



**‘We have the research but where is the influence?’  
Constraints and opportunities for evidence-based  
policy impact in South Africa**

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April 2018

Working Paper 52

## Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the South African Research Chair in Mobility and the Politics of Difference and the Migration and Health Project Southern Africa at the African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand in funding this research. Special thanks goes to Wendy Landau, Loren Landau, Kate Hawkins and Dorte Thorsen for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

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This is an output from a project funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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## **Abstract**

Research can generate evidence that can make a vital difference if utilised in decision-making, and policy or civil society practice. However, despite a considerable amount of optimism about research uptake in the Global South, little is known about the interface between research and policy in these settings. While campaigns or resistance on populist or popular causes in developing, post-colonial countries have frequently been recorded and investigated, negligible investigation has been done on how change on marginalised, 'unpopular' or contentious policy issues is effected using research evidence. This paper explores the research uptake and advocacy experiences of researchers and activists working on three unpopular and politically contentious causes; immigration, human trafficking and sex work - in a post-colonial context of South Africa. It finds little evidence that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents. The paper argues that notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap that are gaining prominence in the recent literature are all important, but these alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the policy processes on these three issues. Technocratic policy and decision-making on these issues is currently the exception, not the norm because there is a lack of political will, which ties into the potential of an issue's unpopularity to antagonise and fragment different constituencies and ethnic groups that politicians and policy makers represent. The paper concludes with a call for a two tier research methodology that complements a research project and advocacy campaign's substantive research or activities with a parallel study of the particular issue's policy processes bearing into mind environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion, obstacles and who can be mobilised.

## Executive Summary

As other case studies and arguments have shown, research can generate evidence that can make a vital difference if utilised in decision-making, and policy or civil society practice. Many funders believe the likelihood of positive outcomes is greatly enhanced when decisions or practices have been informed by scientific evidence. However, despite a considerable amount of optimism about research uptake in the Global South, little is known about the interface between research and policy in these settings. The majority of investigations of research uptake have considered cases in industrialised democracies. While campaigns or resistance on populist or popular causes in developing, post-colonial countries have frequently been recorded and investigated, negligible investigation has been done on how change on marginalised, 'unpopular' or contentious policy issues is effected using research evidence. This paper explores the research uptake and advocacy experiences of researchers and activists working on three unpopular and politically contentious causes; immigration, human trafficking and sex work - in a post-colonial context of South Africa. To a lesser extent, it draws parallels from other Southern contexts using key informant interviews and existing literature in order to show that their experiences are not unique to South Africa.

The paper is based on 12 months of desktop and original exploratory empirical research with researchers and activists working in Johannesburg and Cape Town; key informant interviews; and a review of published case study material from elsewhere. Drawing on the responses of researchers and activists, it explores how a significant supply of unpopular causes scientific research to policy makers, through research uptake and advocacy work, has failed to result in evidence-based policy making by the South African state. Indeed, while the power of evidence to transform policy through research translation remains possible, there is little evidence to date that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents in South Africa when it comes to these issues. In light of the findings, the relevance of using existing research uptake best practices that are mechanical or blue prints without adequately responding to the needs of the operating environment is questioned. Indeed, the models and approaches suited for popular, mainstream development issues may not be suited for unpopular causes. Notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap that are gaining prominence in the recent literature (see Godfrey et al., 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Langer et al., 2015 for e.g.) are all important, but these alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the

migration, sex work and human trafficking policy processes. The South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy. Therefore, this highlights that technocratic policy and decision-making on these issues is currently the exception, not the norm not solely because there is a lack of capacity, but lack of political will, which ties into the potential of an issue's unpopularity to antagonise and fragment different constituencies and ethnic groups that politicians and policy makers represent.

However, the paper warns that one must avoid taking too static a view. The unpopularity of these causes is dynamic and depends on the political rhetoric of the day. Because the African National Congress (ANC) is embattled and these issues are predominantly unpopular because of various gender and moral values attached to them by locals, the political will of policy makers to use evidence that promotes these groups is indeed today questionable. But this might not be the case a few years or a decade from now. Therefore, in light of this dynamism, the paper suggests that funders, researchers, and civil society organisations have a responsibility to constantly (re) organise and (re) mobilise themselves effectively with a full understanding of local contexts to influence the use of empirical research outputs towards achieving shared goals of pro-poor outcomes and social justice. When doing research and advocacy work, these actors need to understand each policy sphere within its own set of interests, opportunities and actors. This requires a two tier research methodology that complements a research project and advocacy campaign's substantive research or activities with a parallel study of the particular issue's policy processes bearing into mind environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion, obstacles and who can be mobilised. I provide an example of how this can be done in this paper. For example, respondents [or research participants] suggest that there might be value in working in partnerships, networks and alliances and adopting a 'nothing about us, without us' approach when doing and communicating research on the three unpopular causes studied. Such insights that draw on empirically studying issue politics and policy making should then influence how researchers and activists try to influence the policy process. Only by complementing specialised technical knowledge with a more holistic reading of political processes and logics can we hope to heighten our influence on policy making in South Africa, or elsewhere.

## Introduction

Since the early 90s, there has been a growing interest by funders, governments and civil society in the uptake, use and impact of scientific research. 'Evidence-based policy' and 'research uptake' have recently become buzzwords in various research and policy fields (Hammersley, 2005). Increasingly, research uptake is now a priority in many research programmes and a condition of many grants (Delany-Moretlwe et al., 2011). For example, the United Kingdom Department for International Development (UK DFID) funded projects and consortia envisage evidence-based policy making as achievable by investing a minimum of 10 per cent of total research budget allocations towards research uptake in the work of DFID Research Programme Consortia (Theobald et al., 2011). Other donors have adopted similar policies. While campaigns or resistance on populist or popular causes in developing countries have frequently been recorded and investigated, negligible investigation has been done on how change on marginalised, 'unpopular' or contentious policy issues is effected using research evidence. Indeed, the unpopularity of any cause is dynamic and depends on the political rhetoric of the day. Therefore, in this paper, an unpopular cause is conceptualised as dynamic and evolving in the sense that it is an issue which is perceived to threaten powerful interests or commonly held perceptions within a society or is currently on the policy agenda but is not a major point of deliberation or debate because of weak interests at the time (Vanyoro, 2015).

Many funders, seduced by almost mechanistic models of production and consumption, insist more frequently on measuring the impact of commissioned research than they did in the past (Hammersley, 2005). In this paper, funders are treated as one group because while the politics of funders are interesting and of relevance in many contexts, paying attention to the aspect of funder diversity and heterogeneity could undermine the focus on the use of empirical findings in South Africa. Indeed, many research uptake strategies are informed by the experiences of scholars and lobbyists in Europe, Australia and North America. Global research consortia and partnerships have become commonplace. Despite a considerable amount of optimism that has been argued and expressed surrounding research uptake in the Global South, there has been surprisingly little empirical or theoretical analysis on the research-policy interface in politically sensitive, less resourced, low and middle-income countries and with regard to politically contentious unpopular causes such as migration, human trafficking and sex work. The majority of investigations of research uptake have either considered cases in industrialised democracies or other popular, mainstream development policy domains such as health, science and technology and the environment.

For example, in South Africa, 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. Godfrey et al. (2010) propose a model of knowledge brokering, reminiscent of Syed et al.'s (2013) work in Pakistan which refines the framework of knowledge brokering as a means to promote evidence-based urban health policy. Godfrey et al. (2010) argue for the need to establish stronger links, trusting interaction and dialogue between researchers and policy makers. They coin 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, expressing confidence in the potential efficacy of 'bridging the science-policy' interface gap. They also propose a model of knowledge brokering as an approach to address the problem of 'unidirectional push' of evidence by researchers to policy makers. Their model looks at the need to build, institutional mechanisms, such as knowledge brokering offices, both within research organisations and government departments. Likewise, recognising that most initiatives over the last decade have focused on 'push activities', that is, increasing the capacity to supply research evidence, Langer et al. (2015) use a case study of South Africa and Malawi to propose a theory of change that focuses on improving the crucial capacities and incentives for decision-makers to engage with research evidence.

The relevance of using these existing research uptake best practices that are mechanical or blue prints without adequately responding to the needs of the operating environment and issue particularities is questionable. Indeed, the models and approaches suited for popular, mainstream development issues which usually attract positive policy traction may not be suited for unpopular causes. While the power of evidence to transform policy through research translation remains possible, there is little evidence to date that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents in South Africa when it comes to unpopular causes. Notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap that are gaining prominence in the recent literature (see Godfrey et al., 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Langer et al., 2015 for e.g.) are all important, but these alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the migration, sex work and human trafficking policy processes. The South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy (Luiz, 2002; Albertyn, 2003), more especially on particular

marginalised, unpopular issues. Technocratic policy and decision-making on these issues is currently the exception, not the norm. But this is not solely because there is a lack of capacity, but rather a lack of political will which ties into the potential of an issue's unpopularity to antagonise and fragment different constituencies and ethnic groups that politicians and policy makers represent.

The study proposes that, when doing research and advocacy work, funders, researchers, and civil society organisations need to understand each policy sphere within its own set of interests, opportunities and actors. This requires a two tier research methodology that complements a research project and advocacy campaign's substantive research or activities with a parallel study of the particular issue's policy processes bearing into mind environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion, obstacles and who can be mobilised. I provide an example of how this can be done in this paper. For example, respondents [or research participants] suggest that there might be value in working in partnerships, networks and alliances and adopting a 'nothing about us, without us' approach when doing and communicating research on the three unpopular causes studied. Such insights that draw on empirically studying issue politics and policy making should then influence how researchers and activists try to influence the policy process. Only by complementing specialised technical knowledge with a more holistic reading of political processes and logics can we hope to heighten our influence on policy making in South Africa, or elsewhere.

One of the few exploratory studies of this kind, this paper documents and thematically analyses some of the challenges, successes and opportunities for policy influence on unpopular policy issues in South Africa; a country where politics is highly contested. It does so by using multiple targeted interviews with civil society and think tank<sup>1</sup> professionals (activists and researchers respectively) who engage with policy processes using scientific evidence. The experiences of civil society and think tank professionals will vary with academics working within university departments because the former actors specifically focus on research uptake on particular issues and proactively act as knowledge brokers between the academy and policy makers, particularly when working on research grants that compel them to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> "A think tank or policy institute, research institute, etc. is an organisation that performs research and advocacy concerning topics such as social policy, political strategy, economics, military, technology, and culture." – Wikipedia. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think\\_tank](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think_tank), accessed 27 April 2016.



Moreover, the inclusion of activists in the sample adds a different dimension to the findings and the dominant literature on research uptake which tends to focus on researchers only. Predominantly, the study uses interview data from South Africa, and to a lesser extent, it draws parallels from other contexts and existing literature in order to show that these are not unique to South Africa.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the study and its background, and explains its methods. The second section presents the key findings of this study that relate to constraints to research uptake and advocacy work identified by participants. The third section presents the key findings about strategies, opportunities and levers for influence against prevailing hindrances. Finally, the paper consolidates the key findings into concluding remarks.

## **Background to the study**

On 27 April 1994, South Africa held its first, non-racial, democratic elections. The African National Congress (ANC), led by Nelson Mandela, captured 252 of the 400 seats in the National Assembly, falling two seats short of the two-thirds majority needed to effect unilateral constitutional change. On May 9 1994, the National Assembly unanimously elected Nelson Mandela president, while Thabo Mbeki and F.W. de Klerk became deputy presidents. This democratic government inherited a discriminatory socio-economic system and a disorganised politico-administrative system, which meant mounting pressure on it to deliver an improved quality of life for all (Luiz, 2002). But today, following the protracted exit of embattled former president Jacob Zuma, rampant corruption and allegations of 'state capture', South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. While South Africa is frequently listed as one of the most developed countries on the continent, it also has one of the highest inequality gaps (based on its GINI co-efficient) in the world. Although gender equality is an important aspect in the government's rhetoric, there is a disjuncture between the gains of women in the public sphere and their daily lives as indicated by increasing levels of poverty, gender-based violence, and HIV infection among women (Albertyn, 2003). Also, despite having democratically elected local, provincial and national governments, one political party has been in power at the national level for 22 years since the first democratic elections in 1994. Even though civil society in South Africa is vibrant and diverse (Habib, 2003) and thereby plays a key role in promoting democratic and constitutional practices, nuanced shades of political repression can be found in how political opposition and public participation are stifled

in democratic institutions like parliament or in attempts to curtail the media or access to information.

The post-apartheid South African state inherited weak state organs which were confronting a creation of the apartheid era: a highly mobilised and politicised civil society (Luiz, 2002). Today, the state is not in control of certain pockets of society including crime in Gauteng, ongoing corruption, and maladministration in various provincial governments (Luiz, 2002). While the South African state is characterised by huge bureaucracy and formalism, it is simultaneously emblematic of a post-colonial politics found mostly in new democracies where huge social needs, which are accompanied by limited state capability, lead to policy making that is paternalistic, stage-managed and top-down (Wenzel, 2007). Participation in the country's policy processes is narrowed to consultation or simply information dissemination and propaganda (Wenzel, 2007). In comparison to older democracies found in most parts of the Global North, the media often have an uncritical and unanalytical knowledge of the issues, particularly due to poor education on unpopular policy matters accompanied by little incentive to gain any (Danso and McDonald, 2001; Vanyoro and Ncube, 2018). As a result, immigrants as well as citizens are uninformed and less engaged on issues of policy making because of concerted political centralisation (see Heller, 2001; Buccus et al. 2008).

Bernstein (1995) argues that because of the nature of the struggle against apartheid, morality and intentions became a much larger part of the public policy debate than is desirable. Essentially, due to the idea of nation-building which underscores the need for most South Africans to agree on broad national goals, values and accept their common citizenship of the same country, certain value systems also play a significant role in policy making. Luiz (2002) argues that the South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy. Government is politically fragmented, representing different constituencies and ethnic groups, and, as a result its political will is also fragmented (Luiz, 2002). On the one hand, party dominance by the ANC since 1994, at a national level, has so far contributed to limited political incentive for policy makers to use evidence in justifying policy decisions. On the other, in the wake of a landscape of increasingly competitive politics characterised by a government that is insecure of losing the popular vote – which has already started to happen at a local level - the space for informed policy debate and rational engagement is narrowing. Overall, research and evidence is 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 (Jansen, 2002; Palmary and de Gruchy, 2016; Vanyoro, 2015). One consequence, and illustration, of this narrowing of policy discussion spaces has been the recourse both by non-profit organisations and political parties to the South African courts system to establish decisive interpretations of the constitution or particular legislation, or to direct the national or provincial governments to implement particular sections of the constitution or key acts related to an issue.

While not overtly repressive, a predominantly populist political landscape is increasingly reducing the spaces and opportunities for consideration of the policy implications of empirical research, or for responsiveness to advocacy campaigns. The overt shift to anti-empirical rhetoric is striking. On 6 June 2016, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) former Chief Operations Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng gave an interview to Jacaranda FM, 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: 'I don't believe in scientific research'. More recently, Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba made statements that; undocumented foreign nationals living in Johannesburg are linked to criminal activity (*Mail & Guardian*, 7 December 2016). No evidence or data was produced to support these claims. This anti-intellectualism, anti-empirical basis of political discourse in South Africa demonstrates that, 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 [South African policy makers] are dissembling the truth, it's that they are lying outright and getting away with it' (*Daily Maverick*, 7 June 2016).

The South African academy, like many others, has taken a principled stance against 'alternative facts'. It 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, 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).

## **Methodology**

This study set out to establish the role and place of evidence in a country like South Africa where the maturity of the policy apparatus is low and the resilience of political institutions is fragile or defensive of existing political ideologies and how this is mediated by contextual, institutional and issue particularities. Probing this required the use of a qualitative research design. This study is thus based on 12 months of qualitative research undertaken from February 2015 to March 2016. The first step of the research involved carrying out a literature review. This review explored prominent debates relevant to the study. Literature was gathered from searches of the University of the Witwatersrand's online library catalogue and Google Scholar. Literature selection was also based on recommendations from key informants in the pilot stage of the study who had experience and expertise in research uptake and policy making in developing countries. The second step entailed interviewing eight activists from non-profit migrant organisations who lobby for different groups of migrants and kinds of migrant rights (e.g. gender rights, refugee rights, sex worker rights, detention rights etc.), four researchers from key migration think tanks, and two key informants who were purposively sampled. Conducting fourteen interviews allowed for a thorough understanding of prominent themes emerging in this underexplored research-policy interface. Interviews were recorded, downloaded and stored on a password secure hard drive and transcribed electronically for data analysis. Ethical clearance (Protocol number H15/07/53) for this study was granted by the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical).

### **'Where is the influence'? Constraints for effective research uptake in South Africa**

This section of the paper explores the key findings related to the constraints for effective research uptake. First, it identifies the financial imperatives that activists argued constrained their activities. In a nutshell, financial imperatives and their implications for resources can be described by the phrase 'NGOs are always poor', a claim made by one of the respondents to refer to financial vulnerability. But financial vulnerability also intersects with questions of local political environments, frequently low collegiality among non-profit organisations and with funders, technical capacity, and local economies more generally. It is thus extremely difficult and inaccurate to argue conclusively that financial vulnerability is distinctly an economic phenomenon or exclusively sectorial, that is, confined only to the non-profit sector. Yet, still,

activists still perceived it as a key determinant in (de) capacitating them for activities required to promote change or influence on policies concerning unpopular causes.

Altogether, the financial vulnerability faced by many non-profit migrant organisations lobbying for policy change in South Africa reproduces two problematic characteristics: a perceived weakness and fragmentation of the non-profit sector; and partnerships with governments and funders that respondents perceived as fairly exploitative of the migrant non-profit sector and intended policy beneficiaries by dictating where the research and policy agenda should lie. According to respondents, these relationships did not always work in the interests of social justice. These will be discussed in greater detail.

Second, there was a perception among respondents that public or populist values and belief systems are a significant deterrent to realising change or policy impact. Therefore, while there may be extant, substantive evidence proving the benefits for policy makers and societies of adopting certain unpopular policies, it may not be taken up if it is related to transgressive ideas around topics like immigration, trafficking and sex work. Respondents reflected on some instances where the introduction of unpopular ideas into policy discussions resulted in policy changes which were undesirable or strengthened existing policies in an opposite direction from the findings of the empirical research (see Palmay and de Gruchy, 2016). Values and beliefs are thus an instrumental determinant of policy change in ways that can deter or facilitate research uptake on unpopular causes.

Finally, respondents felt that the political context positioned them variably in policy processes and played a key mediatory role. Participants saw political complexities of the policy process as a factor that narrowed spaces for evidence-based practice and decision-making on unpopular causes, thereby undermining the autonomy of scientific analysis and research uptake best practices prescribed elsewhere and for popular, mainstream development issues. Respondents cited the political history of South Africa as a delimiter of what change is possible within the constraints of historically (pre) determined and (pre) existing social class relations which (de) legitimises certain narratives. These include divided race relations emanating from apartheid policies which positioned black South Africans at the lower end of the socio-economic strata.

## **‘NGOs are always poor’**

Interviews with non-profit migrant organisations’ practitioners in South Africa revealed that they experienced precarious funding arrangements, which reproduced secondary barriers to realising policy influence. Most activists highlighted that financial vulnerability limited their ability to challenge and engage on policy making on a number of levels. They perceived that, northern-based NGOs and a few local ones, were better funded, better resourced, bigger and thus more likely to be able to respond to policy opportunities by for example commissioning research very quickly where and when it was needed. As one participant mentioned, *‘when you look at some of the bigger organisations, you know, they are able to respond much more quickly to things and sort of commission research very quickly on something’*. Implicit in these perceptions is the assumption that all northern-based NGOs have greater resources, and that high finances inevitably lead to great political and policy influence. In reality, this is not necessarily the case as some northern-based NGOs are also struggling, and in some cases failing to influence policy despite having abundant financial resources. Nonetheless, such perceptions by respondents suggest that organisational funding may impact their capacity and attitude in responding to opportunities of policy influence.

Therefore, ‘NGOs are always poor’ was the response one female activist when asked about the obstacles to engaging and seeking policy influence; a view which resonated with others, indicating that financial vulnerability is indeed an acute challenge. The activist stated:

*[...] the highest challenge is money. I work for free, so I’m a volunteer as well. We have a lot of problems getting money for research. NGOs are always poor and the few monies we have we often put into direct help. So there is always this decision that needs to be made, ‘where do we put the few, the little money we have?’*

One female respondent who was the migrant organisation’s Director argued that they relied significantly on research to substantiate their policy positions with empirical evidence. However, she explained that limited financial resources hindered the organisation’s participation and representation in influential policy processes and spaces. For example, they cannot afford to travel to the national parliament which sits regularly in Cape Town. She said:

*Well, parliament yes, we do try and engage with parliament, but I think we don’t do it enough. I think it is for us, you know, trying to have that real reach which would mean in a way more people working on it because, you know, we are based in Jo’burg so getting to Cape Town is expensive and it’s a mission and you can’t be there, you know.*

To put this response into context, on average a one-way flight from Johannesburg to Cape Town costs between 1 200 and 1 500 South African Rands (between US\$ 100 and US\$ 130). The distance between these two cities is 1400 km, and therefore the respondent argued that driving through this distance regularly for work as an alternative travel option was neither viable, practical nor affordable either. Only being able to travel infrequently hindered the success of the organisation. While the organisation also did a lot of advocacy work and research uptake activities in Pretoria with local government and United Nations (UN) bodies its members also believed that access to participation and representation in legislative policy processes at the national parliament was central to its lobbying efforts.

The interviews also revealed that financial vulnerability directly resulted in limited human resources within the South African non-profit migrant organisations studied; rendering them less capacitated to lobby for evidence-based change.

*We did at one point have someone in Cape Town who was a parliamentary advocacy person but we couldn't sustain it. You know, we are not funded enough to sustain it, which is a pity because it's there. It's hard to maintain that sort of going everyday and trying to see which particular MPs are worth talking to and, which I think we should do more. Especially now parliament is sort of blown open a bit; there is probably more opportunity. There are just not enough of us to be there often to follow parliament for instance. So also, you know, I think we could do a lot more networking and information sharing in other provinces if we had more people to do it.*

Some activists believed that improved financial security and autonomy could create more room for them to be creative and take calculated risks with available opportunities towards strategic policy influence. But, not all respondents mentioned limited funding as a major operational setback. For example, one organisation mentioned that it had enough resources from time to time to commission research to local think tanks when necessary. Moreover, the representatives from think tanks did not identify limited funding among their primary challenges; suggesting that while financing can disadvantage some organisations, perhaps other organisations are relatively better – or more adequately - funded. Thus, funding may not necessarily be an obstacle for all organisations as more financially secure, well established organisations are frequently better positioned to build economically sustainable long-term partnerships and collegiality with funders. Considering these complexities that suggest a high level of intersection of finances with other internal and external factors, this paper forwards the following possible arguments. First that limited funding of non-profit migrant organisations in South Africa may be organisation-specific, and not broadly a sectorial feature (think tanks seemed to be better off); and that limited funding may be due to other crosscutting factors such as low collegiality between funders and NGOs.

This complexity suggests that improved access to policy processes and space towards policy influence not only requires a linear intervention, which would simply entail channelling more funds to organisations, but also requires a multifaceted approach, given the interplay of organisations' finances with other limiting environmental factors.

### ***A weak and fragmented NGO sector***

A majority of the respondents revealed that the financial vulnerability they experienced translated into the reproduction of a weak and fragmented NGO sector; a factor which they perceived as working against desired pro-poor policy outcomes. The NGO sector in South Africa is one of the most profitable business in existence thus there is something akin to a competitive business environment where individuals and groups seek to monopolise the sector in order to access more funding. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the funding pool of the country's NGO sector has however dwindled significantly. As Habib (2003: 7) puts it, early in the transition from apartheid to democracy 'NGOs confronted a financial crunch when foreign donors redirected their funding away from CSOs to the state'. Today, there is still stiff competition for the scarce attention of funders and financial resources in the sector; resulting in divisions among different organisations lobbying for various policy changes in the country. Therefore, even when organisations are working towards a common goal or on the same issue, respondents believed that competition between the organisations stifled much needed solidarity which, if it existed, could possibly facilitate consolidated efforts towards positive policy influence. One founding Director of an advocacy unit in a reputable international non-profit organisation illustrated the fragmentation dynamic quite succinctly. She opined:

*Civil society is fragmented and a lot of that fragmentation is that there is so much of turf war; that organisations are working at odds against each other, because they are all fighting for the same pot of money. And I think there's really room to look at how the struggle against apartheid was organised and how we managed to unite people under a broad banner which was irrespective of religion or where you came from. So it didn't feel like they were all fighting for a small amount of money.*

The above response demonstrates the shift which Habib (2003) comments on. And while indeed some divisions within civil society may be functional to democracy by promoting participatory practices (Habib 2003), the above respondent did not perceive this particular kind of division as that which contributes positively towards this end.



This presents a dual challenge in terms of possible interventions. Even though funding remains an integral and necessary organisational input, it is complicated by the potential that injecting more funding into the sector has to further antagonise non-profit migrant organisations, who may not all have the collegiality or credentials to access them. For example, in one of my own experiences attending the Johannesburg Migration Advisory Panel (JMAP) meetings which are convened by the City of Johannesburg's Migration Unit on a bi-monthly basis, I observed how certain formalised non-profit migrant organisations were better positioned to access small city funds than others, more so because they had neat structures or were perceived by the city as such. This frustrated some smaller, grassroots non-profit migrant organisations who joined the committee who in some cases ended up quitting because they were getting nothing from the city coffers. This finding questions the centrality of approaches that are gaining prominence in the research uptake literature that emphasise the centrality of notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap (see Godfrey et al., 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Langer et al., 2015 for e.g.). It highlights questions of financially induced fragmentation among actors pushing the agendas of marginalised groups and communities, which suggests the need to better understand how to tackle financial vulnerability in a manner that adds value not dependency and further fragmentation to the non-profit migrant organisation sector. Potentially, NGOs could then align their policy influencing agendas together, in a consolidated manner that does not create 'unhealthy' competition, in line with one respondent's opinion that *"Sometimes, you know, if we can find ways to complement each other rather than compete, then to me that's money much better spent"*. Perhaps, this may result in more solidarity that allows NGOs to speak in one voice and be heard unequivocally as they seek unilateral, purposive influence. These issues are surprisingly underrepresented in the extant research uptake literature. The authors of the models promoting knowledge brokering, capacity building and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap in South Africa (Godfrey et al., 2010; Langer et al., 2015) do not examine NGOs or identify the problem of fragmentation due to competition over funding.

### ***'Exploitative' financial partnerships between migrant NGOs and their funders***

In addition to fragmentation, respondents argued that, due to their financial vulnerability, the non profit migrant organisation sector was crippled by 'exploitative' partnerships between NGOs and funders; which impacted negatively on several aspects of their practice. The main

'exploitation' that activists mentioned was regarding the issue of defining policy interests. In a context where research and advocacy work are predominantly funder driven, respondents were concerned that the landscape was increasingly becoming characterised by northern-based funders that dictated where policy interests and solutions should lie, with little regard for the needs and realities of the local context. The current veritable explosion in the number of research grants and humanitarian interventions funded by northern-based institutions to Africa, driven by the motive to show that increased development will stop migration, are one classic illustration (Landau, 2017). Some of these policy interests are informed by the European Union's (EU) 'sedentary bias' (Bakewell, 2008; Castles, 2010) which accentuates a discourse of 'containment development'; 'a form of 'imperialist externalization by re-inscribing power relations between Europe and its former African colonies' (Landau, 2017: 8). Such a discourse is being used to also fund some initiatives like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to run decent work creation programmes in countries like Niger in order to stop or minimize migration (Vanyoro and Wee, 2016). The Doctors Without Borders case is only one unique example where the logic of funding has been challenged by an international NGO. In June of 2016, the organisation announced that it would no longer seek European Union funding, in protest at the EU's maligned migrant deal with Turkey. But because of financial vulnerability, local non-profit migrant organisations in South Africa are less likely to re-politicize the problematic international migration narratives (Wee et al., 2018) informing such funding. Looking at research uptake through the lens of unpopular causes helps to unpack some of these geo- and bio- politics which affect practice beyond technical aspects and this analysis is scarce in the extant research uptake literature.

One of the respondents stated that it had become the norm and not the exception that humanitarian interventions funded by northern-based organisations were often severely misplaced, driven by 'flag-planting' and 'imperial' approaches. Since respondents were aware that many non profit migrant organisations are 'all fighting for the same pot of money', they were actively conscious and privy to the unequal power relations between themselves and their funders, which reduced their bargaining power in these relationships due to fear of losing money. Respondents alleged that they largely had a limited say in these relationships. They had a concern that some funding partnerships among NGOs/think tanks with funders often resulted in unidirectional accountability towards the funder, with little regard of the interests of the intended policy beneficiaries.

*On the one hand there are very distinct funder driven initiatives, which is more about the flag planting of the original donor; whoever it is that wants to make their mark and feels that this is the most important thing that needs to be done.*

Again, what was disconcerting is that these so called 'exploitative' relationships seemed to emerge when more funds were injected into non-profit migrant organisation operations given the need that arises to meet funders' agendas; a conundrum which demonstrates that injecting more funds into the sector is only one part of the solution. This would only work if the international migration narratives (Wee et al., 2018) informing such initiatives adequately took local realities into account instead of importing global policy discourses towards one-size-fits-all approaches.

Not only did respondents implicate funders in dictating the agenda and policy interests, but also in designing research uptake tools that were difficult to implement in these spaces. As two of the study's key informants, both male and female respectively, opined.

*I think what we know about how to do research uptake has largely been determined by northern institutions working in northern contexts; and I think that, you know, the ODI [Overseas Development Institute] guide, you know, the sort of the World Bank's guide to research uptake, the ODI guides to research uptake, I think don't often take into account the particular challenges in the global South.*

*The donors [become] part of the problem, you know. It's hard for a southern think tank to design its own communication strategy when the donors are already attaching, you know, always telling them how they should communicate their research.*

The above responses speak more to the strategic issues in communication and designing research uptake models and approaches and how donor funders often attach research uptake tools to their funding in ways that do not take local realities into account, and constrain freedom of expression, which undermines research uptake creativity and objectivity. This phenomenon begs much more detailed examination.

## **'The public space is not value neutral'**

*I think in academia and in politics and in the NGO world, we tend to imagine the public space for debate as a value neutral zone. I actually don't hold that. The public is very much driven by value systems declared and undeclared.*

Value neutrality also emerged as a key concern that respondents had. Respondents argued that as professionals working in non profit migrant organisations and think tanks, they always had to contend with negative public values and belief systems attached to the 'unpopular'

causes they intended to influence policy on. They identified the influence of values and beliefs in two ways. On the one hand, they saw values and beliefs as able to fast track negative policy outcomes which they did not desire and they gave the South African Trafficking in Persons Act, (2013) as an example. They argued that policy makers and politicians used the moralised values and beliefs the public attached to trafficking to mobilise an alarmist discourse of these being degraded and validated the creation of a policy in response. In other words, anti-trafficking legislation was passed much faster based on the issue's high popularity and moral appeal levels. Bastia (2014) argues that mainstream development continues to be not only gender blind but also gender biased. However, an analysis of unpopular causes presents a counterintuitive gender dynamic. In terms of the gender dynamics, the trafficking policy thrived on a discourse that portrays migrant women and children as victims who need to be 'saved' by the state. The policy assumes a counterintuitive gender sensitivity, in which it recognises potential vulnerabilities faced by migrant women but gender is mainstreamed into subsequent policies in a way that is uninformed by scientific evidence and consequently void of any recognition of women's agency in their migration to South Africa. Implicitly, this policy position is gender-biased and the ramifications are of similar significance as those suffered by women in mainstream development. This ambivalent positioning is convenient for the xenophobic South African state as it allows the state to vilify the voluntary migration of women to South Africa under the pretext of fighting human trafficking. The moralised and gendered response to women migration for the state makes it difficult for activists and researchers who are interested in using evidence to influence migration policies.

On the other hand, respondents argued that values and beliefs could undermine perceived progressive policy outcomes as is currently the case with the hotly debated policy issue of decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. The moral and gendered backlash against sex work resulted in negative state policy positions despite compelling evidence proving the benefits of such a policy.

*So with something like decriminalization and sex work where really people within government and elsewhere would have strong moral views against sex work, the evidence shows clearly that if you want to deal with HIV in a pragmatic and serious way you have to remove the criminal law. There is three decades worth of AIDS research showing that.*

In this case, policy makers and politicians conversely used the moralised and gendered values and beliefs attached to sex work in popular discourse to mobilise an alarmist discourse of these being degraded and derail policy processes aimed at creating a pro-decriminalisation policy. The trafficking discourse expediently allowed the state to maintain the controversial

policy that decriminalises sex work by framing migrant sex workers as sex slaves forced to work against their will (Brennan, 2008; Palmary and de Gruchy, 2016). Respondents argued that the negative values and beliefs informing these discourses were forged in private sphere socialisation processes (for example, in the family). Indeed, the framing of the anti-decriminalisation position taken by the South African state is discriminatory towards migrant women as it portrays them as defying their normative gender roles of 'good, faithful wives'. Therefore, respondents concluded that compelling, standard scientific evidence needed to be complemented with moral framings which are themselves constructed from narratives mediated by social, cultural and institutional discourses (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 62). A very recent example is the Reverend Alan Storey of the Central Methodist Mission, together with members of the Asijiki Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work, who hoisted a banner which read 'Jesus was the first to decriminalise sex work. John 8: 7' over the church steeple in support of the decriminalisation of sex work. A similar example is how activists and jurists equated sexual discrimination with the racial injustice that existed under the apartheid regime in order to gain traction for an LGBTIQ inclusive policy (Massoud, 2003).

But while using morality to frame issues as has been recently done by Reverend Storey is relatively surmountable, respondents mentioned that the biggest hurdle they had to overcome was decoupling moralised ideas from policy issues that are seen by policy makers as transgressive. As Bernstein (1995) argues, because of the nature of the struggle against apartheid, morality and intentions became a much larger part of the country's public policy debate than is desirable. Post-colonial nation-building underscores the need for most South Africans to agree on broad national goals, values and accept their common citizenship of the same country. Therefore certain shared value systems also play a significant role in policy making. Respondents also mentioned the conflation of migration with negative moral values such as criminality and sex work and xenophobic attitudes by policy makers as working against any evidence that portrays the positive attributes of migrants.

*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 against migrants.*

*I think there is a sort of a xenophobic attitude amongst amounts of people. So, you know, you try to say, but, you know, like calmly say something, but people respond very emotionally, and you can see they are just shutting down. So I think it is very hard to influence in that way.*

Indeed, there are significant problems with some of these responses. There are some unpopular issues in South Africa which run against prevailing social, gender and moral norms where evidence-based policies have been put in place. For example, issues like LGBTIQ rights gained significant policy traction despite the negative values and beliefs associated with homosexuality by most patriarchal, heteronormative black families in South Africa. The approval of a South African constitution that enshrined the protection of the rights of homosexuals in 1996 certainly did not reflect the attitudes of most South Africans, who did not support gay rights (Massoud, 2003). By adopting policies that protect gay rights, the government 'created a gap between its tolerant laws and the conservative social attitudes of its citizens' (Massoud, 2003: 301).

## **The mediating role of politics**

In light of the problematic nature of simply assuming that the unpopularity of an issue is directly associated with its marginalisation in policy making, an analysis of the mediating role of politics and power may provide an answer to why certain policy issues like LGBTIQ rights gained policy traction. Politics and power were implicated in a majority of responses participants gave on the issue of values and beliefs attached to issues like migration, human trafficking and sex work in South Africa. For example, the fight for LGBTIQ rights was embedded in a political context where the legacy and brutality of apartheid were still fresh in everyone's mind. That moment meant that a framing that equated sexual discrimination with the racial injustice that existed under the apartheid regime which could show that racism, sexism, and homophobia fostered similar negative consequences – that is a breakdown of rights and equality - would gain traction. Once the ANC guaranteed equal rights for gays and lesbians in its own draft bill of rights in the early 1990s, other political parties followed suite since few if any political parties wanted to be seen in the media as promoting any form of animosity in light of South Africa's history of brutal racial injustice (Massoud, 2003). Therefore, once this framing of LGBTIQ rights was enshrined in the constitution, it created a window of opportunity for the gay community (Massoud, 2003). Moreover, many gays and lesbians who were from the mostly white middle and upper classes had organized during apartheid and were well equipped both politically and financially to fight for protection under the new constitution (Massoud, 2003).

Therefore, beyond negative values and beliefs, the constraints of doing research uptake and advocacy work on unpopular causes is not without its political connotations. Today, unlike most overtly oppressive political contexts of the South, South Africa appears to have a more liberal political context. Surprisingly, however, its political climate was still perceived by respondents as having an impact on research uptake of unpopular causes in several negative ways. One respondent had this to say:

*Sure the evidence is there but policy makers don't necessarily think about evidence, for them politics is much more important. So if policy makers are politicians they are worried about being re-elected, they are worried about their own position in parliamentary committees, they are worried about other civil society organizations, they are worried about religion, traditional leaders. They will disregard the evidence if it's not in their own interests.*

This phenomenon indeed reflects the political climate in South Africa at the moment. It has also been compounded by the ANC government's loss of key constituencies in the 2016 municipal elections and a looming crisis of state capture which has heralded President Jacob Zuma's presidency and sanctioned exit. The political reality is that one-party dominance by the ANC in various institutions often overshadows policy processes that are meant to be democratic. And even though parliament has multiple political parties constitutionally obligated to provide public participation and a national forum for public interests, 'dominance by the ruling ANC has created a 'downsized' democracy, a monopoly of participatory process by elite forces' (Maseng, 2014: 2). Consequently, the ANC's policy desires mostly tend to materialise as they seek re-election while subverting the uptake of evidence on unpopular causes into policy.

The politics of historical oppression and apartheid which resulted in inequality between blacks and whites was also cited by one male respondent as being partly responsible for such a backlash. South Africa has a political history of internal and cross border migrants being kept at bay through a sophisticated and brutal regime of pass laws and immigration legislation which determined which people had the right to enter the country and where they could move inside the country (Crush, 2010). With the advent of democracy, these restrictions have been lifted, but the apartheid era immigration legislation rooted in the Aliens Control Act of 1991 remains and xenophobia is a widespread and growing concern in the country. Relative deprivation by locals who feel historically marginalized and threatened by migrants who generally tend to climb the social ladder quicker because they sometimes accept lower wages presents a significant deterrent to arguing for policies aimed at including them; even when backed by research. Questions of domestic and international labour migration in policy

and public debate are stigmatised by a long history of 'organised labour regimes', which were racist, exploitative and politically disempowering to the country's majority (Vanyoro, 2015). South Africa's immigration policy is indeed not exterior to inequalities, but it is 'affected, inflected and deflected by them' (Ball, 1993: 12). One respondent alleged that the country's anti-refugee stance through the New White Paper on International Migration which introduced gross amendments to the Refugee Act (1998) that make it practically impossible for asylum seekers to work in the country's informal sector are being driven by the dominant belief among locals that foreign 'economic refugees' are responsible for the country's socio-economic woes. Therefore:

*What we've got to do in South Africa is take into account the particular sort of history, demographics and socio-economic profile of the country because refugees will inherently come into lower end jobs or entry level jobs, which is of course where the disproportionate size of the population who are in the lower socio-economic band in South Africa; that's the kind of jobs that they are going for. And those sorts of jobs you know can become very heavily unionized very quickly as a way of protecting their interests.*

This political context has a negative influence on using best practices, models and approaches for research uptake in South Africa. As one male key informant opined by drawing parallels with his work in Ethiopia:

*The best practices that are prescribed for research uptake don't make any sense in an oppressive environment. [...] And they don't always make sense in the institutional environments you have in the south either. I mean try implementing ODI here in Ethiopia, try to implement the ODI's guide to research influence here, you'll end up in jail. I mean, Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration. But you'll end up, you know, you may end up on the wrong side of the government for sure, and that's a real, that's a genuine risk.*

Even though this quote speaks more specifically to perceived oppressive environments like Ethiopia, it may also inform how we frame interventions bearing in mind the political context as one of many mediating factors, particularly when issues that are seen by policy makers as controversial are concerned.

South Africa's political past of racial segregation also means that the issue of alleged racism positions researchers on these issues differently when presenting their findings to policy makers because of the politicised reading that is attached to race in the country. One can look at the ostracization of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the association of its policies by a majority of black people with a return to apartheid to see the everyday manifestations of this phenomenon. Or, the response of one white researcher:



*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.*

## **Pragmatic pathways: Alternative strategies, opportunities and levers for influence**

*Research uptake sounds like a really nice neutral straightforward process but it is nothing like that. It is complex, contested. You need really good strategic thinkers.*

While the findings presented in the previous section largely reflect pessimistic perceptions about the status quo, it is important to recognise that there are other contextual factors and strategies that participants identified as potentially favourable and enabling. In their view, capitalising on these opportunities would require strategic political manoeuvring by those pushing the agendas of marginalised groups, that is, funders, activists and researchers. Some activists believed that improved financial security and autonomy could create more room for them to be creative and take calculated risks with available opportunities towards strategic policy influence. But as the analysis has shown, increased funding is not the solution as it also has the potential to further antagonise the non-profit migrant sector. Respondents admitted that they ought to be smarter, stealthier and generally more strategic about exploiting existing levers for influence.

This section presents these opportunities for influence drawing on two key findings. First, it presents the case made by some respondents that realising policy influence on unpopular causes required locating research uptake and advocacy work within the levers of power by adopting grassroots, participatory approaches that 'democratise' the policy process when conducting and disseminating research. This was summed up in the phrase of one respondent: 'nothing about us, without us'. Secondly, respondents mentioned partnerships, alliances and networks as a key part of any strategy that intends to influence policy on unpopular causes through evidence. In other words, they saw knowing who to work with and who to present available evidence to as important to them as solitude and adversarial relationships had proven counterproductive in their work so far.

### **'Nothing about us, without us'**

*The slogan of 'nothing about, us without us', I think it's a really powerful slogan for any intervention in looking at policy change. [...] I think the common problem and difficulty that funders, donors and academics struggle with is to understand that we can't go and sit behind our laptop in our comfortable offices and think that we are going to solve the problems of today through research.*

Some respondents believed that realising policy influence on unpopular causes required locating research uptake and advocacy within the levers of power by adopting grassroots, participatory approaches that 'democratise' the policy process when conducting and disseminating research. In other words, respondents argued that marginalised communities had to take up their own struggle to better represent themselves as actors in various policy forums. Therefore, in their view, using research to give power to affected groups was important as it had the potential to allow purported 'victims' and 'research subjects' to take on the roles of 'activists'. One example frequently cited by one female respondent was that of the Treatment Action Campaign's (TAC) success in influencing the government's policy on HIV/AIDS. In the early 90s the South African president Thabo Mbeki denied that HIV existed and led to AIDS. He argued that HIV was a poverty related syndrome which could be treated through economic development and pre-existing treatments for malnourishment, and other herbal remedies. This age of denialism withstood compelling scientific evidence to the contrary, even though Mbeki did consult 'scientists' who argued against prevailing medical thought. The respondent argued that the TAC empowered patients to become activists by using participatory treatment workshops and teaching patients about the basic science of HIV/AIDS. After all, it was the patients themselves who had legitimacy in the public eye and this yielded more power and influence to the movement's advocacy. In her words:

*So once people living with HIV and AIDS became AIDS activists, that was a major turning point in any success with policy change thereafter. [...] Because there was so much of propaganda, you had a whole movement of denialists who were feeding Mbeki with their nonsense about, 'there is no such thing as HIV, and this is just about poverty'. So we really had to have a watertight argument, but not only, and who was we? Every patient had to be able to stand up. Persons living with HIV who could firstly speak out that they had HIV. Secondly they had to know what is ARVs, how it works in your body. Where you could demonstrate really with scientific terms, then the very patients could speak out about the benefits of having this particular policy.*

This response suggests that affected groups can be key policy actors but they are often neglected in research and policy processes, and in framing research uptake strategies. Their ability to understand, process and strategically use research evidence is often underestimated. The actual context of the TAC problematises the potential of research to produce discourses that do not further marginalise already marginalised groups and communities. The TAC was founded in 1998 when a small group protested in Cape Town for

access to antiretroviral drugs for pregnant women to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to newborn babies. Jungar and Oinas noted that the activists were to a large extent composed of unemployed, black working-class women even though the membership of TAC was heterogeneous. Its activism entailed mass mobilization, such as street marches where protesters often sang rewritten struggle songs, and civil disobedience campaigns. The TAC also used formal channels such as the courts, the media, and national and international networks to guarantee access to antiretroviral treatment for all citizens through public health care (Jungar and Oinas, 2010). Jungar and Oinas argue that HIV activism worldwide is an example of an alternative knowledge generation processes. More specifically, the TAC presents one example where activism not only challenged the denialist policy positions of the government, but also challenged the representation of HIV/AIDS in Africa in research documents, and the kinds of subject positions these representations allow (Jungar and Oinas, 2010: 181-183). Therefore, the potential of grassroots approaches to create a positive self through collective mobilization and politicization unpopular causes, in contrast to mainstream government and research discourses, questions the actual efficacy of scientific research in representing affected marginalized groups and communities.

Nonetheless, one male key informant suggested that the two worlds could be brought together if researchers can facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups in the research and policy processes. One way of achieving this is by democratising the public policy process by creating a space for marginalised groups and communities to mobilise and strengthen their own voice using research that they would have been a part of in one way or the other. In other words, the respondent saw using research to include people who would not otherwise be included as an indicator of policy impact especially in often-closed and conservative policy environments. He argued:

*So I'll tell you my approach particularly on issues that pertain to marginalised groups. My philosophy or approach is that, rather than taking the evidence straight to policy makers like MPs, or you know, heads of agencies, that's not the right approach. The best approach is to use research as a way to create a space for those very same marginalised groups to sort of, to organise, to mobilise, and to strengthen their own voice and their own ability to advocate on their own behalf. So anyone who is doing research uptake or advocacy himself I think needs to make a decision about whether they are interested in simply influencing policy or whether they are interested in democratising the public policy process and using the space created by research to get to include people who wouldn't otherwise be included.*

Unlike the TAC example and critiques levelled by Jungar and Oinas against HIV/AIDS research, it is plausible that research and grassroots activism can work hand in glove when the latter

are included in both research and policy processes. Dominant approaches to measuring the impact of research on policy through the use of logframes are yet to recognise the inclusion of marginalised groups and communities in research and policy processes as indicators of influence, particularly when it comes to unpopular causes.

Another female key informant felt that we are increasingly seeing a real move to research programmes that work in collaboration with affected marginalised groups and communities (and other stakeholders) across the research cycle, starting from the very point of defining what's important to generate evidence on. This is a move beyond traditional research approaches that would only conduct a communication and dissemination event at the end of a research grant. While this is an approach that is already part of research uptake theory, many of them, particularly the approaches underscored by scholars such as Godfrey et al. (2010), Syed et al. (2013) and Langer et al. (2015) that emphasise notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap, simply focus on policy makers rather than other stakeholders such as communities.

Despite the usefulness of participatory methods, there are some reasons to be cynical about their potential in challenging the status quo. One key informant warned that participatory methods should not be seen as a one size fits all approach. This wariness is synonymous with existing critiques that have been levelled against participatory methodology, for over-privileging community-level processes (see Cooke and Kothari, 2001). A participatory approach seems to work best where research intends to target the public policy process rather than the policy itself, in order to foster more democratic participation and practices. Indeed, unpopular causes in a context like South Africa can benefit from empowering and giving voice to migrants, sex workers and women who are portrayed as victims of trafficking willy nilly. But, participatory approaches may not always realise policy influence because of the recent turn towards quantitative and big data (the same can be said of qualitative research in general). For example, Scott-Villier's (2012) study that is interestingly titled *This Research Does not Influence Policy* found that, policy makers perceived participatory approaches as inappropriate for policy making. Issue unpopularity also influences the politics underlying policy makers' policing of which grassroots mobilisations and participatory research is valid and which is not as it determines which groups they are willing to listen to. So, while community-level processes may foster accountability between researchers and their participants, their real potential when it comes to unpopular causes also needs to be questioned. Nonetheless, because the use of participatory methods on research

and advocacy work about unpopular causes is still limited in South Africa, with a few notable exceptions such as the Methods:Visual:Explore (MoVE), there is need to further explore their potential efficacy.

## **Working in partnerships, networks and alliances**

*I would use adversarial sort of means very, very rarely and very, very carefully. More often than not, and I think it's our experience in South Africa, it has led to people closing ranks and actually a lack of communication and less, kind of less effectiveness, less impact.*

Respondents suggested that working in partnerships, networks and alliances between NGOs and think tanks and with government ministries and departments was an instrumental strategy for influencing policies on unpopular causes. Drawing on years of lobbying for refugee rights in South Africa, one male respondent argued that adversity had not worked for their organisation; rather it had led to the closing of ranks. Therefore, he identified knowing who to work with and how to present available evidence as crucial. Another female respondent argued that, instead of using adversarial approaches, those seeking policy influence on unpopular causes must rather use strong argumentation as their stock in trade to win policy makers and the public over to the correctness of their ideas:

*I think the only way that you can expedite [refugee] documentation is actually by getting a relationship with key people or some key people in DHA [Department of Home Affairs] or in the government departments. Because I find with a good relationship often you can, not expedite something, but you can get further in terms of explanation and in terms of actually getting the change that you seek.*

This collegiate approach was contrasted by another respondent to what she called a 'panga<sup>2</sup> method':

*So if you have someone who is an ally you won't use the same you know panga method as you would if you were fighting someone like a mountain. So, you know what I'm saying, so I think we need to know who we are directing, where policy change and who are the persons on the other side in order to work out what aspect of our research we will use and how militant we are.*

These respondents perceived networks and alliances as crucial to strategic positioning and in turn they saw positionality in the policy process and polity as critical to the efficacy of their research uptake and advocacy work in influencing policies about unpopular causes. The

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<sup>2</sup> A panga is broad heavy knife of East Africa, commonly used as a tool or weapon.

importance of networks, partnerships and alliances is well documented in the extant research uptake literature.

## **Concluding remarks**

While campaigns or resistance on populist or popular causes in developing countries have frequently been recorded and investigated, negligible investigation has been done on how change on marginalised, unpopular or contentious policy issues is effected using research evidence. 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). This paper is an attempt to fill in that gap through exploratory empirical research. The reviewed literature already stresses the importance of strong relationships and networks to be at the heart of evidence informed development (Langer et al., 2015). It also argues for the need to strengthen the pull of research by building capacity and skills of policy makers to access, appraise, synthesise and integrate evidence. Complemented with knowledge brokering and trusting relationships between researchers and policy makers, these scholars believe that policy impact of research will improve (Godfrey et al., 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Langer et al., 2015).

However, while the power of evidence to transform policy through research translation remains possible as seen in the issues examined by these scholars, there is little evidence to date that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents in South Africa when it comes to unpopular policies. The various challenges documented by this paper highlight the need to question the relevance of using existing research uptake best practices that are mechanical or blue prints without adequately responding to the needs of the operating environment. Indeed, the models and approaches suited for popular, mainstream development issues may not be suited for unpopular causes. Notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap that are gaining prominence in the recent literature (see Godfrey et al., 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Langer et al., 2015 for e.g.) are all important, but these alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the migration, sex work and human trafficking policy processes. The South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy (Luiz, 2002;

Albertyn, 2003), more especially on particular marginalised, unpopular issues. Government is politically fragmented, representing different constituencies and ethnic groups, and, as a result its political will is also fragmented (Luiz, 2002). Technocratic policy and decision-making on these issues is currently the exception, not the norm. But this is not solely because there is a lack of capacity, but rather a lack of political will which ties into the potential of an issue's unpopularity to antagonise and fragment different constituencies and ethnic groups that politicians and policy makers represent. Moreover, this paper highlights other underrepresented questions of financially induced fragmentation among actors pushing the agendas of marginalised groups and communities, which suggest the need to better understand how to tackle financial vulnerability in a manner that adds value not dependency and further fragmentation to the non-profit migrant organisation sector.

However, the paper warns that one must avoid taking too static a view. The unpopularity of these causes is dynamic and depends on the political rhetoric of the day. Because the ANC is embattled and these issues are predominantly unpopular because of various gender and moral values attached to them by locals, the political will of policy makers to use evidence that promotes these groups is indeed today questionable. But this might not be the case a few years or a decade from now. Therefore, in light of this dynamism, the paper suggests that funders, researchers, and civil society organisations have a responsibility to constantly (re) organise and (re) mobilise themselves effectively with a full understanding of local contexts to influence the use of empirical research outputs towards achieving shared goals of pro-poor outcomes and social justice. When doing research and advocacy work, these actors need to understand each policy sphere within its own set of interests, opportunities and actors. This requires a two tier research methodology that complements a research project and advocacy campaign's substantive research or activities with a parallel study of the particular issue's policy processes bearing into mind environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion, obstacles and who can be mobilised. I provide an example of how this can be done in this paper. For example, the responses of this study suggests that there might be value in working in partnerships, networks and alliances and adopting a 'nothing about us, without us' approach when doing and communicating research on the three unpopular causes studied. Such insights that draw on empirically studying issue politics and policy making should then influence how researchers and activists try to influence the policy process. Only by complementing specialised technical knowledge with a more holistic reading of political processes and logics can we hope to heighten our influence on policy making in South Africa, or elsewhere.

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## About Migrating out of Poverty

*Migrating out of Poverty* research programme consortium is funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions – across Asia and Africa. The main goal of *Migrating out of Poverty* is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and their countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement.

*Migrating out of Poverty* is coordinated by the University of Sussex and led by Research Director Dr Priya Deshingkar and Dr Robert Nurick as Executive Director. Core partners are the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana, and the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia and L'Université Assane Seck Ziguinchor (UASZ) in Senegal. Past partners included the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh, the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya. Please visit the website for more information.

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