalatable.*

This also brought to the fore the issue of institutional xenophobia in which policy-makers were purported to portray refugees and asylum seekers as “stealing” jobs from “indigenous” locals. One respondent stated that, prompted by scapegoating, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) drafted amendments to the Refugees Act (No. 130 of 1998) in a new White Paper on International Migration (2015). As she explained:

*[...] one of the amendments limits and makes it practically impossible for an asylum seeker to work in the informal sector or piecework, or anything other than totally formal employment. So in that sense, they are trying to change policy to solve a problem that doesn't exist because there isn't a problem. [...] It's a xenophobic perception that people have. So they are responding to crudely what the voters are saying that, “they come in, they take our jobs” rather than actually looking at the evidence of what is going on.*

Overall, the positionality of researchers within the polity emerged as crucial to their potential for influence. Drawing on their experiences, respondents perceived themselves as “outsiders by delegation”, while they identified other research actors as coopted “insiders by choice”. Overall, this suggested that there was polarisation in the research community prompted by policy-makers and politicians' attitude towards some scientific evidence.

## **Discussion**

The respondents perceived the existence of a “doxa” of prejudice, racism and exclusion that overlooked some scientific evidence in policy-making, while coopting some researchers. Two key mechanisms for this were identified. First, where the research of the respondents was used, there was a perception that this was done marginally or selectively to create the impression of balanced evidence-based decision-making. Second, in a convenient inclusion-exclusion of sorts, respondents perceived that, closely “aligned” actors were given more legitimacy in the policy arena than them, a ploy that worked to strengthen those actors' political voice and chances of being heard by positioning them strategically in the

policy process. Policy-makers were thus seen as using these actors' "false" evidence in a bid to discredit and undermine the authenticity of their scientific evidence. Overall, respondents saw emphasis as being placed on reforms that served the interests of important political players and expedient outcomes.

These perceptions suggesting a politics of evidence are not surprising because they are backed up by existing literature. Existing research shows that international migration in South Africa is far less significant than many South African policy-makers suggest (5 million) (Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP), 2010: 2). According to Statistics South Africa (2011), an estimated 3.3% of the country's population was born outside of the country, while internal migration is far more significant than international migration (Polzer, 2010; Crush; 2011) as an estimated 7% of the total population is internal migrants (Moultrie et al., 2016). FMSP (2010) extrapolated census data and found that the overall foreign population (documented and undocumented respectively) is likely 1.6 and 2 million; 3-4 per cent of the total population. South Africa's last census then found that there were 2,199,871 international migrants in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2011) while Statistics South Africa (2012) found the total number of documented migrants to be 142,833.

Likewise, Molo Songololo's (2000) research suggesting numbers of up to 30, 000 trafficked per year has also been dismissed as an unsound basis for policy-making and resource allocation in the literature (Gould, 2008: 84). According to the literature, in 2010, the International Organisation on Migration (IOM), one of the lead organisations on the issue, had dealt with only 300 cases of human trafficking in Southern Africa from 2004 (Gould et al., 2010). There was no substantive or valid evidence that South Africa was a significant destination or transit country for international trafficking at the time of TIP (see FMSP 2010; Gould et al., 2010).

The immigration numbers of 5 million were more aligned with the government's interests of constructing images of an "immigration crisis" and a "Human Tsunami" (Danso and McDonald, 2001; FMSP and Musina Legal Advice Office, 2007). Likewise, the inflation of numbers of trafficked persons was meant to

conflate trafficking with sex work, drawing on mythology and moral panic (Cohen, 1972) to present the issue as a threat to the group (Brennan, 2008; Palmary and de Gruchy, 2016). These findings are not peculiar to South Africa. Policy- and decision- makers the world over can create the “problems” they wish to address and “solve” them by simply declaring them existent and solved (Elder and Cobb, 1983: 24). Both cases can be explained by Cohen (1972) who notes that, politicians, policy-makers and the media are often complicit in creating moral panic by identifying a particular condition, episode, person or group as posing a threat to basic societal values and interests. In their study, Freemantle and Misago (2014) have already established this to be valid for South Africa. Consistent with Edelman’s (1985) argument, they find that political scapegoating about immigration and human trafficking in South Africa has won the acquiescence of those whose lasting support is needed. This has contributed to the organisation of the “group” in throwing up “leaders of opinion” responsible for the taking of political decisions (Cohen, 1976: 77).

The predominance of the belief among respondents that policy-makers may use “false” or unscientific evidence is not peculiar to this study and has been explained at length by Sharman and Holmes (2010). In the interests of retaining rather than refining the exercise of power (see Majone, 1989 cited in Pawson, 2006: 4), Coory (2004) and Court and Young (2013: 13) have found that policy-makers sometimes “tailor” evidence to suit their agendas, while serving the demands of political pressure. By rationalising the research product, whatever it may be, the “untrue” may be faithfully deployed by policy-makers to assuage constructed anxieties and to reassure the public that a “problem” has been resolved by parading the resulting policy as a responsible one (Elder and Cobb, 1983).

Also, the positionality of research actors, by choice or delegation affects “whose justice” and “rationality” has primacy and who become “winners and losers” (March and Olsen, 2006). Responses suggesting underlying suspicions of research into immigration and human trafficking that challenges the status quo illustrate Delany-Moretlwe et al.’s (2011) finding that policy-makers may ostracise researchers as villains. The view that research presented by highly educated white

people is “heard in a particular way” resonates with Delany-Moretlwe et al. (2011) who argue that South Africa’s apartheid history left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust in research and evidence.

Ultimately, the responses suggest that when “tailor-made” evidence fails to elicit strong support (or for other reasons), Bourdieu’s (2000: 112) argument follows: policy-makers do not “answer one scientific fact with another scientific fact” but resort to the use of myths. Bourdieu (2000: 112) describes this phenomenon as, the importation of “non-specific weapons”, especially political or economic ones, into the “internal struggles for political legitimacy”. Brought together, the marginal use of evidence and the use of “false” research and myths reproduces a kind of political life in which symbols, ritual, ceremony and myth assume eminence over scientific evidence in policy-making (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; March and Olsen, 1984; 2006). “Problem-solving” through symbolic political action then bears false testimony to responsibility and evidence-based practice.

## **Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, the findings of this study have demonstrated a perception among respondents that the immigration and human trafficking policy fields are not sufficiently autonomous for their research. Policy-makers are portrayed as co-opting some researchers to generate expedient knowledge that serves political interests. This is what makes this study a unique contribution; that, in addition to the studies emphasising the need to bridge the science-policy gap (Godfrey et al., 2010), it finds divisions within the research community itself that also need to be addressed.

Going forward, the study acknowledges that the knowledge-brokering model (Godfrey et al., 2010) is indeed persuasive. Yet, in light of this study, it is incomplete to conclude that the problem is the lack of established links or continuous dialogue between researchers and policy-makers only. While links,

trust and continuous dialogue are important and need strengthening, this perspective alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the policy process. In South Africa, technocratic policy- and decision-making on issues of immigration and human trafficking is the exception, not the norm. Therefore, the political will of South Africa's policy-makers to "work more closely together" with the *entire* research community and use their evidence to adopt and prioritise evidence-based practice on these issues over the years is questionable. Instead, policy-making on immigration and human trafficking has been characterised by symbolic political action, mythology and the delegitimation of other research actors.

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### **Appendices**

Interview with Remy, Research and Advocacy Director, Johannesburg, 29-09-2015.

Interview with Alex, Senior Researcher, Pretoria, 17-08-2015.

Interview with Donovan, Research Coordinator, Pretoria, 7-12-2015.

Personal communication, email, 9-11-2015.

Interview with Jane, Senior Researcher, Cape Town, 9-12-2015.

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