

EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: BARRIERS AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

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Abstract: This study explores how local government actors in the Czech Republic, particularly mayors, deputy mayors, and senior administrators, perceive and use research evidence and data in decision-making. Through thematic analysis of 46 semi-structured interviews, the research identifies key barriers to systematic evidence use at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. These include lack of time and capacity, inadequate data infrastructure, political pressures, and limited trust in analytical tools. The study highlights examples of good practice and offers recommendations aimed at developing analytical competencies, strengthening institutional support, and improving the research–practice interface. The findings provide a foundation for designing concrete educational and organizational tools to support evidence-based decision-making in public administration.

Key words: evidence-based policy, barriers, thematic analysis, local self-government.

Introduction

In an information-saturated policy environment, decision-makers require tools and processes to make informed choices. However, identifying, interpreting, and applying relevant evidence remains challenging. The volume and diversity of data can be overwhelming, and limited capacity, compounded by biases, time constraints, and institutional pressures, hampers processing (Head, 2015). These challenges affect not only the quality of policymaking, but also the long-term competitiveness of territories and organizations, as effective evidence use supports innovation, adaptability, and efficient resource allocation (Keizer et al., 2025).

Evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) is the systematic use of empirical data and scientific methods to inform decisions in public policy and management. It seeks to improve effectiveness, transparency, and accountability by grounding actions in evidence rather than intuition, tradition, or political expediency. It emphasizes transparent, accountable decision-making grounded in credible information, while still accommodating contextual realities and stakeholder preferences. The approach

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increasingly recognizes multiple rationalities that adapt to different policy contexts (Jennings & Hall, 2011; Kay, 2011).

However, multiple barriers hinder systematic use of evidence in decision-making. A significant body of research (Cairney, 2016; Nutley et al., 2007) emphasizes that these are not random but embedded at individual, organizational, and systemic (political or institutional) level. Distinguishing levels clarifies where and how evidence use is constrained and what can be done about it. Locating a barrier indicates whether the issue can be addressed internally, or whether it is rooted in broader frameworks that require external action. This understanding guides feasible interventions tailored to the source and scale of the problem. This multilevel view also illustrates how individual competencies, organizational routines, and political incentives interact to shape institutional performance and public-sector competitiveness and efficiency (Newman et al., 2017; OECD, 2020).

There is a need for more empirical research and a deeper understanding of who participates in evidence production, how credibility is established, and how evidence is used across policy domains (Isett et al., 2015; Oliver & Fraser, 2021). Building culture of organizational learning, where evidence and continuous evaluation are essential for sustained improvement and institutional competitiveness, is increasingly emphasized (Hahn, 2019).

Balancing expert knowledge, political goals, and public interests is a difficult but important task in designing effective public policies. The ability to base decisions on high-quality, verified evidence becomes essential in a time when perceptions and oversimplification frequently overshadow facts (Parkhurst, 2016). Public officials must move beyond routines and develop competencies for evidence-based governance (Davies & Nutley, 2000; Nutley et al., 2007).

While evidence-based approaches to policymaking and decision making have gained traction, the literature focuses mostly on central institutions (Cairney, 2016). Less attention has been paid to municipal level, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In decentralized European governance systems, municipalities often operate with substantial autonomy but limited analytical capacity. Yet little is known about how local decision-makers, such as mayors, municipal secretaries, and department heads, engage with evidence in their routine responsibilities.

This study offers a micro-level perspective on evidence use in local governance. It builds on the distinction between three levels of analysis: individual, organizational and systemic. Using qualitative methods, we examine how actors in a decentralized European administrative environment use evidence, what barriers they face, and which strategies promote informed, accountable decision-making.

2. Literature review

2.1. Evidence-based Approaches in Public Administration

Evidence-based decision-making is a systematic approach that emphasizes the use of the best available evidence for policymaking (Cherney & Head, 2016; De Marchi et al., 2014). This thought has slowly been superseded by the necessity to use both

scientific evidence available and the local context and constraints as a more realistic approach than decisions and policy based solely on the evidence, thus evidence-informed policymaking emerged (Cherney & Head, 2016; Newman et al., 2017; Raymaekers et al., 2025), making evidence one among more inputs into the decision-making and policy-making processes. Still, the approach is characterized by being rooted in evidence, preferably from more than one source, stakeholder involvement, inclusivity, and completeness of the policy process including its reviews and evaluations (Davies & Nutley, 2000) as well as coproduction and collaboration (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2025).

The importance of EBDM is further emphasized by its ability to mitigate bias by promoting objectivity, eschewing ideologies, reducing policy conflict or maintaining methodological rigor (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011; Dorren & Wolf, 2023; Head, 2015). Where traditional decision-making processes often rely on intuition or political expediency EBDM helps to achieve more impartial approaches (Bellé et al., 2018; Cairney & Oliver, 2017). It supports the use of rigorous evidence to guide policy design and implementation (Haecker et al., 2017). This evidence-based orientation enhances the credibility of public institutions and fosters public trust, as citizens are more likely to support policies grounded in robust research and demonstrated effectiveness (Batalli & Fejzullahu, 2018; Raymaekers et al., 2025).

EBDM is particularly valuable in addressing complex societal challenges that require coordinated responses from diverse stakeholders. For example, in healthcare contexts, it has been shown to improve patient outcomes by ensuring that clinical decisions are based on the latest research and best practices (Warren et al., 2016). Similarly, in the field of public policy, EBDM facilitates the identification of effective strategies for addressing issues such as driving offenses, timely tax payments (Pabst, 2021), social or educational policies (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011) and in other areas.

Despite growing awareness of the importance of using evidence in policymaking (Cheng et al., 2024; Fedorowicz & Aron, 2021), and increasing academic attention to improving data and evidence use in government (Ma & Cheng, 2025), a significant research gap remains. We lack understanding of how public officials develop, assess, and apply evidence when making decisions about administration, budgeting, policy, and grant matters (Head, 2015). Discretion exercised by officials in these contexts profoundly impacts people's lives and their interactions with government (Rivera & Knox, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to understand how public officials perceive and use evidence, what barriers exist in implementing evidence-based approaches, and what strategies can be employed to overcome these challenges.

Evidence-based approaches contribute to improved outcomes, cost effectiveness, and thus benefit the citizens (Jennings & Hall, 2011; Mills et al., 2021; OECD, 2020), although researchers point out it is not a panacea to all government problems (Keizer et al., 2025). The idea of evidence-based or indeed evidence-informed policies is derided by some authors as deficient in times of crisis (Pabst, 2021), achieving little when relying on evidence alone without broader context (Cairney, 2016), streamlining top-down solutions (Ansell & Geyer, 2016), and generally

unfeasible. That is especially the case when it is undermined by the politicians who may disregard even the best evidence (Donadelli, 2020; Veselý et al., 2018).

2.2. Types of Evidence (Scientific Studies, Data, Experience, Evaluation)

Defining “evidence” is not straightforward task, as no universally accepted definition exists. Parkhurst (2016) emphasizes that to contribute effectively to policymaking, “good evidence” should meet three key criteria: credibility, meaning scientific rigor; relevance, or usefulness in context; and legitimacy, which refers to respecting the values and interests of stakeholders. Still, there are various forms of evidence used in creating policies and decision-making in the public administration. In terms of EBDM the evidence should be a product of systematic data gathering and its analysis that has been verified (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011; Davies & Nutley, 2000). The evidence commonly used, however, does not necessarily meet this standard. A wider concept of evidence includes statistics, governmental data, programme and strategy evaluations or expert advice (Cairney, 2016; Head, 2015; Keizer et al., 2025). Indeed, these days evidence is increasingly defined more broadly, shifting to a focus that emphasizes its fitness for purpose or allowing research methods to suit specific policy needs. This approach values diverse research methods and evidence types, including expert opinion, lived experience, monitoring data, and stakeholder input, not just quantitative results or evaluations (Cantarelli et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2024; Nutley et al., 2007).

In EBDM, the DIKW model (Data–Information–Knowledge–Wisdom) helps clarify how raw data evolves into actionable wisdom for decision-making (Rowley, 2007). The DIKW model is depicted as a pyramid. The data forms the base as unprocessed facts with no inherent meaning. Information emerges when data is organized and contextualized. Knowledge is built on interpreting information and identifying meaningful patterns and rather than wisdom it is knowledge that Nativi (2020) presents and the necessary evidence for elected officials. Wisdom represents the top of the pyramid and the capacity to apply knowledge strategically, ethically, and with awareness of broader social and policy contexts (Nativi et al., 2020; Rowley, 2007), indicating the high expectations of policymakers’ personal characteristics and abilities.

This progression aligns well with the principles of evidence-based policymaking. The acquisition of high-quality evidence often begins with the collection and analysis of data, which is then transformed into information (e.g., through statistical processing), further synthesized into knowledge (e.g., policy recommendations), and finally applied with reference to specific policy priorities and goals.

2.3 Factors Limiting the Use of Evidence

This paper works with three types of barriers that closely follow the recommendations of OECD (2020) for improving evidence-based approaches in public decision-making at different levels: individual, organizational, and systemic. Identifying the level is essential for effective intervention design. Whether the barrier is internal, that is stemming from an individual or their immediate organizational surroundings or external and is part of the entire administrative or political culture, determines strategies to overcome it (Jennings & Hall, 2011; OECD, 2020).

Individual level is represented by barriers to evidence use that are rooted in personal skills, attitudes, experience, and abilities. Many of these barriers are common to both civil servants and elected officials, these include personal inability or unwillingness to work with evidence, understand the evidence presented, individual biases, or being generally overwhelmed with too much information (Aula, 2023; Bejko & Dauti, 2018; Cheng et al., 2024). The case of elected officials is, as mentioned, further complicated by the inherently political nature of decision-making in public administration and the desire to satisfy the voter and be voted for again. Political pressures can then complicate the work of civil servants, too (Honig & Coburn, 2007). Individuals who have experienced evidence-based practices and are familiar with scientific methods are more likely to adopt similar approach in their own work (Jennings & Hall, 2011; Raymaekers et al., 2025). Individual skills most frequently missing when dealing with evidence are the analytical capacity and interpretation skills and knowledge of methodologies used in processing data into information and relevant knowledge (French, 2019; Head, 2008; Jennings & Hall, 2011). Attitudes towards evidence might also be pushing against use of evidence. Lack of skills often results in reduced receptiveness to evidence, lack of trust, and preference to retain established decision-making and policy-making processes based on intuition (Donadelli, 2020; Isett et al., 2015; Veselý et al., 2018). Personal bias and lack of experience compound the challenges, often leading to hesitancy or resistance in adopting evidence-based approaches (Head, 2008; Phillips et al., 2020).

At the organizational level, a rational and results-oriented culture, supported by access to information, time for analysis, skilled personnel, and leadership commitment, fosters effective evidence use (Raymaekers et al., 2025). The most frequently cited barrier to evidence use in any capacity are usually the time constraints, whether caused by excessive agenda (Davies & Nutley, 2000), or by the large amount of time evaluating the evidence at hand would take (Cheng et al., 2024). Access to data or information that precedes knowledge is also a factor (Cairney, 2016; Isett et al., 2015) as is the lack of infrastructure to process it (Honig & Coburn, 2007). Both are frequently caused by the chronic monetary deficiencies in public administration. The lack of data, information, and finally knowledge may however stem from inadequate communication which too constraints use of evidence-based approaches (Honig & Coburn, 2007; Mills et al., 2021). Individual organizations lack intradepartmental coordination good enough to act on existing data and information (Cairney, 2016), and the problem is exacerbated at intraorganizational level (OECD, 2020). This altogether brings to the fore efficiency of processes in public administration that should support everyday use of evidence. Combined with high turnover and political appointments (Bejko & Dauti, 2018), civil servants frequently struggle also with disinterest or lack of support from the political and organizational leadership (Cheng et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2017; Petrescu & Lambru, 2021). These organizational barriers collectively hinder the consistent integration of evidence into decision-making, making it difficult for public administration to fully realize the potential benefits of evidence-based approaches in everyday operations.

At systemic level, local context comes into play and an evidence-based approach should be based on evidence that is relevant to the local context (Mills et al., 2021). Aula (2023), too, posits that any evidence used should be locally relevant, not only to a place but also to an institution making the decisions. This prompted the shift from the technocratically perceived evidence-based policies to evidence-informed ones (Dorren & Wolf, 2023). The local knowledge can of course be gained from public, however, the public understanding of evidence-based approaches is frequently as insufficient as is the case of civil servants and elected officials themselves (Ball & Head, 2021) resulting in limited participation. Another aspect of systemic level is the political nature of public administration. Not only is the evidence-based approach hindered by ideologies, desire to be voted for again which can results in data manipulation (Newman et al., 2017; Raymaekers et al., 2025) or political cycle (Vesely et al., 2018). It is also constrained by the strict regulatory environment of public administration (Jackson et al., 2020), a sector which remains deeply entrenched in established routines and resistant to change that evidence-based approaches might bring (Kelstrup & Jørgensen, 2024; Petrescu & Lambru, 2021). The resistance to change is in direct contrast to political change that is rather frequent in public administration resulting in preference for short-term projects and actions rather than waiting for results of long-term research (Dorren & Wolf, 2023). Head (2008, 2010) repeatedly hints at the misalignment between policy cycles and achieving research objectives. The organizational barriers already mentioned insufficient communication channels in individual organization, that much is true within the system of public administration itself, the data repositories are as fragmented as is frequently the power structure itself (Bogensneider & Corbett, 2011; Cairney, 2016) who does not leant itself to efficient use of existing data. Financial constraints frequently prevent generation or processing of institutions own data to use in the decision-making process (Cheng et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2020). These persistent financial and structural barriers compound the challenge of integrating evidence-based practices into the everyday workings. Implementing evidence-based approaches within public administration face a complex mix of individual, organizational, and systemic barriers. These range from personal skills and attitudes to entrenched routines, fragmented information channels, and chronic resource limitations. Overcoming these challenges requires better understanding of these barriers at all levels, including the municipal level, so that even local governments can move closer to realizing benefits of evidence-based decision-making and policymaking, achieving improved outcomes for their communities.

3. Research questions

This study aims to explore and better understand the barriers that hinder the use of evidence-based approaches in municipal decision-making. Using a combination of content and thematic analysis, the research identifies and categorizes barriers based on semi-structured interviews with municipal officials and elected representatives.

The goal is to examine both the frequency and perceived weight of these barriers and to determine whether their distribution is influenced by contextual factors such as gender, professional role, or the size of the municipal office.

To guide the research, the following questions were formulated:

- What types of barriers to evidence-based decision-making are most perceived in Czech municipal governance?
- How are these barriers distributed across different analytical levels (individual, organizational, political)?
- To what extent do gender, role (civil servant vs. elected official), or the size of the municipal office influence how barriers are perceived?
- Which barrier categories carry the greatest perceived weight among respondents, and what does this suggest for targeted policy support or intervention?

The overarching assumption of this study is that while barriers may be widely distributed, their perceived relevance and prevalence are not necessarily conditioned by individual or institutional attributes. Nonetheless, the study seeks to empirically verify this assumption to inform better-tailored recommendations.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study applies a two-stage qualitative analytical design that integrates content analysis and thematic analysis to examine barriers to EBDM. The rationale behind this combined strategy lies in its capacity to map and explain the distribution of perceived obstacles as reported by political and administrative actors.

In the first stage, a directed content analysis quantified and categorized respondents' statements according to a three-level typology of barriers: *individual*, *organizational*, and *political-systemic* (Nutley et al., 2007; Newman et al. 2017). This allowed for systematic comparison of how different groups perceived and articulated specific categories of obstacles. Frequencies of coded segments provided an empirical basis for identifying which types of barriers are most mentioned and by whom.

A quantitative account of code frequency alone did not reveal the substance and internal logic of barriers. Therefore, in the second stage, the study employed thematic analysis to deepen the interpretation through an inductive, data-driven process. This qualitative deepening aimed to explore how respondents constructed meaning around barriers and how they interrelated at the narrative level.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis offers a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data, helping explore the underlying reasons, dynamics, and experiences that shaped the perceived barriers identified in the content analysis. As Lochmiller (2021) and Naeem et al. (2023) suggest, thematic analysis is particularly suitable for public administration research, where context and actor interpretations play a pivotal role.

The process followed abductive logic (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006): initial coding was guided by the predefined typology, subsequent stages remained open to emergent sub-themes that cut across categories. These inductively developed subdimensions reflected more granular and nuanced obstacles not captured in the original framework.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) and artificial intelligence-supported tools were used to manage and refine this process (Lee et al., 2020). Content analysis provided the structure and scope of perceived barriers across cases, while thematic analysis supplied the interpretive depth necessary to understand their meanings and implications.

4.2 Participant Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to gather diverse views from 46 participants across 31 Czech municipalities, including mayors, deputy mayors, municipal secretaries, and heads of departments involved in administrative, policy, and budgetary decision-making. Efforts were made to reflect institutional diversity across municipalities by including respondents from urban and rural settings, as well as from central and peripheral regions, allowing for cross-context comparison. The sample balanced elected officials with administrators to examine both political and bureaucratic aspects of evidence use in local governance.

Out of 46 participants, 29 were males and 17 females. The sample included 14 mayors (11 men, 3 women), 3 deputy mayors (2 men, 1 woman), and 1 male elected council member. Administrative officials included 8 municipal secretaries (6 men, 2 women), 16 department heads (8 men, 8 women), and 4 data analysts (1 man, 3 women). Participants represented various hierarchical levels to provide a comprehensive view on EBM in municipal governance. For analysis, respondents were grouped into two categories: political representatives (18 respondents) and administrative officials (28 respondents). The municipalities involved spanned 14 administrative regions across the Czech Republic, ensuring wide geographic representation.

The sample included municipalities with a range of administrative office sizes[†]. Most represented categories were medium-sized offices with 250–499 employees (9 cases) and 100–199 employees (7 cases) with fewer offices in the 50–99 and 200–249 employee categories (3 cases each). Small (<25 employees) and very large (>1,000 employees) offices were rare. The number of elected municipal representatives was sourced from public records[‡]. A polyserial correlation analysis on July 5, 2025, confirmed strong link between office size and number of representatives ($r = 0.978$), consistent with proportional representation. Therefore, office size served as the main grouping variable for further analysis. For this purpose,

[†] Data on the number of municipal employees were retrieved from the Czech Statistical Office's Register of Economic Subjects, using municipality-specific identification numbers (IČO), on July 5, 2025: <https://apl.czso.cz/res>

[‡] The number of elected municipal representatives was retrieved from the official election results available at Seznam Zprávy (<https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/p/vysledky-voleb/2022/komunalni-volby>), accessed on July 5, 2025.

offices were classified as small (1–49 employees), medium (50–249), or large (250+).

Conducting 46 interviews was sufficient for the analytical goals due to the sample's diversity. In qualitative research when using semi-structured interviews to explore diverse roles and institutional contexts, conceptual saturation is prioritized over statistical representativeness (Mason, 2010). Methodological literature recommends a sample size of 20–50 interviews for heterogeneous groups and complex topics to achieve thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Malterud et al., 2016; Vasileiou et al., 2018). This number provides a solid foundation for analyzing multilevel barriers to evidence use in local governance.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews between December 2023 and July 2024, conducted either in person or online based on participant availability. A flexible interview guide maintained consistency while allowing for in-depth exploration of emergent themes. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation.

A combined deductive–inductive coding approach was applied. A deductive framework, based on key implementation science models (Nutley et al., 2007; Newman et al. 2017), categorized barriers into three analytical levels:

- Individual (knowledge, attitudes, cognitive frames, personal motivation),
- Organizational (administrative routines, processes, institutional culture, internal data practices, technical or human capacity),
- Systemic (broader legislative, financial, political context influencing the use of evidence).

The authors used ATLAS.ti for data organization, coding, memoing, and report generating. The codes, memos, and data segments were exported into Excel, where further content and thematic analyses were performed.

Eighteen interviews were manually coded, while AI assisted with coding the remaining 28. In the first phase, human coders annotated fragments and assigned them to the three categories; these annotations were used to train the AI model. The AI then processed the remaining transcripts, tagging text segments and providing justifications for its classifications. A 5 % random sample of AI-coded segments was reviewed by a second researcher.

To evaluate the reliability of the coding framework for categorizing barriers at individual, organizational, and political/systemic levels, inter-coder reliability was tested. Of 46 semi-structured interviews, the first researchers manually coded 18, yielding 277 barrier-related segments. A random sample of 50 fragments (approximately 6%) was selected for reliability testing. These fragments were independently re-coded by an AI-based assistant (ChatGPT-4, OpenAI), without prior access to the original definitions or coding rationale. The AI was instructed to classify each fragment into one of the three categories based solely on its content. Initial agreement was achieved in 33 out of 50 cases (66 %). In the second round, the same fragments were provided to the AI along with a brief justification by the

first researcher explaining the rationale behind each coding. Adding the additional context, agreement increased to 76% (38 out of 50).

Emerging subcategories within each level were identified through inductive coding by AI, facilitating the creation of classification trees that mapped more granular barrier types. This abductive approach follows Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006). Recent research (e.g., (Cook et al., 2024; Flanders et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2024)) shows that AI effectively supports qualitative analysis tasks like coding, theme identification, and translation when accompanied by human oversight.

Multiple researchers conducted coding with regular intercoder agreement checks. Methodological triangulation was applied by comparing themes from interviews with secondary data (e.g., municipal reports, strategic documents) and insights from existing literature. This process enhanced the validity, transparency, and transferability of the results.

5. Results

A total of 692 barrier-related statements from 46 interviews were classified as individual (182), organizational (295), or political (215). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed a significant difference in how barriers were perceived across levels $\chi^2(2) = 29.27$, $p < .001$. This indicates that respondents did not perceive all types of barriers equally. Most barriers were seen at organizational level, highlighting systemic and managerial obstacles to implementing EBDM.

Table 1 summarizes the number of identified barriers to evidence-based approaches across all interviews, grouped by individual, organizational, and political levels. Barriers are further categorized by respondents' gender, professional role, and office size. These figures reflect coded statement frequencies, not respondent counts; individual participants could contribute multiple excerpts, and some responses were coded under several barrier levels. As such, the table provides a quantitative overview of the distribution of barriers across groups for further content interpretation.

Table 1: Frequency of Coded Barrier-Related Statements by Gender, Governance Role, and Size of Municipal Office

	Gender		Group		Size of municipal office		
	F	M	Elected officials	Civil servants	Small	Medium	Large
<i>Individual</i>	59	123	80	102	14	83	85
<i>Organizational</i>	119	176	128	167	17	138	140
<i>Political</i>	84	131	89	126	15	82	118

Source: Authors' contribution

Chi-square tests found no significant relationship between barriers perceived and gender $\chi^2(2, N=692) = 3.196$, $p = .202$; professional role, $\chi^2(2, 692) = .310$, $p = .856$; and municipal office size, $\chi^2(4) = 4.78$, $p = .311$. This indicates that views of

individual, organizational, and political barriers are broadly consistent regardless of respondent demographics or institutional context, suggesting these challenges are structurally embedded in local governance.

5.1 Individual barriers

A key outcome of the qualitative analysis was the identification of individual-level barriers hindering EBDM implementation, including deficits at each stage of the DIKW model from data literacy to the application of knowledge and wisdom in decision-making. These issues stem from patterns in competence, culture, motivation, and context rather than isolated individual flaws. Analysis of 182 coded fragments revealed five core categories with the most common lack of expertise (56), motivational deficits (41), and psychological or attitudinal barriers (39).

A frequent barrier is the general lack of analytical skills, data literacy, and evaluative competence among local government officials. This problem manifests in various forms: inability to navigate digital tools and statistical indicators to deeper difficulties in interpreting, contextualizing, and utilizing empirical information for decision-making. This deficiency is often accepted as a norm within administrative culture, as one senior official remarked: *"I just don't know how to work with credible data."* (ID 93)

This admission shows the skills gap is both a technical and psychological barrier. Many respondents or their colleagues rely on informal methods because they lack formal training or confidence, as one noted: *"We work with different software, but the question is how well colleagues actually know how to use them."* (ID 222)

Several respondents admitted lacking personal drive to seek or use evidence in their roles (lack of motivation), often viewing it as irrelevant or futile: *"Why should I do this if no one uses it?"*, or feeling disconnected from policy work. Motivation was low even where resources were available but ignored. For example: *"We're doing it here and now—why should we be doing it differently?"* (ID 144) These remarks reflect a narrow professional identity, prioritizing compliance over engagement and innovation.

The preference for intuitive or habitual decision-making (or decision-making style) emerged as a salient barrier to EBDM. Many officials reported relying on routines, precedent, or gut feeling rather than systematic analysis, which reduces transparency and accountability. A notable example came from a respondent who stated: *"I don't prepare any supporting analysis. It's not something we do here. Before council meetings, I just draft the minutes and go over the agenda myself. It's more about clarifying my own thoughts than collecting data. We don't write any explanatory notes or justification reports either. These decisions are mostly made based on experience or routine."* (ID 120)

Table 2 summarises the main individual barriers from the qualitative analysis, with related subthemes and definitions.

Table 2: Summary of Main Themes and Subthemes for Individual Barriers

Main Theme	Subthemes	Short Definition
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Lack of Analytical and Methodological Skills	Poor data literacy, weak evaluation skills, incorrect interpretation of results	This theme refers to deficits in data analysis, evaluation, and methodology needed to apply evidence-based approaches effectively.
Psychological and Attitudinal Barriers	Fear of change, low self-confidence, reliance on intuition, risk aversion	This includes individual psychological traits or mindsets that hinder openness to change or analytical reasoning.
Decision-Making Style	Intuitive vs. data-driven decisions, routine-based judgments, operational shortcuts	It captures preferred ways of decision-making, often favoring intuition or routine over data-informed methods.
Motivational Deficits	Resignation, procrastination, emotional burnout, detachment from purpose	This theme covers low emotional engagement, lack of drive, and withdrawal from proactive roles in decision-making.
Lack of Expertise and Experience	Insufficient training, low familiarity with tools, fragmented knowledge	This concerns the lack of domain-specific or practical expertise needed to make sense of and apply data.

Source: Authors' contribution

5.2 Organizational barriers

At the organizational level, barriers often arise from municipal office structures, poor information sharing, limited analytical skills, and ineffective internal processes. These issues usually reflect a lack of structured support and clear responsibilities rather than motivation. The analysis identified eight organizational barriers, mainly related to capacity and resource limitations (74 codes), data and information challenges (47), and management or leadership gaps (35).

A common obstacle to EBDM stems from low awareness or understanding of evidence-based practice. Many employees are unfamiliar with the concept and available tools, which reduces interest in using evidence and hinders building internal expertise. As one municipal officer remarked: *“In terms of awareness, maybe only around one percent of our clerks would actually know what evidence-based decision-making really means.”* (ID 314) The issue is compounded by the lack of professional development focused on data skills.

Another organizational barrier relates to inefficient administrative processes often caused by outdated routines, excessive paperwork, and limited digitalization. Such inefficiencies consume time and limit the capacity to make data-driven decisions. Some officials are overwhelmed with basic administrative tasks, restricting opportunities for strategic or analytical work. As one respondent shared: *“I end up manually signing around 250 to 300 documents every day. It physically hurts — I have carpal tunnel syndrome from it — and honestly, that's the part of my job I dislike the most. If this could be eliminated, I'd be very happy.”* (ID 515)

Resistance to change is a significant organizational barrier, often rooted in ingrained habits, psychological reluctance, or apprehension about digital transformation. Even

with new technologies available, employees, particularly older staff, may stick to outdated methods and avoid training, making adoption challenging. Resistance may manifest passively through continued reliance on outdated methods or avoidance of training. As one interviewee commented: *“Older employees especially refused to work with it. And it's always a huge struggle to convince them that this is a necessary step. People here generally perceive the transition to a new system as burdensome, rather than something positive.”* (ID 11)

Another barrier is poor organizational structure and culture in municipal offices, which often lack specialized roles for strategic and analytical tasks. This leads to weak coordination and missed opportunities. One respondent observed: *“We want to move the city forward and achieve something, so it often means that some office should take on more responsibilities. I know an example where the mayor's office includes investment technicians, grant specialists, and legal staff — that's the core team that knows how to work with these things — but most offices aren't structured that way.”* (ID 377) Fragmented responsibilities and unclear mandates further limit effective data use.

Gaps in communication and collaboration challenge effective EBDM in municipalities. Limited teamwork, poor interdepartmental coordination, and lack of informal knowledge-sharing impede collaboration; as one employee observed: *“In our office, the ability to work as a team is absolutely essential. It's not just about holding a regular weekly meeting; you need to be able to track what your colleague is doing and recognize which of your insights are relevant to them — and when. If someone can't do that, it becomes a real problem.”* (ID 75) This quote reflects how insufficient real-time awareness and coordination can obstruct meaningful collaboration and knowledge flow.

Insufficient management and leadership further hinder EBDM in municipalities. This manifests as weak strategic planning, inconsistent human resource policies, lack of cross-departmental coordination, and an over-reliance on individual initiative rather than institutional frameworks. Many offices struggle with siloed departments, inadequate delegation, poor knowledge management, and a lack of motivation or accountability from senior management. This leadership gap often results in underuse of data, reactive governance, and inefficient internal communication. One respondent captured this challenge: *“So when someone leaves a position, there is no system for passing on knowledge. It just disappears with the person.”* (ID 501) This reflects the broader problem of absent institutional memory and weak leadership mechanisms to retain and transfer organizational knowledge.

A frequent barrier to evidence-based governance is inadequate data governance and archiving practices. Many municipal offices lack organized systems for storing and retrieving information, resulting in inaccessible and unreliable data. Data repositories are disorganized and inconsistently maintained, leading to inefficiency and underuse. As one respondent noted: *“We do have a shared server you can access, but honestly, it's incredibly disorganized—everyone has created their own folder over the years, so there are over 100 folders. Where do you even start looking?”* (ID 98). This quote clearly illustrates the disorientation caused by

uncoordinated digital infrastructure, which hinders routine access and diminishes motivation to work with data altogether.

Finally, limited capacity and resources are the most frequently reported barrier. Tight personnel limits, restricted budgets, and outdated IT infrastructure make it difficult to build and sustain evidence-based systems. Even motivated staff struggle due to resource constraints: *“We simply lack the capacity - and above all, the money.”* (ID 162) These constraints are not merely operational, they shape the entire institutional culture around learning and decision-making.

Table provides an overview of the main organizational barriers to EBDM, including their key subthemes and concise definitions.

Table 3: Summary of Main Themes and Subthemes for Organizational Barriers

Main Theme	Subthemes	Short Definition
Lack of Awareness /Understanding	Limited knowledge of data-based decision making, Lack of familiarity with evidence-based principles, Low perceived value of evidence in policy	Barriers related to insufficient awareness or understanding of how evidence can inform decisions.
Inefficient Administrative Processes	Cumbersome internal workflows, 'Time-consuming documentation procedures, Low digitalization of internal processes	Includes procedural inefficiencies within institutions that hinder effective implementation of evidence-based approaches.
Resistance to Change	Cultural inertia and conservatism, Fear of new approaches, Organizational reluctance to innovate	Describes the reluctance of individuals or institutions to adopt evidence-based practices due to comfort with status quo.
Organizational Structure and Culture	Hierarchical rigidity, Siloed departments, Weak interdepartmental cooperation	Focuses on how structural and cultural attributes within the organization hinder integration of evidence into decision-making.
Communication and Collaboration Gaps	Limited data sharing, Poor inter-organizational communication, Lack of platforms for collaboration	Barriers caused by inadequate communication and collaboration mechanisms across departments or institutions.
Management and Leadership Deficit	Lack of vision and strategy, Limited leadership support, Absence of clear guidance on data use	Insufficient managerial drive or leadership commitment to promote evidence-based policymaking.
Data and information	Low data quality, Fragmented data systems, Insufficient analytical reports	Barriers related to the accessibility, quality, and usability of data necessary for informed decision-making.
Capacity and Resource Constraints	Insufficient staffing, Lack of financial resources, Time constraints	Constraints related to limited human, financial, and time resources required to support evidence-informed processes.

Source: Authors' contribution

5.3 Systemic (contextual, political) barriers

Of the 213 coded fragments classified as political barriers, five main categories emerged. In this regard, political culture and attitudes were dominant and further broken into five subthemes: *passive acceptance of the status quo*, *resignation toward systemic change*, *disinterest in data and evidence*, *political norms and traditions*, and *fear of accountability*.

Within *passive acceptance of the status quo*, several patterns were identified. Many respondents reflected resignation or habitual inertia pointing to a belief that “things have always been done this way” or that “change is not worth the effort.” For instance, one respondent (ID 242) noted that “*generational turnover plays a role – some people just don’t want to deal with anything new at their age.*” Similarly, another (ID 367) observed, “*there’s virtually no demand for data among colleagues,*” indicating a prevailing culture of passivity. Another frequent motif was low political responsiveness. Actors expressed reluctance to act unless prompted by higher-level authorities. One respondent (ID 466) admitted, “*the boundaries are set by the law—we don’t really have a choice,*” highlighting the constraints of rigid institutional frameworks. Additionally, there was clear evidence of demotivation, where failed attempts to initiate change led to a belief that further action would be futile. Respondent (ID 263) recalled, “*I presented clear data showing the project was worthwhile, but the council decided otherwise,*” reflecting frustration over the rejection of evidence-based proposals. The lack of civic engagement appeared as a reinforcing factor: political leaders perceived little pressure to act differently. One respondent (ID 56) explained, “*most citizens are not active—this seems to be the case across the country.*”

Ad hoc decision-making is a common result of political disinterest in evidence-based governance. Decisions are driven by immediate political moods, short-term interests, or gut feelings rather than data, analysis, or strategy. Respondents noted that decisions are sometimes made despite available information or even without it at all. Political motives, the desire for quick approval, and fear of unpopular choices frequently outweigh long-term considerations. As one respondent observed: “*Everyone says the data should be used, but in practice, it just doesn’t happen—because that’s a matter for the distant future, and the votes are needed now.*” (ID 151) Another elaborated on the marginal role of strategic documents: “*If we’re talking about the normal, everyday level of governance, it’s definitely not about strategic plans. The strategic plan just lies there untouched—no one follows it, nor any other plan. So long-term planning doesn’t really play a role in decision-making.*” (ID 518) A third summarized the underlying political logic: “*They decide based on what brings them political points. The idea still prevails that building a stadium will win more favor than renovating a theatre.*” (ID 551) These decisions are often reactive and emotionally motivated, with data serving to justify actions already taken. Analytical approaches are limited by both time and a lack of political commitment to long-term, data-driven perspectives.

An overview of the main organizational barriers to EBDM is presented in Table, highlighting core subthemes and succinct definitions.

Table 4: Summary of Main Themes and Subthemes for Systemic/Political Barriers

Main Theme	Subthemes	Description
Institutional Frameworks	Legal, institutional, or intergovernmental barriers	Rules or formal structures limit flexibility, prevent coordination, or impose external constraints including fiscal decentralization rules.
Political Culture and Attitudes	Passive adherence to routines, disinterest in change	Cultural norms and habitual behavior inhibit experimentation, learning, or change in governance.
Political Will and Interests	Short-termism, self-interest, lack of leadership, avoidance of political responsibility	Decision-makers prioritize political gains or avoid controversial actions at the cost of long-term strategy.
Public Engagement and Participation	Low public demand, weak civic pressure	Lack of citizen interest or pressure reduces incentives for evidence-based or strategic policymaking.

Source: Authors' contribution

6. Discussion

The study found that while local government representatives value EBDM, analytical approaches are limited by both time and a lack of political commitment. Organizational barriers were cited most often, followed by political and individual ones. Perceptions of these challenges did not differ by gender, role, or municipality size, indicating that they are widespread and structural in local governance.

Regarding individual barriers, the research found that civil servants often lack the necessary skills to effectively access and apply research evidence, a challenge that is particularly acute among those burdened by operational responsibilities. These findings are consistent with international literature, which highlights insufficient individual capacity and limited confidence in evidence use as widespread issues (French, 2019; Head, 2008). However, the study also revealed a novel perspective: psychological distance from data, especially among non-specialist staff, can create a sense of irrelevance and inaccessibility, discouraging evidence engagement. While prior studies have emphasized the role of technical skills and training to improve the analytical capacity and abilities to work with evidence (Davies & Nutley, 2000; Haecker et al., 2017), this research adds that affective and cognitive factors, such as a workplace culture that values intuition over analysis, further undermine individual motivation for evidence use. Thus, this study underscores the importance of addressing deeper cultural and psychological barriers to foster routine evidence-based thinking in local government settings.

Organizational barriers identified in this study align with broader findings in literature. Time constraints were among the most frequently cited as in previous studies in excessive agenda that prevented spending time on creating or evaluating

evidence (Cheng et al., 2024; Davies & Nutley, 2000), or indeed learning more about evidence-based approaches as the lack of knowledge also appeared among the barriers mentioned at the municipal level. Inertia of public administration at municipal level combined with personal disinterest in learning new things also presented a significant obstacle as it is indeed understood from previous research (Petrescu & Lambru, 2021). Furthermore, this echoes research that highlights the slow nature of changes in public administration (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011; Parkhurst, 2016) and unwillingness to change without a clear legal mandate (Nikiforova et al., 2024). Financial constraints may have been mentioned directly less often, but lack of financial resources emerged when pointing out insufficient infrastructure or indeed lack of dedicated personnel within the organizational structure of a municipal office. Lack of finance is well documented and pervades all aspects of public administration including initiatives for evidence-based approaches (Raymaekers et al., 2025; Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025). It also impacts infrastructure for data collection and storage. Data and information, even if present is frequently inaccessible across departments and institutions, which was pointed out by the respondents as well as previous research, frequently owing to lack of financial resources (Capano & Malandrino, 2022; Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025) but also public administration inertia, concerns over security, misuse or misinterpretation (Nikiforova et al., 2024).

As for systemic barriers, this study confirmed that political pressures may hinder EBDM even at municipal level of a decentralized administration (Davies & Nutley, 2000). The analysis showed that evidence is often used to justify positions, rather than foster real debate, a trend common in politicized environments (Nutley et al., 2007; Parkhurst, 2016) and that issue bias may limit the debate (Cairney & Oliver, 2017). Respondents noted that political cycles rarely align with the time needed for rigorous evidence production, leading to the preference for immediate, visible outcomes over thorough data (Aula, 2023). This underscores the need for institutional transparency safeguards and strategic communication capacities to navigate value conflicts and stakeholder tensions in democratic governance (Dorren & Wolf, 2023). Addressing these issues demands technical fixes and recognition of policy's political nature and pragmatic engagement strategies that bridge research and politics (Parkhurst, 2016).

In summary, while local government actors widely recognize the value of EBDM, persistent individual, organizational, and systemic barriers continue to hinder its integration into routine practice. Issues, ranging from limited skills and psychological distance to entrenched cultural norms and political short-termism, highlight the need for comprehensive strategies that address not only technical capacity but also the deeper cultural and institutional contexts shaping evidence use in governance. Addressing these obstacles is essential for fostering a more robust, transparent, and accountable public administration at the local level.

7. Conclusion

Evidence-based approaches in public administration can improve the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of governance (Cantarelli et al., 2020; Viterouli et al., 2024). Yet, its use at the local level faces individual, organizational, and systemic barriers. This study contributes to a growing body of literature presenting an in-depth qualitative exploration of how municipal actors perceive and navigate these challenges through thematic analysis of interviews. It provides a grounded understanding of the specific conditions under which evidence is used or neglected. This research lays a strong theoretical foundation for further empirical and applied work. It forms part of a broader research project aimed at strengthening EBDM use within public administration. The next step involves translating the identified needs and conditions into practical tools, such as structured methodologies, guidance, and training syllabi to facilitate the design of educational modules and capacity-building programs for public officials.

The study lays groundwork for designing standardized instruments to assess organizational readiness, attitudes, and practices of evidence use. A follow-up quantitative survey, based on identified themes, could confirm findings across a broader sample and links between various barriers and facilitators.

It underscores that while awareness of the value of evidence grows, routine EBDM needs coordinated investment in people, infrastructure, and institutions. Evidence alone does not drive change. Its impact depends on systems and capacities that can interpret and apply it to fit local governance realities.

8. Limitations of the Study

This study's qualitative approach limits the generalizability of its findings. As elected officials and senior administrators were purposively sampled, results are closely tied to specific local contexts and institutional cultures, making them hard to apply broadly (Crick, 2020; Lim, 2024). While the diversity of offices provided diverse perspectives, the goal was analytical insight into recurring patterns and mechanisms in EBDM, not statistical generalization.

Researcher subjectivity and interpretive bias are significant limitations, as qualitative interview analysis is influenced by researchers' perspectives (Busetto et al., 2020). While flexibility allows for depth and nuance, it can lead to inconsistencies if unchecked (Mwita, 2022). To mitigate this, coding reliability was addressed through systematic triangulation, collaborative coding, and regular peer consultation.

The study addressed the complex, large data set by combining human and AI-assisted coding. Researchers developed the initial thematic framework through inductive analysis and subsequently, AI was deployed as a secondary coder, trained on human-coded data. To ensure methodological robustness, inter-rater reliability was calculated between the researcher and the AI, as well as between researchers independently reviewing the AI-coded data. This hybrid approach allowed for scale and consistency while maintaining transparency in analytical procedures.

Despite safeguards, qualitative research relies on researcher judgment. Interpretation is influenced by prior experience, topic familiarity, and cognitive framing. This

subjectivity recognized feature of qualitative research that requires continuous reflexivity and methodological transparency, rather than a flaw.

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