# Review
# Policy Labs and Evidence Use in Education

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Produced by OTT Consulting
for the Jacobs Foundation

**2023**

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# About this review

The Jacobs Foundation is collaborating with EdLabs (education policy labs) in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Switzerland, and Colombia. Its mission: to strengthen evidence use in education policy and practice.

Policy labs are a popular approach across diverse sectors. Despite their prevalence, however, there is little systematic evidence of their effectiveness. The Jacobs Foundation seeks to address this gap, as part of a broader collective effort to maximise the effectiveness of EdLab models in supporting the use of evidence in education. In October 2023, the foundation convened partner EdLabs and other interested stakeholders, with the aim of catalysing alignment and collaboration and identifying next steps and key questions to explore.

To move forward in their endeavour, the Jacobs Foundation and its partners first need to understand the existing evidence base on policy labs as a means of institutionalising evidence use in education. To this end, the review weaves together three main strands of fast-growing literature and practice: evidence-informed policy (across sectors); evidence use in the education sector; and the rapid expansion of policy labs in this space. It provides an initial analysis of key issues, lessons, and gaps. The review then considers the implications of this information for policy labs aiming to strengthen evidence use in education. We conclude with practical recommendations for the Jacobs Foundation, its partners, and other stakeholders to advance their efforts.

The review was produced through a learning partnership between the Jacobs Foundation and OTT Consulting. An earlier version of this report was circulated as background material for the convening in October 2023.

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# Foreword

The Jacobs Foundation has been dedicated to advancing excellence in research on learning and education since our establishment in 1989. In line with our longstanding commitment, we are delighted to introduce this review, exploring how education policy labs (EdLabs) can enhance evidence generation and utilisation in education.

EdLabs are innovative partnerships designed to amplify the use of scientific evidence in shaping educational policies and their implementation. The Jacobs Foundation is working with government and research partners to establish EdLabs in Switzerland, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Colombia to ensure that evidence drives education policy and practice in each country. The approach is part of a broader effort to contribute to the creation of national architectures of sustainable systems change in education.

However, despite their potential, a global knowledge gap persists on how to design, implement, and measure the impact of EdLab mechanisms. In collaboration with OTT Consulting, we have initiated a project to comprehensively review the evidence base on EdLabs. Building on desk research of academic and grey literature, content analysis, and interviews with key stakeholders, OTT has produced a rich and nuanced summary of existing knowledge on EdLabs, offering valuable recommendations for stakeholders in the field.

To validate and complement this review, we co-hosted, along with the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), a global convening on EdLabs. This convening united representatives from ministries of Education, EdLab implementing units, research institutions, multilateral agencies, and global funders and served as a catalyst for increased alignment and collaboration among EdLabs implementers, funders, and partners. The emerging strong alignment among this diverse community has set the stage for increased collaboration – both globally and at the country level – to overcome barriers to evidence uptake in education policy and practice. Specific commitments include advancing global efforts to build a living repository of evidenced education interventions, and developing an effectiveness framework to measure the impact of EdLabs mechanisms.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Clara Richards, Marcela Morales, and Emily Hayter at OTT Consulting for leading this review. We also thank all the organisations and individuals who have contributed their insights to this work. We hope that this review, and the actionable commitments that have emerged from it, will serve to galvanise a broader movement among policymakers, researchers, and philanthropic organisations, to build – and strengthen the use of – evidence around EdLabs in the education sector. Let us work together to ensure that every child has the evidence-based learning opportunities that they need to thrive.

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **AFIDEP** | The African Institute for Development Policy |
| **ASEAN** | Association of South East Asian Nations |
| **BCURE** | Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence |
| **CDD** | Center for Democratic Development |
| **CERI** | Centre for Educational Research and Innovation |
| **DAP** | The Data for Accountability Project |
| **DfID** | Department for International Development |
| **EIP** | Evidence-informed policy |
| **EIPM** | Evidence-informed policy making |
| **FCDO** | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office |
| **GDP** | Gross domestic product |
| **IDB** | The Inter-American Development Bank |
| **IDRC** | International Development Research Centre |
| **LMIC** | Low- or middle-income country |
| **MEL** | Monitoring, evaluation, and learning |
| **MENA** | Middle East and North Africa |
| **MP** | Member of parliament |

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| **ODI** | Organisation formerly known as the Overseas Development Institute |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PEERSS** | Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems |
| **QURE** | Quality Use of Research Evidence |
| **R&D** | Research and development |
| **RCTs** | Randomised controlled trials |
| **RISE** | Research on Improving Systems of Education |
| **SDG** | Sustainable Development Goal |
| **SEDI** | Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| **UNICEF** | United Nations Children's Fund |
| **USAID** | United States Agency for International Development |
| **WHO** | World Health Organization |

# The opportunity

# The opportunity

Within the education sector, there is a pressing need to institutionalise and strengthen the way evidence is used in policy and practice – and donors and practitioners are increasingly interested in addressing this through the use of policy labs.

In fact, policy labs have become a popular approach across multiple sectors. They are ideally positioned to help practitioners understand some of the most pressing questions around evidence use – and to strengthen it.

But the rapid expansion of the idea has resulted in multiple, differing understandings and definitions of what a policy lab is, and what it is for. To a certain extent, 'policy lab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe many things that overlap with other, more conventional, entities, such as think tanks and research units. We also often see great disparity between the theoretical ideas about and practical application of policy labs.

We call this the 'labification' conundrum.

And because of this conundrum, the evidence base on the effectiveness of policy labs is lacking, making it difficult for donors to make informed decisions about their investments and their impact.

But all is not lost. After all, 'labs' are intended to be spaces for innovation, testing and learning.

**We believe that the education sector has a real opportunity, not only to strengthen evidence use in education and to further the global body of knowledge about policy labs, but also to make an important contribution to the wider evidence-informed policy field – which historically has been dominated by the health sector.**

At the EdLabs Global Convening Event hosted by the Jacobs Foundation, we saw a great appetite among donors and other stakeholders to move forward in maximising the effectiveness of EdLab models.

And now is a great time to start. Most of the EdLabs represented at the convening event are in their early stages – making this the time to influence their design.

To move forward in driving the success of the EdLab model – and avoid reinventing the wheel – we must first understand the existing evidence base for their effectiveness. Therefore, this review starts with an overview of what we already know, before proceeding to explore the implications and practical next steps.

# Introduction

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# 1. Introduction

This review was designed to complement an event that the Jacobs Foundation hosted in October 2023, exploring the current barriers to evidence use within education policy and practice and focusing on the role of Education Labs (EdLabs) in overcoming these challenges[1].

The paper summarises our review of the existing evidence base for the effectiveness of policy labs in strengthening evidence-informed policy, and identifies the relevant implications and recommendations for EdLabs in particular.

It draws on more than two decades of research and practice across three intersecting areas: evidence-informed policy; evidence in education; and policy labs.

## 1.1. The Jacobs Foundation's EdLabs

The Jacobs Foundation is working with a group of partners to support the establishment and systemic institutionalisation of Education Lab, or EdLab, mechanisms in four countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Colombia and Switzerland. The EdLabs are at varying stages of establishment and are taking different approaches in their design and activities.

This extract from the Jacobs Foundation's concept note on EdLabs describes the foundation's goals for the initiative, and the impacts it hopes to see:

1 This review was originally published in December 2023. This updated version (June 2024) incorporates minor corrections.

### Box 1: EdLabs goals and impacts

EdLabs are hoping to achieve three main common goals:

1. Generate new and thorough evidence led by a collaboration of both domestic and international research partners in order to address the main gaps outlined in a shared national research and learning agenda and to inform the implementation of teaching and learning practices.
2. Promote relevant, accessible and usable findings in unison with existing high-quality evidence relevant to national and sub-national education needs from global and domestic sources.
3. Facilitate the effective adoption and use of meticulous research in both policy and practice by building the capacity and the understanding of policy makers and practitioners. This would aid in the development and implementation of policies and in the design, scaling, and evaluation of teaching and learning practices.

The envisaged impacts of these goals are to:

- Create a robust and relevant evidence base that exists in each country to inform decisions on policy and planning, as well as to elicit the implementation of teaching and learning practices.
- Encourage policy makers and practitioners to use high-quality research to inform their decisions and to implement evidence-informed policies and practices.

As a result of the Jacobs Foundation's work to establish and institutionalise education systems in each country, EdLabs would be able to serve the holistic development of every child with evidence-informed learning.'

*Source: Jacobs Foundation (2023) Concept note on EdLabs*

## 1.2. Terminology

We understand the **'evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) field'** to encompass a broad spectrum of researchers, practitioners, policymakers and knowledge-brokering organisations, all concerned with the production, communication and use of evidence for policy making. This spans cross-sectoral approaches focused on evidence and knowledge systems, as well as pockets of thinking and practice within sectors, such as health, agriculture or education, which focus on knowledge systems in specific policy domains.

When we use the term **'evidence use'**, we are referring to the 'demand side' of the EIPM field. This means strengthening the demand for evidence from users (policymakers or practitioners) rather than increasing the production and influence of evidence.

Within this field, we see **policy labs**, in their various forms, as both 'evidence use' interventions in their own right (for example, through the establishment of an embedded unit) and as mechanisms to implement other interventions targeted at creating demand for evidence (through activities that the lab might carry out, such as training policymakers or convening dialogue between policymakers and academics).

Our review therefore focuses on two key design choices for policy labs and their partners to consider. These are:

- where to situate the policy lab, and
- what the policy lab should do.

Both decisions should be grounded in a clear sense of purpose: what kind of changes in evidence systems and evidence use the lab is aiming to achieve and why.

## 1.3. Methodology

### Research questions

Our research questions were expressed in two layers:

- An exploration of evidence use, focusing on definitions and types of evidence use, the factors that affect it, and the lessons that have been learned about addressing these factors. The questions in this layer pay particular attention to the envisaged 'evidence use' activities and outcomes of the Jacobs Foundation's EdLabs, including capacity development, fostering cultures of evidence use, and fortifying relationships between producers and users with the ultimate goal of strengthening evidence ecosystems in education.
- An understanding of **policy labs** in general and EdLabs in particular. Here, our research questions revolved around four key areas of investigation: definitions, types and functions, effectiveness, and lessons learned. We explored the current landscape, challenges, and potential opportunities in policy and education labs.

A full list of our research questions can be found in Annex 1. The final research questions drew on an initial set of 'learning questions' developed collaboratively with the Jacobs Foundation and its EdLab partners. These are listed in Annex 2.

## Desk review

We reviewed academic and grey literature across our three thematic areas. The focus was largely on English-language literature but also incorporated some Arabic, French and Spanish texts. Based on our experience of the topic, we understood from the outset that literature specific to EdLabs could be sparse; therefore, we expanded our scope by examining policy labs and evidence use more broadly. This allowed us to analyse the interplay between evidence use and education policy, aiming to decipher specific implications for EdLabs.

To ensure a broad and inclusive review, our search terms included policy labs, education labs, and various keyword combinations focusing on evidence-informed education policy. Given the rapid growth in the literature on evidence use in policy over the past few years, our analysis drew from academic insights across political science, public administration, and other sectors. On the practitioners' side, we noticed a dominance of grey literature from the international development sector, reflecting multiple initiatives over the past decade to fortify evidence use across different contexts in the Global South. However, this literature mirrored the limited focus of these efforts on the education sector. Instead, the literature on evidence use in education primarily originated from Global North regions such as the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia. It also became clear that there was limited cross-referencing between literature from the education sector and the 'evidence-informed policy' sector.

Yet thanks to the significant mentioning of policy and innovation labs in academic texts – both as abstract concepts and in relation to other, sector-specific contexts – we were able to extract relevant insights to enrich our comprehension of policy labs in the education sphere. This amalgamated knowledge, including from other sectors, recognises the possibility of interdisciplinary learning that might be beneficial to EdLabs. However, we do acknowledge the education sector's distinctiveness and the fact that, while some principles might be adaptable, effective work in the field demands a specialised approach.

Within the literature returned by our search terms, our desk review concentrated primarily on:

- Insights from 'embedded' lab models, or units set within governmental entities. These were rare compared to the vast documentation on research collaborations and intermediary activities external to governments.
- Practical experience related to the establishment and functioning of labs and similar initiatives. We referred to learning briefs, project reports and blogs by project stakeholders, alongside external evaluations, to understand the practicalities often missed in academic literature.
- Endeavours focused on enhancing evidence incorporation within policy. Although we noted the potential to build comprehensive approaches that target both policy and practice, our primary focus remained on evidence use in education policy, excluding the vast literature that dwells on evidence use in teaching practice. We have noted this as an area for further exploration in our learning questions in Annex 2.

## Key informant interviews

To supplement our desk review, we conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews. Our interviewees, detailed in Annex 3, included researchers, policymakers, funders, and practitioners, all with experience at the intersection of the three areas of our enquiry (policy labs, education, and evidence use). We carried out 16 interviews overall.

## Review of existing policy labs

Recognising the scant academic literature specific to EdLabs, our exploration expanded as described above. However, our review did not comprehensively cover all existing labs. Instead, we strategically selected and analysed those that we judged most relevant.

Our inclusion criteria entailed labs that are focused on education and have an online presence, either through websites or other dynamic information sources. We considered entities working within the realms of pre-primary, primary, and secondary education or related areas. We excluded labs focused on tertiary education.

Using these criteria, we produced an initial list of EdLabs derived from a web search. The list was augmented by additional education-focused labs suggested by interviewees. Even if these entities did not expressly classify themselves as labs, they were included in our study. Ultimately, we reviewed a total of 27 EdLabs.

## Limitations

Our methodologies, though robust, have intrinsic limitations. First, we emphasise that this is not a systematic review. We have been selective in our focus across our three interlinked areas of enquiry. Second, the literature review pointed to several critical evidence gaps with implications for our study. For example, evidence purporting to show the efficacy of EdLabs was often found to be context-specific and anecdotal (typically shared by their proponents) and undermined by a lack of comprehensive documentation and rigorous evaluation. In addition, the review revealed a disparity between academic discourse and practical implementation that suggests a need for further examination of the self-definition and operational dynamics of policy labs. And finally, the absence of coherent typologies for labs limits the possibility of cross-comparison, and hinders a deeper understanding of their operations and outcomes.

It should also be noted that a significant limitation of the online review of EdLabs was the existence of defunct websites and outdated information. This made it difficult to access comprehensive and up-to-date data for every EdLab.

An additional factor relevant to our study can be seen as both a limitation and a strength. It is important to disclose that some of our team members have been personally involved in executing some of the evidence use models described in this review. We acknowledge that this prior experience in the field will have influenced the review; however, we have strived for objectivity at all times, and believe that the team's experience and knowledge represent a net benefit to our study.

# What we already know

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# 2. What we already know

Before we identify a way forward with efforts to maximise the effectiveness of policy labs in institutionalising evidence use, we must first take stock of what is already known. This will allow us to build on, rather than duplicate, existing knowledge.

This section provides a succinct overview of existing knowledge on two areas: 1) evidence use in education, and 2) policy labs.

*Figure 1: Section contents summary*

### Evidence use in education

This section covers:

- How has the EIPM field evolved?
- What is 'evidence use' and what do we know about how to strengthen it?
- What is 'evidence' in the education policy context?
- What does 'institutionalisation of evidence use' mean and what does it look like in education policy?
- What strategies can help institutionalise evidence use?
- What has been learned about strengthening evidence use capacities and culture in education?
- Which are the best change agents to target in the education policy ecosystem?

### Policy labs

This section covers:

- What are policy labs and how are they understood in different contexts?
- What are different types of policy labs and the main roles they play?
- How effective have policy labs been in influencing policy?
- What key lessons have been learned from their operations?
- What contributions have policy labs made; what challenges have they faced; and what is their main potential for the future?

## 2.1. Evidence use in education

In this section, we explore the following questions:

- How has the evidence-use-in-policymaking field evolved?
- What is 'evidence use' and what has been learned so far on how to strengthen it?
- What is 'evidence' in the context of education policy?
- What is 'institutionalisation of evidence use' and what does it look like in the context of education policy?
- What strategies can be adopted to institutionalise evidence use?
- What has been learned from the education sector in particular about how to strengthen evidence use (especially capacities and cultures of evidence use)?
- Which change agents within the education policy ecosystem need to be targeted in order to institutionalise evidence use?

### *a. How has the evidence-use-in-policymaking field evolved?*

**Research and practice on evidence use in policy-making originated in the political science and public policy fields in the late 1970s.** Carol Weiss is often recognised as a pioneer of the field, with her 1977 study on the use of social research in policy-making.

**Since then, interest in the use of evidence in policy decision-making has evolved into a multidisciplinary arena of research and practice spanning the disciplines of implementation science, political science, public administration, and governance.**[2] Although the field has, to date, been dominated by the health sector, issues around access to and use of evidence within education policy have also been areas of interest for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) over the past two decades (Révai, Hill & Torres, 2023).

2 See, for example, Head, 2015; Supplee, Boaz & Metz, 2023; Cairney, 2016; Langer et al., 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Young and Court, 2004.

**In the international development sector, a focus on research and evidence use emerged from the early 2010s,** with funders such as the Department for International Development (DfID) (through its Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence [BCURE] programme) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) beginning to explore how to maximise the impact of their large portfolios through tools and approaches focused on policy influence (Carden, 2009). Meanwhile, the William T. Grant Foundation has also been developing a funding portfolio of research on evidence use in decision-making in the USA (Supplee, Boaz & Metz, 2023). Major funders of evidence use in international development include the Hewlett Foundation, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the IDRC.

**Today, there is a dynamic field of research and practice focused on evidence use, including in education policy and practice (Box 2).** The establishment of the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a global call to action to strengthen evidence use in decision-making. This complements lively regional networks and communities focused on evidence use, including the Africa Evidence Network, the Evidence-Informed Policy Network hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union Joint Research Centre's Knowledge4Policy community, the Transforming Evidence Funders' Network, the International Network for Government Science Advice, and several networks focused on evidence use in parliaments.

### Box 2: Evidence networks and communities

A number of international networks of governments, funders, researchers, and practitioners are focused on evidence use in decision-making across sectors. The examples below host virtual and in-person events, convene communities of practice, and maintain resource repositories on evidence use. Many have regional or national chapters associated with them. Together they form a dynamic, international, multilingual community, driving forward research and practice on evidence use.

- Africa Evidence Network
- Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges
- European Union Joint Research Centre/EU4Facts Community
- International Network for Government Science Advice
- Latin America/Caribbean Evidence Hub
- Semana de la Evidencia
- Transforming Evidence Funders Network
- What Works Global Summit
- WHO Evidence Informed Policy Network (EVIPNET)

**In education, interest in evidence use continues to grow**. A Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel was founded in 2020 by the FCDO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank out of recognition that the education sector was lacking in the kinds of high-level expert advisory panels that are more common in other sectors such as health. The panel provides broad guidance on education resource allocation and reform in low- or middle-income country (LMIC) contexts and is made up of a diverse group of policymakers and experts from the fields of economics, education and psychology. Meanwhile, the global Building Evidence in Education donor group has been active for over a decade as a collaboration mechanism for over 30 donors seeking to boost the production and use of rigorous evidence in education policy-making. The group includes a subset interested in knowledge systems strengthening. In recent years, the Africa Evidence Network has had a frequent focus on the education sector in its work and events.

*Figure 2: From evidence production to evidence use*

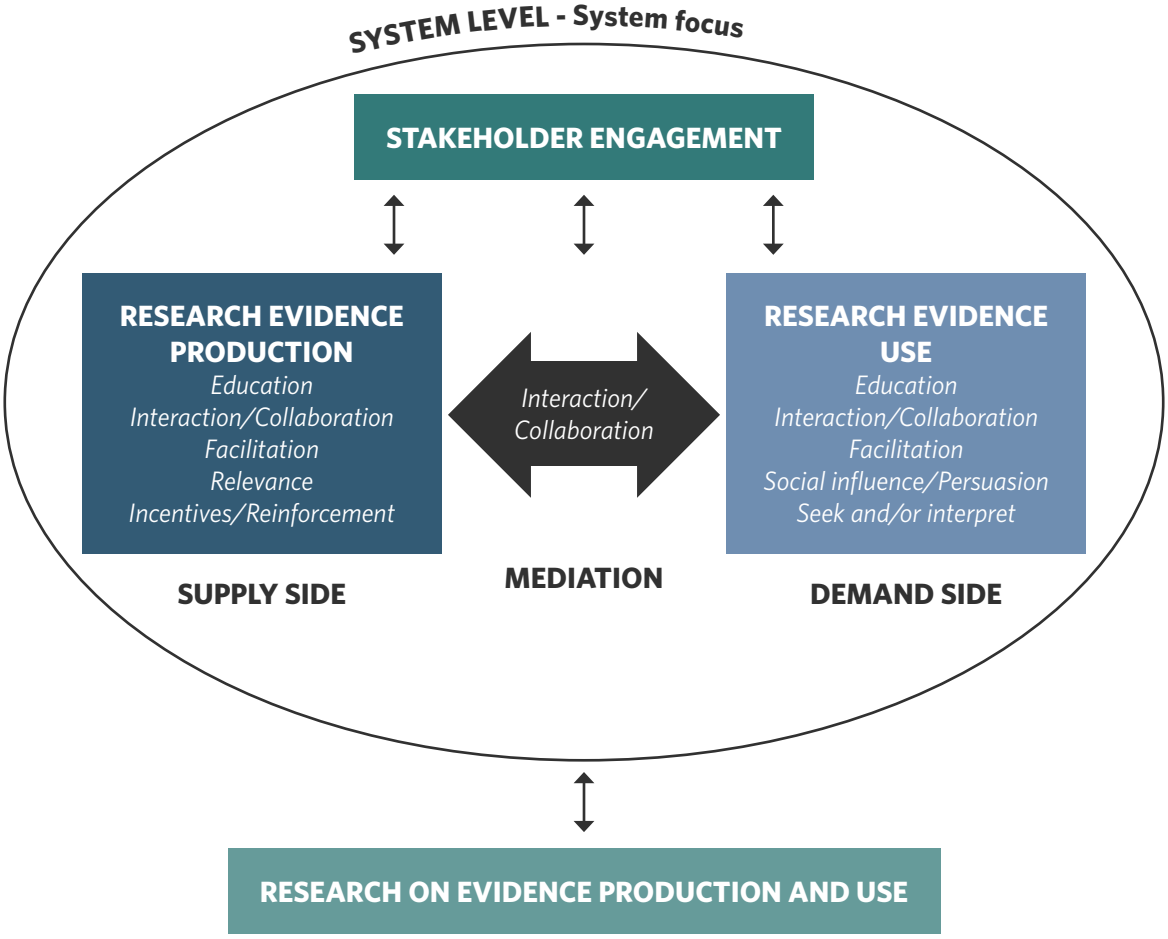



*Figure adapted from: Gough et al. (2011)*

Earlier approaches to evidence use concentrated on the 'supply side'; that is, focusing on the production of research and evidence, and then considering how to use it for greater impact or policy influence[3].

**However, there is now widespread acceptance in the field that only increasing the production and communication of evidence cannot result in evidence *use*.** The focus has expanded to include the 'demand side', starting with an understanding of the users of evidence and responding to their priorities, needs and behaviours in relation to evidence.

3 Increasingly nuanced conceptualizations of pathways from research production to uptake have been developed. These include the then-DFID's influential guidance note on research uptake, first published in 2013, and the Impact Initiative's Wheel of Impact (Georgalakis & Rose, 2019; see also Rose & Tofaris, 2021), developed through the experience of over 200 social science research projects in 79 countries. Such approaches have explored the nuances of partnerships between producers and users of research, particularly against the backdrop of structural North–South inequities in research production. They have also emphasized the need for capacity of researchers and knowledge brokers to support research uptake in ways that go beyond simple/linear "dissemination" to strategically navigate complex, nonlinear, and inherently political policymaking landscapes.

'Creating and communicating research that is relevant, timely, and actionable is a feat unto itself', observes Vivian Tseng. 'But, on its own, it is not enough to foster an education system that is able to learn from and incorporate research findings into policy changes, professional development, curricula, and teaching and learning.' (Tseng quoted in Hunter, 2017). As one interviewee concluded, 'We've learned that getting better at pushing doesn't enhance the pull.'

**The Jacobs Foundation's own trajectory and approach to evidence use reflects that of the broader field.** From an initial focus on funding research production in the education sector, like other funders such as the FCDO and the William T. Grant Foundation, the Jacobs Foundation grew increasingly interested in how to maximise the use of this research in education policy. The ambitions of the policy lab approach, in supporting both production and use of education evidence at the same time, reflect the current consensus that 'supply side' and 'demand side' approaches should be addressed together.

### *b. What is 'evidence' in the education policy context?*

**A foundational underpinning of the 'demand side' approach to evidence use in policy is the adoption of a wide definition of 'evidence'.** As Supplee, Boaz and Metz (2023, p.6) explain: 'the field [of research on research-use] is grounded in the premise that research is not the only legitimate form of evidence used in policy and practice. Evidence can include theory, data … patient or participant input, politics, and values […] the field … seeks to understand how all these forms of evidence interact to support decision-making.' This builds on a long history of research, including that by Jones et al. (2013) at ODI, which proposes three interlinked forms of evidence that can inform policy: research, practice-informed knowledge, and citizen (or participatory) knowledge. Regardless of the labels used, two conclusions are clear: firstly, that multiple types of evidence intersect to inform policy; and secondly, each of these forms of evidence has unique power dynamics and stakeholders involved.

**Many major recent efforts to strengthen evidence use reflect this broad definition.** For instance, the Global Commission on Evidence recognises that research evidence is combined with experiential knowledge, citizen or participant input, and other forms of evidence to inform decision-making (Global Commission, 2022, p.2). The commission uses a framework of several interlinked types of research evidence that are used in decision-making: data analytics, modelling, behavioural/implementation research, qualitative insights, evidence synthesis, cost-effectiveness analysis, and

guidelines (ibid, p.46). Most recently, a 2023 evaluation of the Hewlett Foundation's EIPM grant-making portfolio re-examined the question of whether efforts to strengthen evidence use should focus on just one type or a range of evidence types. The evaluation concluded that while specific types of evidence, such as impact evaluations, do have unique merits, policy-makers find most value in a broad range of evidence types, and therefore focusing evidence-use interventions on only one type of evidence is not the most effective approach (Dalberg 2023, p.38).

**In the education sector, the review found a mixed picture in terms of how 'evidence' is defined.** A broad definition is being called for by many stakeholders seeking to strengthen its use in decision-making; the African Education Research Funders Consortium, for example, argues that 'credible evidence can take multiple forms … quality standards should avoid being narrow and restrictive, and supporting a diverse set of approaches and models' (2022). Burns (2023), meanwhile, describes efforts to resolve the complex issues of combining methodologies and types of evidence in education over the past 15 years. Roberts-Hull and Jensen (2022), drawing on prior work by Coburn, provide an example of what a range of evidence types can look like in education, identifying three particular categories of evidence:[4]

1. **Research evidence,** such as professional trade books, resources and articles. Interviewees pointed to specific forms of research that are useful in education, including evidence synthesis (such as systematic reviews or 'evidence gap maps', as used by UNICEF); implementation research (such as that called for by Supplee et al., 2023); and cost-benefit analysis (such as the 'Smart Buys' that were the focus of the first report of the Global Evidence in Education Advisory Panel. There have also been efforts in recent years to expand qualitative and mixed-methods research within education.
2. **Sector-generated data,** such as student assessment data, feedback surveys, and others. There is a strong subsection of the 'evidence use in education' community focused specifically on data use in education policy; areas of interest include strengthening data ecosystems via education management information systems at a national level and gathering, synthesising and using data on attainment, attendance, retention, teacher attendance and other key factors. Given the decentralised nature of education, this data is held at multiple levels of government.

4 The categories in this list are adapted from Roberts-Hull and Jensen (2022) and have been expanded with additional examples from interviews and the literature reviewed for this paper.

3. **Practice-informed advice from individuals and organisations,** such as consultants, universities, professional associations, non-profit organisations and vendors. As is true for the evidence sector in general, studies from the education sector have found that existing trust in the source of the knowledge is a critical factor in determining both *which* of these types of 'experiential evidence' get used, and *how* they are used. For instance, Candelaria in the Philippines (2013) and Finnigan in the USA (2021) both found that education policymakers were most likely to seek evidence from trusted personal networks.

**The evidence landscape in education remains contested.** There are persistent tensions, for instance, on the importance of quantitative versus qualitative forms of evidence; the merits and drawbacks of randomised control trials (RCTs); and the definitions of 'rigour'. And this debate extends into the practical realms of educational implementation and policy-making. Stakeholders – including school boards, teachers, policymakers, and researchers – often diverge in their views about the usefulness, applicability, and relevance of different forms of evidence (Tseng, 2012).

Contributing to this discourse, an interviewee emphasised the significance of considering and utilising evidence from less conventional sources – such as citizen inputs and every-day classroom practice. In the informant's view, there is a wealth of evidence at the local level, where the practices of teachers and local directives serve as vital and contextually relevant sources of innovation. As well as highlighting the indispensable nature of quantitative metrics, they also advocate for the integration of qualitative evidence, asserting that to truly understand educational outcomes, one must 'go beyond' traditional boundaries and adopt a holistic approach. This perspective underscores the need to expand our understanding of what constitutes evidence in education beyond conventional academic research – and to incorporate the experiences and practices of educators and practitioners. Evidence of this type – at both the national and subnational levels – provides critical insights into effective educational strategies.

**The use of RCTs in educational research has increased over the past 15 years, and they are now seen as key tools for generating evidence in the field** (Connolly, Keenan & Urbanska, 2018). But although their widespread adoption speaks to the trust placed in their methodology, there is a growing discourse around their limitations and the need for a more nuanced approach to research in education. Critics argue that RCTs, in their current form, can oversimplify complex cause–effect relationships, be too descriptive, and not contribute sufficiently to theoretical understanding (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018; Patel,

2019; Courtney, 2019). The model thrives under specific inclusion/exclusion criteria and uniform intervention delivery, but may struggle in the diverse and dynamic environment of education, where interventions often require customisation and adaptability. Despite these criticisms, RCTs continue to be a mainstay of educational research, primarily due to their ability to isolate the effects of specific interventions.

The increasing debate about and awareness of the limitations of RCTs highlight the importance of shifting from method-centric to question-centric approaches in educational research. More educators and researchers are recognising the need to prioritise the questions that need answering, over dogmatic reliance on a particular methodology. This is echoed by one key informant, who emphasises the importance of assertively focusing on the pertinent questions before selecting the most appropriate and relevant methods. He advocates for a mixed-method approach as an effective strategy for addressing complex questions in education. This growing awareness marks a significant stride in ensuring that research methods are applied judiciously, taking into account the unique contexts and complexities of educational environments.

**A broadened definition of evidence is not just an academic consideration. It is also a powerful tool to challenge and navigate the intricate power dynamics embedded in global knowledge systems.** The disparities, especially between the Global North and South, and the inherent biases in research methodologies, are profound. As Christian Acemah from the Uganda National Academy of Sciences stated at a 2023 Global Young Academy conference:

> *A plurality and integration of knowledge systems makes science advice more relevant, accessible, and contextual. Replicating Western modes of inquiry as the only and exemplar of 'evidence' production does not serve African EIPM. Any partner from outside Africa and those within Africa itself must work toward overcoming the coloniality of knowledge and knowledge production. That means reckoning with systems of oppression. (Acemah, 2023)*

This statement sums up the urgent need to address the colonial legacies in knowledge production and dissemination, and also applies to the need for a more inclusive and diverse approach to evidence in education. It calls for a paradigm shift, whereby different knowledge systems, particularly from the Global South, are integrated into and valued equally within the global discourse, thereby democratising knowledge and empowering local communities to contribute meaningfully to educational practices and policies.

### *d. What is evidence use?*

**Different ways of categorising and understanding evidence use are employed in the sector.** Many of these build on a taxonomy from an influential evidence-in-education project led by Gough at al. (2011). More recently, the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges has identified at least four types of evidence use, and in an edited volume of African case studies, Goldman and Pabari (2021) use a separate four-fold categorisation of evidence use, following Johnson et al. (2009).

**Although applications of these categories vary, they typically hinge on two underpinning distinctions.** First, it is necessary to differentiate between 'evidence users' who are individual decision-makers and those that are organisations or systems. At the individual level, concrete knowledge, skills and awareness of evidence are key elements of what Goldman and Pabari (2021) call 'conceptual use' or 'building greater understanding' (also sometimes known as 'transparent use'). Second, at the organisational and systemic levels, there is a distinction between one piece of evidence directly informing one decision (often known as 'instrumental use') [Goldman & Pabari [2021]; Rose & Tofaris [2021], and multiple pieces of evidence being collectively and systematically considered on an ongoing basis (known as 'process use' in Goldman and Pabari [2021], or 'embedded use' as in Rinnert & Brower [2017]).[5] Although the Jacobs Foundation's EdLabs do not use a specific framework to categorise the types of evidence use they aim to support, their goals as currently conceived can be understood to span several of these types of use implicitly.

5 Some of these types of use also appear in key frameworks for research uptake, such as the ESRC 'Wheel of Impact' approach or ODI's ROMA approach to policy engagement. Here we have focused on frameworks that centre on use rather than influence.

*Figure 3: Examples of evidence use from DfID-funded projects*

| | Transparent Use | Embedded Use | Instrumental Use |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | Increased **understanding and transparent use of (bodies of) evidence** by policymakers. | No direct action is taken as a result of the evidence, but **use of evidence becomes embedded** in processes, systems and working culture. | Knowledge from robust **evidence is used directly to inform policy** or programme. |
| **Examples** | ***BCURE VakaYiko:*** Several roundtables were held to help bridge the gap between research and policy making on climate change in Kenya and to help decision-makers acknowledge the full body of evidence on climate change in the country. | ***BCURE Harvard:*** The researchers worked directly with government technicians to create a Report Dashboard designed to serve as a one-stop shop for over 50 indicators deemed crucial for evaluating MGNREGA. | ***BCURE University of Johannesburg:*** In South Africa the evidence map, published by DPME, fed directly into the decision-making of the White Paper on Human Settlements. |

*Figure adapted from: Rinnert and Brower (2017)*

**Initiatives aiming to strengthen evidence use typically implement different approaches to support each type of use,** as discussed by Langer and Weyrauch (2021, p.40). Interventions such as training workshops are a common entry point and might target conceptual or transparent use; while new organisational systems, structures and procedures would be introduced as interventions targeting embedded or 'process' use. Figure 3 shows an example of how different activities from DfID's BCURE programme targeted different categories of evidence use – in this case transparent, embedded, and instrumental – respectively. Interventions targeting different types of evidence use have also been the subject of various systematic reviews and landscape maps (e.g., Langer et al., 2016; Taddese & Anderson, 2017; Weyrauch et al., 2016b; Punton, 2016b).[6]

6 The myriad possible activities and approaches to strengthening evidence use at individual, organisational and systemic levels were categorised by the SEDI project into an 'interventions toolbox', which built on an INASP capacity development design framework. The toolbox was intended to map all the possible activities that could be carried out in response to opportunities for change identified through the diagnostics.

*Figure 4: In their own words: Education policymakers' uses of evidence*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **To define the problem**<br>'The other side of it was also trying to get some more specificity on what the problem definition was... So looking at system data [and] what that was telling us about what the issues were here.' | **To flag a case for change**<br>'So the PISA piece, this is about building a case for change. Wake up. The system believes it's doing well and it's not. And why PISA? Well, because it's probably the best thing we've got that can say, "Here's a comparative number that you should pay attention to".' | **To keep things on the agenda**<br>'So it was also about trying to find a way to build in [references to certain ideas or areas of work] because it meant... you could come back to it at a later date and say "Well, we said we were going to do this".' |
| **To clarify international practice**<br>'You also look at research where, you know, the context is quite different but there might be just a nugget that sort of says, "Well, actually that issue is worth having a look at in terms of how that might work here".' | **To clarify state/national trends**<br>'So there was a bit of looking at Victorian system performance and putting together Victoria's performance story, and then say "Well actually, we can see that there are issues here and here".' | **To identify key drivers/levers**<br>'We spent quite a bit of time developing a research paper that was giving an outline of the key drivers that we saw in the research.' |
| **To challenge proposals**<br>"We came back to them with a set of evidence which explained why you wouldn't do that... Sothero wore situations like that where a specific piece [of evidence] helped to bring people around to something that was more sensible.' | **To challenge assumptions**<br>'And that's where again the evidence did come in to say that teachers and all professionals really need to be intentionally supported to build the skills and capabilities to do that work rather than just a broad assumption that there's an inherent skill set there.' | **To get buy-in from key audiences**<br>'This is really interesting - why is this specific researcher named in there? ...Because [that person] carries weight with teachers in Victoria... That name means that teachers will buy in in Victoria.' |
| **To design interventions**<br>'So... the broad parameters were fairly well set by the government. So it then became a question of: Well how do you do that in a way that's going to maximise the likelihood of success? ... So the evidence was probably the thing that put in place a training programme for principals and school reviewers, for example.' | **To identify possible interventions**<br>'So to come up with something to do, you've got to look at what the data is actually saying about those specific areas and then think "Okay, well what does the research and avidence say actually works and makes a difference in teaching and learning which can impact on the data and improve our performance?".' | **To select interventions**<br>'Certainly the evidence has been a consideration in the deliberations about which strategies we'd prioritise or not... So, which ones in terms of beaing able to be implemented and having evidence base and being effective, should we keep on the list.' |

*Figure adapted from: Rickinson et al. (2019)*

An example of how these types of evidence use are targeted at project level can be seen in the Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) consortium's theory of change (see Annex 5), developed to guide evidence use interventions in Pakistan, Ghana and Uganda. It shows how the programmes' two technical workstreams – *evidence brokering* and *capacity development* – aimed at contributing to both embedded use of evidence (in structures and systems) and policy decisions by targeted policymakers. 'Transparent' or 'conceptual' use of evidence via improved policymaker capabilities to access, appraise, and use evidence were envisaged in this theory of change as an intermediate outcome contributing to these two overarching outcomes. Other project theories of change presented in Annex 5 show variations in how 'evidence use' is defined; yet the two core distinctions – between individual versus organisation/systemic evidence use and between direct versus ongoing impact on decision-making – can be detected in different ways in each.

**In the education sector, the literature contains a nuanced picture of instrumental and conceptual forms of evidence use, but less focus on embedded use.** A comprehensive range of evidence-use types within education in the USA is illustrated in a review by Finnigan (2021). These findings show that 'symbolic' use of evidence – where evidence is selectively used to justify a pre-existing position – appears to be the most common within this context. Finnigan argues that conceptual use of evidence, which sees changes in individuals' knowledge and understanding, is the most important – and appears to be prevalent, judging from policymakers' self-reports – but requires different methodological approaches to measure reliably. Instrumental use of evidence was found to be both extensive and varied across different parts of the US education system. In Australia, meanwhile, Rickinson et al. (2019) carried out interviews with education policymakers about their use of evidence (see Figure 4). Although these are framed through a 'policy narratives' lens, they can also be read as revealing first-person illustrations of different types of use.

### e. *What is 'institutionalisation of evidence use' and what factors affect it?*

**Institutionalisation can be understood as the combination of different uses of evidence on a sustained and systematic basis.** The WHO describes institutionalisation of evidence use as follows:

> *To institutionalise a process, approach or intervention is to make it integral to an organisation, society, or culture, so that it is seen as 'normal'. By aiming towards institutionalising EIPM within countries, evidence is meant to be regularly, systematically, and transparently used in decision-making, allowing improvement in policy development for societal progress. (WHO, 2023; see also Lucas, 2020; and Oronje, 2021).*

Institutionalisation is therefore a long-term goal, which evidence use mechanisms or interventions aim to contribute to. Policy labs or other evidence use mechanisms are not the end in themselves, but a means to achieve this longer-term outcome. At an August 2023 international convening on institutionalisation of evidence use, a speaker from the Ministry of Health in Oman pointed out that institutionalisation is a process as much as it is an outcome, and can involve multiple iterations of 'de-institutionalisation' or 're-institutionalisation' along the way (al Sabahi 2023; drawing on Kuchenmüller et al., 2022).

**A clear and consistent set of contextual factors affecting institutional evidence use emerges from across the literature.** The dynamic, political and non-linear elements of policy processes have been firmly established by researchers and practitioners in the evidence-informed policy sector for at least the past decade (ODI, 2004; Carden, 2009; Jones, Shaxson & Walker, 2013; Candelaria, 2013; Broadbent, 2012; Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Khumalo et al., 2021/22; Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges, 2022). As Stewart, Dayal, Langer et al. (2019) explain, 'an evidence ecosystem at a country level cannot be fully understood and appreciated without locating it in the context of a political and knowledge economy' (see also Thoto, 2021).

The same contextual factors affecting evidence use have been identified repeatedly, both in the general evidence-informed policy literature (for example Weyrauch et al., 2016; Wills et al., 2016a; Vogel & Punton, 2018; and more recently Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges, 2022; Kuchenmüller et al., 2022) and in that focused on education (Tseng, 2012; OECD, 2022; Finnigan, 2021; Roberts-Hull & Jensen, 2022; Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges, 2022, pp.83-84). Notably, these two bodies of literature appear to have arrived at the same set of factors independently, with very limited cross referencing between the two. Although contextual factors affecting the institutionalisation of evidence use are categorised differently in different places, they broadly consist of the following dimensions:

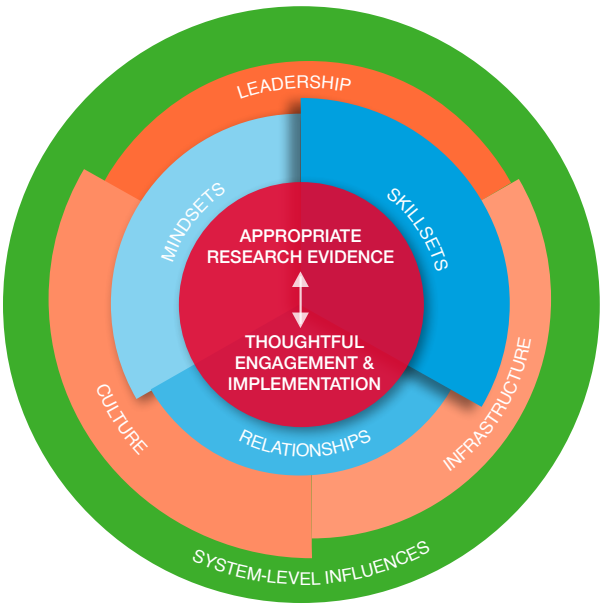
- **Political economy:** including an extensive list of factors, such as party political system (coalition or majority); electoral context; executive–legislative relations; politics of donor engagement; corruption; crises and transitions; and the role of the media.
- **The evidence ecosystem:** including aspects such as decentralisation/relationships within and outside government; relationships between producers and users of knowledge; epistemic communities; and the landscape of local evidence producers, including government think tanks or research producers.[7]
- **Organisational factors** within 'user' agencies (such as government ministries, departments, or agencies): including processes, structures and standard operating procedures; budgets; working cultures and incentives around evidence use; staffing structures; and infrastructural resources, such as access to research and databases.
- **Individual characteristics** of policymakers: including skills; knowledge; attitudes; motivation towards evidence use; and leadership behaviours.

Our review only identified one illustration of how all these factors intersect within the education sector: Monash University's Quality Use of Research Evidence (QURE) framework.

7 See Annex 4 for an indicative list of government education research institutes.

*Figure 5: Quality Use of Research Evidence in Education framework*

**Quality use of research evidence in education is defined as...**
the thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organisational enabling components within a complex system.




**CORE COMPONENTS**

**APPROPRIATE RESEARCH EVIDENCE**
The need for research evidence to be not only methodologically rigorous, but also appropriate for the educational issue, the context and intended use.

**THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION**
Critical engagement with the research evidence, shared deliberation about its meaning and effective integration of aspects of the evidence within practice.

**ENABLING COMPONENTS - INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

**SKILLSETS**
The knowledge and capabilities that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

**MINDSETS**
The dispositions, attitudes and values that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

**RELATIONSHIPS**
The interpersonal processes and connections that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

**ENABLING COMPONENTS - ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL**

**LEADERSHIP**
The organisational vision, commitments and role models that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

**CULTURE**
The organisational ethos, values and norms that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

**INFRASTRUCTURE**
The organisational structures, resources and processes that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

**SYSTEM-LEVEL INFLUENCES**

The complex interactions and inter-dependencies across the education sector to support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

*Figure reproduced from: Monash University, Quality Use of Research Evidence framework (2020)*

### *Factors with particular salience in education*

As mentioned above, many of the overarching factors affecting institutionalisation of evidence use within the education sector are broadly the same as those in other sectors (see for example Martin et al., 2022). However, our desk review, and particularly our interviews with education specialists, identified some factors that have particular significance in the education ecosystem and are likely to have strong effects on efforts to strengthen capacity and cultures of evidence use in the sector.

### *'Education is a political hot potato'*

**Education is often in the political crosshairs.** As one of the biggest areas of public spending (along with health), and one of the most immediately recognisable elements of public/state infrastructure in communities, education is often a priority for citizens and their elected representatives. And, as Kingdon et al. concluded in their review of the political economy of education, 'The paths and outcomes of educational policies are overwhelmingly impacted by political processes and practices' (2014, p.5). Interviewees described how deregulation and the role of the private sector; the growth of the middle classes and the role of elites; and the role of teaching unions are all key elements of the political landscape of education. In some ways, the level of political and public attention afforded to education can be seen as an opportunity – and sometimes even a prerequisite – for the institutionalisation of evidence use. All the African case studies of evidence use compiled by Goldman and Pabari (2021), for example, related to issues that already had political attention.

**However, in education, political narratives have typically focused more on access or physical infrastructure rather than educational outcomes – running counter to the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the consensus within the expert community.**[8] This can be seen in the growing popularity of free-secondary-education policies across sub-Saharan Africa despite a limited evidence base for their success (Gruitjers et al., 2023), or in the political focus on physical infrastructure discussed by Williams (2017) in an analysis of primary education in Rwanda. Kingdon

8 Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) places education quality at the centre of international education efforts. It shifts the focus from merely attending school to evaluating what young people are learning while they are at school. The thought, policy context and practice around education in development has evolved considerably since SDGs were adopted. In addition to thinking far more carefully about education quality, major international policy priorities include: inclusive education; an increased focus on education in emergencies and fragile context; the emergence of Early Childhood Education as a critical area of attention; and a focus on school system management and the importance of broad-based reforms that acknowledge how the system works as a whole.

et al. (2014, p.2) argue that 'clientelism, patronage and corruption are the three most intense political forces that push states to expand access to, rather than improve quality of, education'. But Burns (2023) believes that this is beginning to shift, with governments placing increasing attention on outcomes as a result of pressure from treasuries and finance ministries to demonstrate the effectiveness of education spending. This was corroborated by several interviewees, who pointed to ministries of finance as important stakeholders to engage in a politically savvy approach to strengthening evidence use in education.

**However, while politics was recurringly cited throughout our review as a key factor affecting evidence use, we were unable to identify any comprehensive studies of the politics of evidence use in education.** In its survey of education policymakers in 29 countries, the OECD (2022) found lack of political will to be one of the biggest factors affecting evidence use in education. Interviewees concurred. 'Education is a political hot potato', observed one interviewee; another pointed out that 'education was seen as an ideological battle to be won' by the previous president. Specific examples of the politics of evidence use in education are also sparse, with Candelaria's work in the Philippines (2013) serving as one of the only cases identified by this review.

This contrasts with a rich body of work on the politics of the education sector overall. For example, the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme's political economy analyses takes a very detailed and nuanced look at 12 different education systems, which it classifies into three different clusters, showing how entry points for improving educational outcomes differ across distinct political education contexts (Levy, 2022). This need for greater focus on the politics of evidence use in education has been recognised across the literature (see, for example, Coburn and Penuel 2016; Finnigan 2021), and Tseng's call to action is a timely reminder: 'Rather than viewing politics as a nuisance to be set aside, it behoves us to increase our understanding of how the political and policy process works and how it influences research acquisition, interpretation, and use' (Tseng, 2012).

### Box 3: Evidence use in education policy in Brazil

Brazil's Congress approved a new version of its main public education financing mechanism, the Basic Education Development Fund (FUNDEB) in 2020. Campos (2022) argues that five main factors interacted to result in a policy outcome that was highly influenced by evidence:

**a.** a shared problem definition that relied on systematic information, including indicators, feedback and technical feasibility discussions
**b.** the participation of relevant stakeholders from central, state and local government in the generation and interpretation of evidence, with a low level of engagement from federal government paving the way for greater involvement of other stakeholders including advocacy groups and think tanks
**c.** the use of multiple methods for problem identification and demonstration of technical feasibility including legislative acts, mathematical models, demographic data and other forms of evidence in a way that connected multiple epistemic communities
**d.** key policymakers who acted as evidence facilitators, in particular two critical legislative positions: the lead of the Special Commission and the bill rapporteur
**e.** the space provided by the balance of political forces, which had a common view of the aim of the policy (to transform FUNDEB into a permanent constitutional device) and interest in consulting evidence, though differing views on the relative importance of different types of evidence.

Campos argues that the policy outcome was 'highly influenced' by evidence, but uses the FUNDEB case study to propose a nuanced, 'gradual conception' of the use of evidence in policy, inspired by calls by Parkhurst (2017) to move beyond a simple 'used or not used' binary.

*Source: Adapted from Campos (2022)*

### *Policy and practice go hand in hand*[9]

**Educational outcomes, however defined, are as much a result of classroom practices as they are of policy design and implementation.** Although interest in evidence use in education began with policy, it has since expanded to encompass evidence use in practice (Burns and Schuller, 2022; Burns, 2023). Indeed, the literature contains a wealth of nuanced examples of evidence use by practitioners (see for example Rickinson et al. 2019; Hill, 2022; Torres, 2022; Hunter, 2017). Although there appears to be consensus that policy and practice are both important for evidence use, the relationship between them can be perceived in different ways. For some, policy and practice in education are spoken of in the same breath. For example, the QURE framework encompasses both policy and practice, and major education sector programmes such as the new FCDO 'What Works' Hub for Global Education also aim to inform both. However, the OECD found that the respective discussions on evidence use in education policy and practice have not informed each other as much as might have been hoped, and have instead developed in silos (2022). Burns (2023, p.7) argues that there has been a shift of focus from policy to practice over the past 15 years, which constitutes a 'strategic error' and has 'let [policymakers] off the hook' for their role in using evidence in education.

**The literature and interviews pointed to several implications of this dual focus on policy and practice.** First, as Georgalakis and Stanley (2020, p.10–11) found in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, policymakers and practitioners often have diverging evidence priorities: 'Reformers face the challenge of bridging the acute divide between the macro top-down goals typically set by policy makers, and the micro realities of practitioners at the school level'. Second, the contextual factors that come to the fore in policy and practice respectively are likely very different. For example, as one interviewee observed, the intensely political arena of national-level education policy is very different to the environment in education practice, which the interviewee felt might provide more opportunities for evidence use. Other interviewees pointed out that cultures of evidence use among teachers are different from those of both policymakers and researchers: 'in health, often the people generating the evidence are the same ones using it. In education there's more of a divide', said one interviewee.

9 As noted in the Limitations section, this review has focused primarily on evidence use in education policy and has only covered practice to the extent that this literature also includes it. We are aware that there is an extensive literature on evidence use in education practice and that the implications of this are relevant to EdLabs that aim to inform teaching practice.

### *A complex, decentralised stakeholder landscape*

**The decentralisation of education is a defining structural feature affecting evidence use in the sector.** The literature is clear that decentralisation opens up different political and contextual factors compared to those at national level. For example, interviewees described how decentralisation can provide entry points for strengthening evidence use in education policy at both national and state/provincial levels in federal contexts such as Pakistan and Brazil, while Finnigan (2021) found a wide variance in how different levels of the educational system in the US use evidence. However, Kingdon et al. (2014, p.2) found that promises of decentralisation in education are not fully realised because of the role of elites in preventing broad community participation in schools.

**The literature shows that – beyond a simple 'research–policy–practice' three-way nexus – the decentralised nature of education provides many other entry points for strengthening evidence use in the sector.** Potential entry points mentioned by interviewees included ministries of public administration and/or planning; the centre of government; other ministries with overlapping mandates (for instance, where girls' education is split between a ministry of education and of gender); and parliaments (specifically education committees and/or caucuses). Interviewees described multiple layers of education practice reaching the local level from the national and district levels, as well as from other providers such as civil society organisations or philanthropic initiatives. So decentralisation can clearly have benefits for the strengthening of evidence use within education. But the complexity of the landscape means that deciding where evidence use interventions should be 'housed' (or in other words 'where to try to institutionalise evidence use') is a critical design decision for policy labs and others involved in designing and implementing evidence-use interventions .

Table 1 presents an emerging overview of change agents in the education/evidence use sector that policy labs may need to consider.

*Table 1: Change agents/key stakeholders for evidence use in education*

| Within Ministry of Education (MoE) or 'host' organisation | Other government bodies | Political & civil society organisations | Private sector | Regional & international |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Evidence generation and use staff units (e.g. planning, policy, monitoring and evaluation) within the MoE<br><br>Education research bodies affiliated with the government (see Annex 4) | Ministry of Finance<br><br>Ministry of Planning<br><br>Ministry of Gender/Social Protection<br><br>Education committee in parliament<br><br>National research funding/ prioritisation body<br><br>Teacher training institutions<br><br>Provincial government departments<br><br>Municipalities<br><br>Local authorities<br><br>Inspectorates | Teacher unions<br><br>Parent associations<br><br>School boards<br><br>Religious institutions<br><br>Research organisations<br><br>Charities and philanthropic foundations (local and international)<br><br>Venture capitalists<br><br>Political parties<br><br>Media | Private school owners<br><br>Publishers<br><br>Furniture makers<br><br>Textbook writers<br><br>Computer manufacturers<br><br>Construction firms<br><br>EdTech | Governing bodies within regional blocs e.g. ASEAN, AU, EU<br><br>OECD<br><br>UNICEF<br><br>International lending agencies<br><br>Donors (to education sector and to research sector) |

### *'You can't reduce education to a number': Lack of consensus on outcomes*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the complex politics of the sector, education outcomes and measurement are contested. In terms of overall outcomes, there is a broad consensus that the overall aim of education systems is for learners to acquire the skills they need to live their lives productively and meaningfully. There are differing views, however, about what this looks like – and this can sometimes expand into fundamental theoretical questions. As one interviewee put it: 'There's a strong values element …

debates ... get very philosophical. If the aim is to build good citizens of tomorrow, how do you find evidence for that? What is a "good citizen"?'

Gershberg (2021, p.15) points to prior work by Mitchell and Mitchell to explain how different views of the purpose of education can lead to different motivations for driving – or impeding – reforms. Equally contested is the question of how to measure these impacts; for instance, there are debates about the extent to which indices of income and employment can be used as proxies for living a 'meaningful and productive life' when measuring the success of education. Some interviewees believe that these philosophical and values-based debates differentiate education from other sectors – such as health or environment – where it is felt there may be more commonly agreed or easily measurable outcomes.

The question of what outcomes to measure is also fraught with difficulty. For example, interviewees pointed out that teaching quality, attendance data and learning outcomes are not comparable across contexts; in any case, there are often critical data gaps, and no globally accepted measures of social and emotional wellbeing – despite efforts by the OECD and others to introduce them.

Interviewees pointed to debates about the prominence of national and international qualitative measures of student attainment, with the criticisms summarised by one interviewee thus: 'you can't reduce education to a number'. The unsuitability of using averages in contexts with very high inequality was also noted by one interviewee, who gave the example of Brazil as a place where a national average is not a useful number.

Given these issues – both with defining educational outcomes and with the actual collection and analysis of data – there is significant potential for a mismatch between policymakers' needs and the quality and amount of evidence available. This represents a barrier to evidence use in education that policy labs and others aiming to strengthen evidence use in the sector must contend with.

### *Tensions between global and local priorities*

**The landscape of evidence use in education is also characterised by tensions between global standards and local priorities.** This hinges on two related points of contestation. The first focuses on the extent to which education systems across contexts can be compared using (quantitative) international benchmarks and standards, such as the Program for International Student Assessment. This gives rise

to a second, twin set of concerns: the dangers of 'best practices' and 'blueprints' being transferred across different contexts, and the opposite risk of duplication of efforts and 'reinventing the wheel' when lessons are not applied. Both of these issues are exacerbated by the political economy of development aid, and the disproportionate policy and research power wielded by northern actors in southern contexts.

A strong sensitivity towards international measures was described by interviewees in several LMIC contexts – likely because, as Wiseman (2010, p.11) argues, 'schools are perceived as indicators of modernization and economic productivity and consequently, student achievement is inappropriately used in these cross-national comparisons as evidence of each nation's level of development and economic output.'

The lack of contextually relevant approaches to education policy was a recurring theme throughout the review – Georgalakis and Stanley (2020), for example, describe how identifying context-appropriate policy and programme responses to education challenges is a major priority in the MENA region. Some interviewees suggested that this lack of contextual relevance can even manifest in the rejection or dismissal of global evidence in some LMICs; while another saw the potential to respond to domestic, rather than international, education policy and research agendas as a major opportunity of the policy lab model.

### *Evidence production landscape affects evidence use*

**Issues around availability and funding of evidence in education are pronounced – particularly, but not exclusively, in the Global South.** This is a persistent issue noted over the last two decades by the OECD; while investment in education research has increased, it still lags behind other sectors such as health (Révai, Hill & Torres, 2023). In resource-constrained education systems in LMICs, this problem is exacerbated: the Education Sub Saharan Africa programme found that up to 80% of locally generated African education research appears to be unfunded; the major funding sources that do exist are largely external and from the Global North, with UKAid and the Hewlett Foundation emerging as the biggest funders of education research in the region (Rose et al., 2019, p.52). Furthermore, lessons from the UNICEF Data Must Speak initiatives point out both the existence of data gaps, and that the vast majority of existing administrative data in education remains unused (Le Nestour & Comba, 2023).

### Box 4: Who are the policymakers?

One common learning activity for those seeking to strengthen evidence use is to break down the term 'policymaker'. This can be done in different ways but typically involves building an in-depth understanding of the different levels and decision-making functions (both on paper and in practice) within government and other public institutions, including both the political and bureaucratic layers. Examples include:

- ACED (Thoto, 2021) drew on its experience working on evidence use in the Benin agriculture sector to identify three types of government decision-makers:
  - Apparent decision-makers, who act as though they have decision power but do not
  - Constrained decision-makers, who hold power but cannot use it
  - Unwilling decision-makers, who hold power but do not want to use it
- The VakaYiko Evidence Informed Policy Toolkit (Ademokun et al. 2016 p.155) identified three levels of policymaker, each with different evidence needs:
  - Political actors
  - Strategic actors
  - Operating actors
- In its report on evidence use in African parliaments, the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (Draman et al., 2017) identified the five key typical internal units of a parliamentary information support system and discussed the relative roles and needs of each with regards to evidence production and use:
  - Library
  - Research
  - Committees
  - Hansard
  - Information and communication technology

## *f. What has been learned about how to strengthen evidence use?*

**As noted in the literature and corroborated by the experience of several interviewees, there is more known about the factors affecting evidence use – and what institutionalisation of evidence use looks like – than about how to achieve it** (see OECD, 2022; DuMont, 2019). The fact that the contextual elements shaping

evidence use appear to be the same in education as in other sectors suggests that learning on how to overcome barriers to evidence use from the wider evidence-informed policy sector could also be applicable or adaptable to education contexts. There is, in fact, far more learning on how to strengthen evidence use than is sometimes assumed in the education sector – as demonstrated by the syntheses of evidence on evidence use produced by Gough, Sharples and Maidment (OECD, 2022); Langer, Tripney and Gough (2016); Dumont (2019); and Oliver et al. (2014).

**A number of multi-year, international donor-funded initiatives have contributed to this learning,** including the key programmes listed in Table 2 (see also Annex 5 for theories of change). This section draws heavily on learning papers, experiential knowledge from interviewees, and evaluations. It is striking that while these programmes all share key aims and activities with the 'policy labs' envisaged by the Jacobs Foundation and its partners, none of them appear to have used the 'policy lab' label to describe their interventions. Interviews with some of those involved suggest that their understanding of 'policy lab' is narrower than that adopted by the foundation and its EdLabs. Most of the 'evidence-informed policy' experts interviewed for this review think of policy labs as embedded units within government – mainly for carrying out testing and experimentation. The types of activities carried out by the programmes in Table 2 – such as capacity development for evidence use, building shared research priorities, and developing organisational processes and standards for evidence use – were described by one interviewee as the 'bread and butter' of the evidence-informed policy sector rather than a distinct approach meriting a 'policy lab' label. Identifying entry points for action.

*Table 2: Major recent evidence-informed policy programmes* [10]

| Name | Location | Date | Budget | Funder | Partners |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) | Indonesia | From 2013 | AUD 16 million | AusAid/ DFAT | 16 local research institutes, govt of Indonesia, 5 global research institutes |
| Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) | Africa, Asia, Latin America (12 countries) | 2013–2017 | GBP 13 million | DfID | 6 consortia led by Harvard, INASP, Uni JHB, Adam Smith Intl, Ecorys, AFIDEP |
| Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) | Ghana, Uganda, Pakistan | 2019–2021 | GBP 17 million | DfID/ FCDO | Oxford Policy Mgmt, ODI, 3ie, INASP, ACET, EPRC, SDPI, AFIDEP, Uni JHB |
| Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems (PEERSS) | UK, Africa & Latin America plus China and Lebanon | 2018–2023 | CAD 8.7 million | IDRC, Hewlett | R4D convened 13 country partners, mainly but not exclusively working with ministries of health |
| Heightening Institutional Capacity for Govt Use of Health Research (HIGH-RES) | Kenya, Malawi, Uganda | From 2019 | USD 1 million | WHO & Wellcome Trust | AFIDEP, 3 ministries of health, regional networks & research organisations |
| Hewlett Foundation EIPM portfolio | East & West Africa (esp. Ghana, Kenya, Senegal) | 2015–2023 | USD 120 million | Hewlett | 55 projects, primarily led by grantees in East and West Africa |
| Building Capacity for Evidence-Informed Policy Making | Greece, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands | 2023–2025 | | EU (DG-REFORM) | EU Joint Research Centre & OECD |

10 This is a selective list of programmes for which the main focuses/envisaged outcomes were on strengthening evidence use. Many other initiatives exist for which the main outcomes were the production or communication of evidence; many of these also have an evidence use element 'tagged on'. The programmes listed here (with the exception of some elements from the Hewlett portfolio) generally did not produce research or evidence but were solely focused on strengthening use and sharing learning about how to do this. Most of the initiatives in this table have published evaluations and reports, which were consulted for this review.

**Despite resounding evidence of the importance of contextual factors in shaping evidence use, many EIPM interventions still fail to adequately understand the realities of policymaking in the contexts where they are seeking change** (OECD, 2020; Oliver et al., 2022). In the last seven to ten years, increasing energy has been dedicated to finding practical ways to understand and respond to contextual factors – such as those described in the earlier section – in the design and implementation of interventions.

At the time of writing, no contextual analysis has been undertaken by the Jacobs Foundation or its EdLabs to situate their work within the four contrasting countries of operation. Yet, in their rapid review of the politics of education systems in developing countries, Kingdon et al. found that, where windows of opportunity in the context are effectively identified and used, the 'intervention of vigilant, strong outsiders who are committed to reform, and who are not embedded in a country's vested interests, can be a driver of changes that would not happen otherwise' (2014, p.52). Similarly, in a review of the evidence on evidence use, Gough, Sharples and Maidment (2022) recommend that knowledge brokering initiatives aiming to strengthen evidence use undertake an explicit analysis of the wider ecosystem and make evidence-informed, contextually grounded, and strategic choices about where and how to intervene.

A review of evidence use in education policy conducted for the Australian Education Research Organisation explains why this is critical: 'The evidence may show that a certain policy will deliver high value, but it is not the best policy if it is not politically feasible or if the capabilities to effectively execute the policy don't exist' (Roberts-Hull & Jensen, 2022, p.7).

**One result of the growing interest in context has been the development of diagnostic tools, designed to identify and prioritise entry points for action.** These have evolved into detailed diagnostic frameworks (see Annex 6), developed by evidence-informed policy practitioners in collaboration with policymakers. The tools combine elements of political economy analysis, knowledge systems analysis and organisational analysis to identify entry points for improved evidence use, in the manner recommended by Gough et al. (2022). Some initiatives, such as the SEDI programmes (Shaxson et al., 2021) and IDInsight's embedded learning partnership model (Martin et al., 2022), have drawn on the problem-driven iterative adaptation 'authority, acceptance and ability' model in their diagnostic approaches to identify entry points for strengthening evidence use. As IDInsight notes, 'partners at both the individual and institutional level must be

committed to EIPM beforehand. If not, [embedded learning partnerships] are unlikely to inform policy decisions' (Martin et al., 2022, p.6).

**Although the factors affecting evidence use in education appear to be broadly the same as in other sectors, and despite calls in the sector to develop a greater understanding of 'quality of use', which considers some contextual and systemic elements** (Rickinson et al., 2019; Monash, 2020), no published examples of the practical use of evidence diagnostics in education were found in our review.[11] However, it was clear from our interviews that, in their day-to-day work, education policy labs are facing the exact design decisions – relating to entry points for action – that such diagnostics aim to facilitate. For instance, one important decision a lab needs to make is whether – and where – the lab should be 'housed' within government.

A specific example provided through our interviews concerned a decentralised federal context where the 'energy' and existing capacity on evidence use in education at national level was more concentrated in the Ministry of Finance than in the Ministry of Education; meanwhile, at state level, the governments had significant resources to invest in education but none of the basic data processing and handling systems that could be seen as prerequisites for a 'lab' approach to work well. The interviewee felt that a policy lab approach could be valuable, but deciding where it should sit would be a complex task.

**The organisational analysis element of a diagnostic assessment is key to practical intervention design, because it is within one or more organisations – such as ministries of education – that the more embedded or 'institutionalised' evidence outcomes are targeted.** These outcomes might include changes to processes, structures and systems for gathering and using evidence. As one interviewee explained, 'Institutionalising evidence use means paying real attention to the institutions … how government organisations function, from the "inside out"'. This, then, is the second design decision a lab needs to make: identifying where they are aiming to contribute to 'evidence use' changes – whether only in their 'host' agency (for embedded labs) or perhaps a cluster of different agencies, and then which specific parts of the agency they should target.

11 We specify here that there are no published examples, however some Jacobs-supported EdLabs have carried out organisational needs assessments and context analyses internal to their projects.

Making this decision requires an understanding of the existing structures, systems and processes within organisations that shape how evidence is gathered, synthesised and used – as well as, crucially, the resources that the organisation has dedicated – or can dedicate – to evidence.[12] Organisational diagnostics also shed light on different types and levels of evidence users and decision-makers and their varying evidence needs and mandates (see Box 4 for examples of typologies and categorisations of evidence users within the sector; also see Ahaibwe et al., 2021; Ahmed et al 2021a.; Commodore et al., 2018; OECD, 2020; Thoto, 2021; Global Commission, 2022).

Once an initiative has identified windows of opportunity to strengthen evidence use, there are a wide range of tools, approaches and interventions that can be used to try to achieve different types of evidence use. These are often divided into individual, organisational and 'systems' approaches.

### *g. Approaches to strengthening capacity at individual levels*

**These approaches target the skills, knowledge and behaviour of evidence users (policymakers or practitioners) and constitute the most common type of capacity development intervention for evidence use.** They usually involve training workshops, delivered either by a third party/evidence brokering organisation or through an existing civil service college or parliamentary training institute. Participants are most commonly civil servants or parliamentary staff who are responsible for gathering and synthesising evidence for decision-making on a day-to-day basis – these fall into different staff units in different countries.[13]

Training workshops are often combined with other individual-level activities, such as coaching or mentoring. This might also include training for high-level policymakers – for example, senior civil servants, ministers, or MPs. In recognition of their very different roles, training for these groups tends to focus more on awareness, or the value of evidence, rather than practical skills to access, appraise and use it.

12 Examples of such 'inside out' profiles of 'evidence user' ministries, departments or agencies can be found in: Shaxson's work with Dept for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs in the UK (2014) and Dept for Environmental Affairs South Africa (2016); KSI programme's in-depth analyses of evidence use in Indonesian national policy-making bodies (2014); AFIDEP's needs assessments and diagnostics of ministries of health in Kenya and Malawi; CLEAR's case studies of African national M&E systems; compilations of global examples of in-house government data and evidence structures by the KSI programmes, Results for All, OECD, INASP; and profiles of in-house parliamentary research and evidence structures in Africa and the UK produced by ACEPA, INASP, CLEAR and the UK parliament.

13 In Ghana, for example, many recent programmes have targeted the research, statistics and information management and the planning, policy, monitoring and evaluation units of the civil service, as well as parliamentary researchers – most often at the national level but increasingly at the district level.

A growing area of training for evidence use centres on building evidence-informed policy into university curricula, targeting a 'pipeline' of skills among future practitioners, policymakers and researchers. Work by the African Institute for Development Policy in Kenya and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration in Ghana to include evidence-informed policy-making in university curricula is also notable here, as are the courses provided at Harvard's Centre for International Development, Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government, and the University of Johannesburg, which all cover evidence use in policy-making.

### *Examples*

- The **BCURE programmes** implemented many models for training civil servants in evidence use across different sectors, including through collaboration with public service training institutes in Ghana, Pakistan, Uganda and the Philippines (Vogel and Punton, 2018). Many of the materials used are available online, including the VakaYiko Evidence-Informed Policy Toolkit (Ademokun et al., 2016).
- The **European Union's Joint Research Centre** carries out extensive training workshops for researchers from across the EU using its map of eight interlinked competency areas for evidence use in policy (Topp et al., 2018; see also Smart4Policy self-reflection tool, European Union, 2023).
- **Nesta's Engaging with Evidence Toolkit** (Morgan et al., 2022) uses cutting-edge learning design and policy approaches, developed through its work with UK civil servants and academics, to strengthen individual capabilities for evidence use and expert engagement.

### Box 5: Reflections on capacity development for evidence use in education in the Philippines

"Capacity-building programmes developed outside of formal state institutions remain at the margins. To avoid this, we included the participation and support of the Department of Interior and Local Government, particularly its lead training arm, the Local Government Academy (LGA), early in the conceptualization stage. The team strongly felt that the modules developed should be mainstreamed through existing capacity-training institutions such as the LGA, since it will be more prudent to "position" this training as complementary to existing programmes already within government. As a result, the Newly Elected Officials programme was chosen because it is not only one of the most long-running programmes of the LGA, but it is also considered as a prerequisite to many other training programmes for local governance" (Candelaria, 2015).

### *Lessons learned: Strengthening the capacity of individual evidence users*

Given that training of civil servants is one of the most common approaches used to strengthen evidence use for policy, labs embarking on such interventions can draw on an extensive range of lessons learned within the existing literature (see in particular: Vogel and Punton, 2018; Langer et al., 2016; Dalberg, 2023). Key lessons include:

- **The competencies required for evidence use are not only 'technical' skills** for finding, appraising and interpreting evidence, but also 'soft' skills such as communication, negotiation and influencing.
- **Adult-learning approaches should be incorporated into the design and delivery** of quality training that is relevant and applicable to civil servants in their day-to-day work (Vogel & Punton, 2018; Langer et al., 2016).
- **Embedding training interventions within government training institutions is often cited as a best practice, but this requires knowledge of how governments understand 'capacity development' in the civil service** (Menon et al. [2021] provide an example from Ghana; in Box 5 Candelaria [2015] describes how this influenced the development of a training programme on education evidence use in the Philippines).

### Box 6: Increasing access to evidence through repositories

Repositories, dashboards and other mechanisms aiming to gather evidence and make it easily accessible to decision-makers are a frequent starting point for those seeking to strengthen evidence use. An evaluation of DFID-funded research portals found 'frequent, rapid and impatient' online searches for evidence from policymakers in north and south alike, yet very low usage of the search tools within DfID-funded repositories (Phillipson et al., 2016). It concluded that while it is appropriate to devote effort to making evidence available online, it is important to make this more easily searchable in Google, which users rely on to direct them to relevant content.

The evaluation made detailed recommendations to funders of evidence repositories. Trotter at al. (2014) point to some of the implications of the many donor-funded institutional repositories in Africa, which, while assisting in developing infrastructure and capacity, have developed in a 'piecemeal' way and left gaps in institutional ownership and long-term maintenance. The authors highlight the importance of a supporting policy framework, and incentive structures to drive use of the repository. Furthermore, in their systematic review of approaches to strengthening capacity for evidence use, Langer et al. (2016) found that repositories can work to increase evidence use only when combined with efforts to strengthen decision-makers' opportunity and motivation to do so. The review recommended that better use of information design principles could help improve how repositories support evidence use.

## *h. Approaches to strengthening organisational-level capacities and cultures*

**Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of user organisations' capacity and culture in shaping evidence use, in practice this is one of the least common target areas for EIPM initiatives in education.** This contrasts with the broader EIPM sector, where much of the energy in recent years has focused on 'institutionalising' or 'embedding' evidence use within the machinery of government institutions. The OECD's report in 2020 called for investing in organisational-level capacity for evidence use, and its 2021 survey of education policymakers in 29 countries (Torres, 2022, Fig. 5.4) found that the overall most commonly reported barriers to using research in education policy were structural/organisational. Efforts to strengthen organisational capacity for evidence use are usually targeted at outcomes around 'embedded' use of evidence and

focus on the development and operationalisation of tools, practices, approaches, or structures at an organisational level. As such, 'embedded' models of policy labs can be seen as organisational-level interventions to strengthen evidence use in their own right.

A less common, but nevertheless important, approach is the explicit targeting of organisational *cultures* of evidence use (Burns, 2023) – which cannot be delinked from broader civil service and political cultures, as well as the surrounding knowledge system (Weyrauch et al., 2016a). At a global event on funding for evidence-informed policy-making in August 2023, issues around incentivising evidence use through strengthening cultures within policy-making organisations was discussed and identified as a priority by the Hewlett Foundation and others. The Jacobs Foundation's EdLabs' focus on both capacities and cultures of evidence use therefore resonates strongly with experience from the evidence-use sector. However, given the particular controversies about the overall purpose of education, the politicisation of the sector and the methodological debates among the research community, work to strengthen cultures of evidence use in education is likely to be complex.

***Examples***

- A **partnership between ODI and the Department for Environmental Affairs in South Africa**, undertaken as part of the BCURE programmes, built on the prior work of champions within the department that had already begun to establish structures and systems to strengthen evidence use (Wills et al., 2016b). The partnership supported the development of strategic approaches to managing, resourcing and planning the evidence base within the department, with the participation of a wide range of stakeholders.
- The **Data for Accountability Project** (DAP), led by the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs in Ghana, is the first formal partnership between parliament and the National Statistical Service, aiming to strengthen the use of data in parliamentary oversight of the SDGs. The DAP's work has included organisational-level changes within parliament to establish a dedicated SDGs desk in the research department, as well as supporting the development of a new constituency profile system to make district-level evidence easily accessible and digestible by members of parliament.
- In Trinidad and Tobago, a technical cooperation team was established with Inter-American Development Bank funding within the Programmes and **Projects,**

**Planning and Management Unit in the Ministry of Education**. The team spearheaded several organisational-level initiatives aimed at strengthening evidence use, including the establishment of a Research in Education steering committee, training and capacity development of civil servants, and a series of events aimed at strengthening the research–policy interface (Katwaroo, 2018).

### *Lessons learned*

- Governments around the world have taken steps to create and sustain a wide range of organisational reforms to structures, processes, and procedures with the aim of improving evidence use. Landscape reviews by Taddese and Anderson (2017) and Weyrauch et al. (2016b), as well as the OECD's recent survey of policymakers in 29 countries (OECD, 2022), provide a wealth of examples of initiatives in place. **Evidence shows that 'accompanying' such internal initiatives, rather than imposing them from the outside, offers the greatest chances of success** (Vogel & Punton, 2018; Torres, 2022, Martin et al., 2022). Hirji (2023) describes how these principles resonated in Innovations for Poverty Action's (IPA's) experience with 11 policy labs, where alignment with existing priorities was a critically important element of strengthening organisational processes and buy-in.

### Box 7: Mechanisms for evidence use in the education sector in Europe

*Gough et al. (2011) published lessons from an EPPI project mapping evidence use initiatives in the education sector in Europe. They identified 27 activities spread across nine different mechanisms for improving evidence use:*

1. **Accessibility:** ensuring policymakers have access to research by making it more easily available or usable.
2. **Relevance:** ensuring that there is a relevant evidence base from which policymakers can draw.
3. **Education:** increasing awareness, knowledge and skills in understanding, producing, finding, communicating and/or using research.
4. **Incentives/reinforcements:** encouraging researchers or policymakers to change their attitude/behaviour towards producing, communicating or using research by controlling external stimuli.
5. **Social influence/persuasion:** relying on others with influence to prompt attitude/behaviour change in policymakers.
6. **Facilitation:** providing technical, financial, organisational and/or emotional support to either researchers or policymakers in producing, communicating or using research.
7. **Seek and/or interpret:** seeking out and/or analysing/interpreting research evidence in order to inform decision-making.
8. **Interaction/collaboration:** enabling the two-way flow/production of information and knowledge between producers and users of research evidence.
9. **System focus:** emphasising the (strategic) importance of focusing on the evidence-to-policy system as a whole.

## Brokering relationships between evidence producers, intermediaries & users

**Increasing interaction between evidence producers and users appears to be the most common approach to strengthening evidence use in education** (OECD, 2022; Georgalakis & Stanley, 2020). Drawing on policy influence and engagement approaches, and in recognition of the complex, multi-stakeholder landscapes in the education sector, this type of approach is most commonly linked to broader outcomes aiming to strengthen relationships across the system. In recent years, as interviewees

pointed out, there has been increasing recognition that the categories of 'producers' and 'users' are not binary, requiring a 'bridge between two worlds'; in practice, they are overlapping and dynamic. In developing countries, as Rose et al. (2019) describe, and in response to the unique challenges in education research systems, it is also especially important that these dialogues are promoted at the national and/or regional levels to support the locally led identification of education research priorities.

### *Examples*

- The **Areas of Research Interest (ARI)** approach in the UK sees all government departments producing, publishing and updating a list of priority research topics, in order to create a cross-government set of priorities, including at the local level.[14] This model has been found to operate as a 'boundary object', at the interface between government and academia (Boaz & Oliver 2023).
- **Parliamentary research 'weeks' or 'days'**, as pioneered by the Parliament of Uganda and also held in the UK, Austria, Canada and Ghana, offer spaces for MPs to engage with research and evidence-production organisations from across the local ecosystem (Hayter, 2023). This is of relevance for parliaments, where in-house research and evidence teams are small and often need to rely on external partnerships to cover the enormous breadth of issues discussed in a parliamentary setting.
- **Semana de la Evidencia** ('evidence week') in Latin America is a platform that brings together various interested parties dedicated to exchanging experiences in the field of evidence-informed policy. It aims to promote the use of evidence in public policy and improve the conversation between decision-makers and researchers. The evidence week started as a Peruvian initiative in 2016 and generated interest across the region.

### *Lessons learned*

- **The quality of relationships built between evidence producers, users and intermediaries is important.** For instance, while the OECD policy survey found that initiatives to strengthen these relationships existed in almost all of the 29 countries surveyed, there was still an appetite for more – and better – relationships:

14 An example from the Department of Education can be found here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/706991/DfE_Areas_of_research_interest.pdf

> It seems that speaking to each other is not enough (...) Researchers have to learn to listen. The language and stories of teachers and policy makers is not a scientific discourse but carries the deep knowledge of students, schools, teaching and learning. Without understanding their experience and unpacking their knowledge, it is more difficult to ask relevant research questions, formulate meaningful hypotheses, and design appropriate research. A good conversation between the different actors requires genuine curiosity, respect and active listening. (Gábor Halász, quoted in Revai, 2022)

Reflections from the PEERSS partnerships to strengthen evidence use in 13 countries provide practical examples of approaches to building such trusted relationships (PEERSS, 2023).

- **Efforts to strengthen relationships across evidence systems are a critical element of any initiative aiming to strengthen evidence use.** The Hewlett Foundation's 2023 evaluation found that the establishment and cultivation of long-term, trusted relationships between government agencies and evidence producers and intermediaries was one of the most effective strategies for institutionalisation of evidence use across its portfolio (Dalberg, 2023, p.33). A recent study on knowledge translation in the Global South by Siregar et al. (2023) further underlined the importance of building enduring relationships for effective knowledge translation. It was observed that sustained relationships with policymakers facilitated the provision of more timely advice from external experts. Such affiliations not only made policymakers more receptive to advice, but also fostered a deeper sense of trust and helped advisers to be ideally positioned when a window of opportunity emerged. As one interviewee said, 'if you want long-term/sustainable approaches, invest in relationships that can last even if the structures are gone'. Yet in their study of the UK ARI approach, Boaz and Oliver (2023) found that relationships alone are not enough to strengthen evidence use; organisational capacities within both research organisations and within government also play a role.

### Box 7: Expanding the focus to subnational levels in Ghana

In Ghana, as in other countries, much of the work aimed at strengthening evidence use in policy over the past decade has been targeted at the national level.[15] The Center for Democratic Development's (CDD's) Evidence for Development Initiative, however, took a different approach, aiming to strengthen the use of evidence for governance and accountability in service delivery at a district level.

Focusing on three districts in the Bono, Northern, and Upper East regions, the CDD partnered with local civil society organisations and district assemblies. Capacity-strengthening activities targeted a range of actors, including the heads of local health and education agencies, district statistics officers, coordinating directors, and development planning officers. These activities were supplemented with a 'community of practice' approach, aiming to build relationships between stakeholders interested in strengthening evidence at the local government level. The CDD also facilitated a peer-learning mechanism between the three pilot districts.

Reflections and lessons learned from the project, which was funded by the Hewlett Foundation, included the importance of the following:

- Understanding the local/subnational political economy, and taking advantage of a policy planning window to contribute to the development of district-level medium-term development plans.
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue, within and outside government: 'Fostering partnerships with state and non-state actors, facilitating regular engagement, and providing opportunities for actors to discuss, share and collaborate on evidence to policy practice issues improves the awareness, capacity, and the potential to nurture champions and activists to advance the field of EIDM practice at the subnational, district level.'
- A multi-tiered approach to capacity development, which relies not only on building skills through training, but also the application of those skills.
- A flexible approach to project delivery, which enables the team to adapt and iterate based on learning.

*Source: Summarized and quoted from Center for Democratic Development, 2022*

15 Ghana's parliament, Civil Service Training Centre, Environmental Protection Agency, Ghana Statistics Service, Ghana Institute for Management and Public Administration, and other government and public bodies, have all partnered on capacity-strengthening initiatives focused on use of evidence, evaluation and/or data in decision-making. These have most commonly been targeted at public servants, usually in the Research, Statistics and Information Management directorates and the Policy, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation directorates within the civil service. Major funders of this work have included DfID/FCDO and the Hewlett Foundation, among others. More details can be found in the BCURE evaluation (Vogel and Punton, 2018); SEDI political economy analysis of evidence use in Ghana (Gatune et al., 2021); and the Hewlett Foundation's evidence informed policy evaluation (Dalberg, 2023).

## Strengthening evidence use: Cross-cutting principles

Across the body of literature and practice, some clear common principles emerge about how the approaches described above can be combined to strengthen evidence use in a systematic, 'institutionalised' way.

- Perhaps the most common overarching lesson is **that interventions to strengthen evidence use need to be combined across all three levels (individual/ organisational/systemic)**. For instance, training alone will not catalyse changes in evidence use without appropriate enabling environments in organisations; likewise, organisational structures and tools alone cannot foster use without individuals' interest and commitment to use them (Burns, 2023; OECD, 2022; Tseng, 2012). As the BCURE evaluation concluded, 'working with governments to build capacity for evidence use requires a politically informed and multidimensional approach. Capacity gaps should be viewed as just one element of a tapestry of factors that block or disincentivise evidence-informed policymaking'. (Vogel and Punton, 2018)
- Those seeking to strengthen evidence use have learned that the capabilities required are **political, social and cultural as much as they are technical;** in other words, both 'hard' and 'soft' factors should be tackled. For example, any new organisational structures or processes introduced need an element of buy-in to 'stick'; while training needs to cover not only technical skills but also influencing, negotiation, and other 'soft' skills.
- In recent years, the sector has increasingly moved towards **the co-design and -delivery of interventions**. For example, Ahmed et al. (2021b) described how the SEDI programme collaborated with the Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda and the Department for Trade in Pakistan, to identify issues or capacity gaps. This stands in contrast to earlier models, which sought to 'assess' government needs from an objective, external viewpoint and then recommend changes. It also involves co-producing learning derived from such initiatives; current publications on evidence use in policy-making often involve civil servants and/or politicians as co-authors (see for example, Goldman & Pabari, 2021; Stewart et al., 2019).
- **There is room for greater collaboration and learning between initiatives in the evidence-informed policy sector.** Breckon and Boaz (2023) describe a crowded space, in which often territorial and competitive organisations compete with and duplicate each other's work. Peer learning is a sometimes neglected approach

to strengthening evidence use, despite the fact that it is consistently cited as having promise across individual, organisational, and systemic levels of capacity development (e.g., OECD, 2022 and the evaluation of the Hewlett Foundation's evidence-informed policy portfolio [Dalberg, 2023]). Its usefulness can perhaps particularly be attributed to the dispersed, interdisciplinary nature of the sector, in combination with the commonality among factors affecting evidence use – resulting in rich opportunities for sectors and disciplines to learn from each other about how to strengthen evidence use.

- There have been repeated calls across the evidence-informed policy sector to itself draw more on the body of evidence described in this review and to be **more evidence-informed in the design and delivery of EIPM interventions.** As Gough, Sharples and Maidment (2022) note, 'there are still instances of knowledge brokering initiatives assuming an approach will be effective and useful without being explicit about why'. A common suggestion for initiatives aiming to strengthen evidence use – which we have included in our own recommendations to EdLabs in this report – is to begin with an evidence-based theory of change (ibid; see also 3ie, 2023; Oliver et al., 2022).

### Box 8: Using evidence in project design, implementation and evaluation

In October 2023, 3ie and partners – including the FCDO, Norad, IDB and others – released a Global Evidence Commitment calling for better use of evidence throughout the international development sector's programming and project cycle. Recommendations include:

1. Conducting problem diagnostics to determine which factors contributing to a development problem are most severe;
2. Developing evidence-informed theories of change, drawing upon systematic reviews of impact evaluations to determine which interventions have a track record of success;
3. Making funding decisions informed by comparing the cost-effectiveness of proposed interventions against evaluated alternatives;
4. Conducting evaluations that are useful for iterative adaptation during the lifecycle of a project, such as formative evaluation, process evaluation, and A/B testing;
5. Building the global evidence base by conducting impact evaluations with cost analysis where there are gaps in research; and
6. Spurring innovation by piloting and evaluating new approaches to solving development problems.

*Source: Adapted from 3ie, 2023*

## Doing funding differently

**Learning points for funders in the evidence-informed policy space have been repeatedly identified.** This learning has particular potential for impact given that the role of external funders in supporting evidence use projects, particularly in the Global South, has such a strong influence on the design and implementation of efforts to strengthen evidence use. The most common learning points for funders include:

- **Short timelines** are a common critique of funders that fund in two-year timeframes, despite the much longer-term nature of the evidence use outcomes they are seeking to support (Gough et al. in OECD, 2022; Taddese, 2021; Dalberg, 2023).

- **Inflexibility and lack of adaptability** among funders has affected the evidence-informed policy sector for some years (e.g., Vogel and Punton, 2018; Gough et al., 2022; Siregar et al., 2023). For example, in a review for the Center for Global Development (CGD), Taddese (2021) found that 'funding for evidence-to-policy work is heavily projectized and constrained by short timelines. There is little room in project budgets to engage in relationship building, flexibly support government needs as they arise, or address capacity constraints … the ability to respond to new windows of opportunity with additional activities once a project or programme is underway is key.'
- There are opportunities for **greater coordination** between funders; failure to coordinate when working in a single evidence ecosystem often results in duplication or contradiction of one another's work, and what Oliver et al. (2022) call a 'rudderless mass' of activity. Initiatives such as the Transforming Evidence Funders Network, the Building Evidence in Education funder network, and the African Education Research Funders Consortium are all examples of efforts to tackle this issue.
- Building on the findings – mentioned above – about **better use of evidence in EIPM initiatives,** the role of funders in supporting this has become increasingly clear. A new international funder collaborative launched by 3ie in October 2023 makes several specific commitments to more evidence-informed programming (see Box 8), many of which are echoed in our recommendations for EdLabs at the close of this report.

The political economy of international development means that myriad issues – around incentives, power asymmetries, agency, and ownership – that affect evidence use efforts in the South, do not affect those in the Global North in the same way. We discuss these in further detail in relation to policy labs in the next section. Notably, it is not only in the implementation of initiatives that these power dynamics are manifested, but also in the way *learning* about evidence use is framed. As Stewart et al. (2019) point out: 'Evidence production, and its use in decision-making is not a uniquely Northern endeavour (…) Lessons are available from across the world, North and South: what perhaps needs greatest adjustment is not the capacities of the South, but the culture that gives global prominence to Northern innovation and leadership but is silent on what is happening in the South.'

## 2.2. Policy labs

In an ever-evolving policy landscape, policy labs are increasing in number – as well as in prominence and significance – across the ecosystem. This section delves into the multifaceted universe of policy labs, with a special emphasis on EdLabs. Our goal is to provide a clear and straightforward overview of the current state of policy labs.

In this section, we explore the following questions:

- What are policy labs and how are they understood in different contexts?
- How effective have policy labs been in influencing policy?
- What are different types of policy labs and the main roles they play?
- What key lessons have been learned from their operations?
- What contributions have policy labs made; what challenges have they faced; and what is their main potential for the future?

### *a. 'Everyone loves the lab model': The 'labification' of the policy field*

**A marked rise in the creation of policy labs has been observed since 2011, resulting in a phenomenon that is often termed the 'labification' of the policy field.** This proliferation of labs on a global scale has been extensively documented in the literature; the various explorations of policy labs include studies spanning innovation theory, public and private sectors, research and development (R&D), public service design, and evidence-informed policy-making in sectors like education, edtech, healthcare, technology, and social welfare.

'Everyone loves the "lab model"', said one interviewee: 'you see it all over the place'. To 'lab' complex issues has become a recent trend in addressing global challenges, promising an openness and agility that conventional bureaucracies may lack (Lewis, 2021). And this dynamism mirrors the broader context of governance and policy-making, which now requires adaptable mechanisms to navigate complex and evolving challenges. Moreover, the literature illustrates how the policy lab trend is also helping to integrate experimental-like structures into the search for innovative policy solutions for social challenges (Wellstead, Gofen & Carter, 2021; Brock, 2021; Williamson, 2015; Lewis, 2021).

**Several studies have attempted to map the presence of policy labs worldwide**. Fuller and Lockhard's 2016 study pinpointed 78 such labs dedicated to policy innovation within the European Union alone; in 2014, a joint mapping exercise by Nesta and Bloomberg Philanthropies (Putick et al., 2014) revealed 20 innovation labs around the world – some closely affiliated with governmental bodies and others operating with more autonomy. Broadening the scope, the DeliverEd Initiative catalogued 152 distinct delivery approaches being applied in 80 countries worldwide. Olejniczak et al. (2020) provided an analysis of 20 policy labs scattered across multiple continents, including Europe, North America, South America, Australia and Asia; while McGann, Lewis and Blomkamp's 2018 study offered an overview of 52 labs in Australia and New Zealand. More recently, Breckon and Boaz (2023) mapped and attempted to discern the characteristics of 'intermediary organisations', which included policy labs within its definition.

These varied studies collectively contribute to an expanding body of literature that aims to grasp the scope, scale, and diversity of policy labs globally. However, despite the field's growth and the emergence of new initiatives adopting the 'lab' label, a clear consensus on what, precisely, constitutes a 'policy lab' remains elusive. Instead, the ongoing debate and lack of agreement regarding the exact nature and definition of a policy lab leaves us with – as Breckon and Boaz (2023) put it – something of a 'definitional morass'.

So what exactly defines a policy lab, and how should we understand its role and function? The following section aims to address this question by examining a range of different interpretations and definitions of a policy lab.

### *b. What is a policy lab?*

Policy labs are referred to in the literature using various terms, from 'public policy labs' to 'social labs', via 'innovation teams', 'policy innovation labs', 'evidence centres', 'government innovation labs', and 'delivery units' or 'mechanisms', with occasional references to 'hubs' as well (Breckon & Boaz, 2023; Williamson, 2015; Wellstead, Gofen & Carter, 2021; Olejniczak et al., 2020; Fuller & Lochard, 2016; Martin et al., 2021; Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023 ). However, this diffusion of the term makes it extremely challenging to pin down a singular definition (Breckon & Boaz, 2023). And as more and more organisations adopt the label of 'policy lab', we are seeing an expanding and increasingly fluid understanding of what these entities actually are, or should be.

**Policy labs represent a distinctive approach to the use of techniques, instruments, and methods to respond to development challenges.**

Policy labs have traditionally been conceptualised as entities playing a significant role in innovating and testing new approaches to enhance public service delivery. However, there is a disparity between this theoretical role and their practical application. Although many self-identified policy labs adopt aspects of this definition, not all comprehensively fulfil the conventional functions – such as testing innovations, for example – that are typically associated with them.

It is clear from the literature that policy labs use diverse methods to deliver their functions. Design thinking, RCTs, quasi-experimental design, administrative data analysis, behavioural research, and qualitative and mixed methods are just some examples of approaches used (Zida et al., 2017; Whicher, 2021; Lewis, 2021; Breckon & Boaz, 2023). But this diversity of practices is in some ways unhelpful, because it limits the possibilities for classifying policy labs and comparing their operations and outcomes.

During our research interviews, the fluidity and evolving nature of the term 'policy lab' were frequently highlighted. One interviewee noted, 'Policy labs have been emerging naturally in the development [space] (...) If they are defining themselves as policy labs, there is a sign that the field is changing in practice' [translated from Spanish]. Another interviewee explained their organisation's self-designation as a policy lab, describing it as 'a collaborative space for testing evidence and fostering partnerships across stakeholders'. Indeed, both these quotes illustrate the self-defined nature of many policy labs, which may go some way to explaining the ever-expanding understandings of the label. Additionally, some interviewees pointed out that, within larger organisations, certain initiatives or divisions might also be referred to as a 'lab' – reflecting the breadth of the term's possible interpretations and applications.

In this context, our goal here is to articulate *what constitutes a policy lab*. A key starting point for this definition is the central objective of **informing policy,** which can be considered a defining feature. We aim to explore policy labs from this standpoint – examining their various structures and functions, but always focusing on their primary goal: to inform policy and guide decision-making.

In their review of intermediary organisations, including policy labs, Breckon and Boaz (2023) acknowledge the challenge of defining these entities, and suggest focusing on

*functions* as a useful way to establish boundaries around what constitutes a policy lab. They also identify three common elements in the work of evidence intermediaries such as policy labs: 1) The centrality of evidence in their work, mission, and practices, which includes both the creation and curation of evidence; 2) A focus on knowledge brokering; and 3) A proximity to government while maintaining a degree of independence.

The organisational form of these intermediaries also varies, with some being standalone entities and others part of larger organisations with broader mandates. This fluid organisational structure is consistent even among those that engage in similar activities. Furthermore, there is recognition that no single model fits all and that entities evolve over time.

Thus, when considering policy labs, it is beneficial to focus on their functions and discern their day-to-day activities, as rigid categorisations often do not neatly apply. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of what policy labs do and how they contribute to the broader landscape of evidence-informed policy-making.

### *c. What do we know about policy labs in the education sector?*

**Governments worldwide are setting ambitious targets to enhance the quality of public services, especially in education.** Yet, academic research on EdLabs is scarce. Fuller and Lochard (2016) identified that less than 40% of the 76 policy labs they reviewed pertained to education. Moreover, the DeliverEd initiative revealed that despite over 80 countries using embedded labs within various sectors, only a few peer-reviewed studies (fewer than 10) discuss their impact – with a notable absence of independent research from the Global South (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023).

**Over the past two decades, governments have increasingly used delivery units and labs to push for educational reforms.** These specialised teams, embedded within governmental structures, are tasked with transforming the existing approach to policy implementation, shifting the emphasis from mere procedural adherence to achieving tangible outcomes (Williams et al., 2021; Mansoor, 2021). The DeliverEd initiative reports that over 80 countries have implemented such units for policy reform in general – with a significant number focusing either exclusively or partially on education (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023).

The concept of delivery units is not new, having been in existence since the 1990s. Early adopters of this model included New York City's CompStat policing programme

and the UK's Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, both of which set the stage for subsequent developments in the field (Gold, 2017). In the education sector, a notable early example was the UK's Innovation Unit, established in 2002 within the Department for Education and Skills, which played a pivotal role in conceptualising the idea of policy labs focused on education (Williamson, 2015). One prevalent model in the education sector is the embedding of specialised units within ministries of education, or within specific departments or divisions that concentrate on statistics and/or research. These embedded units then work closely with the education ministries to drive reforms and enhance policy efficacy.

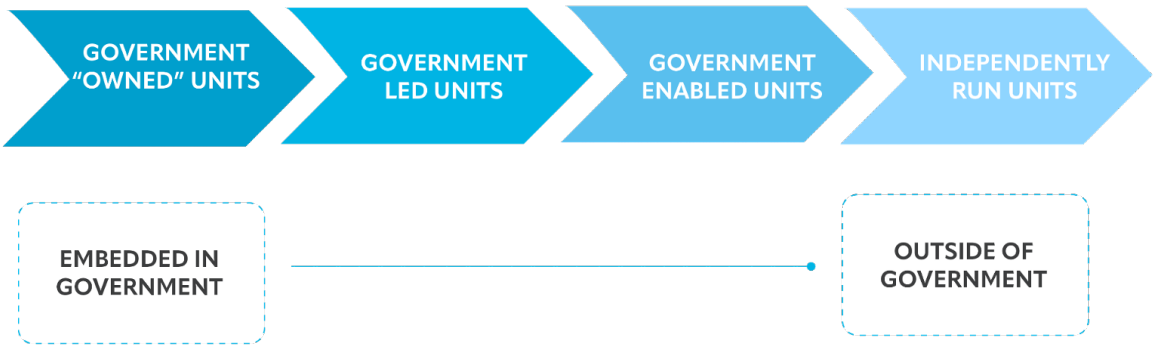
**Other education-focused policy labs do exist but are not widely mentioned in academic writing** – we came to know about them through the insights of the experts we interviewed. Our findings indicate that EdLabs are not limited to the traditional roles of embedded delivery units, and often collaborate with entities outside government frameworks. From the non-academic sources we reviewed, including our interviewees, we identified labs that operated independently and were not directly tied to governmental bodies.

### *d. Organisational set-up of policy labs*

**One way to understand policy labs' organisational structures is by examining their level of embeddedness, or closeness to government**; the extent of this proximity plays a significant role in determining their operational dynamics. According to Lewis (2021) and McGann, Lewis and Blomkamp (2020), policy labs generally fall into one of four categories (see Figure 6): government-owned units, government-led units, government-enabled units, and independently run units. In a paper reviewing evidence-to-policy partnership models for the CGD, Taddese (2021) identifies a similar framework.

A central question is whether an EdLab is funded by the government or relies on independent financing. Equally significant is its 'physical' location – within a government ministry, or outside. But it's also crucial to understand that these categories are not static. EdLabs frequently exhibit a blend of these attributes, providing a level of flexibility in their organisational setup that enables them to adapt and evolve in response to their specific objectives, available resources, and the contextual needs of the educational policy environment. This structural diversity positions EdLabs as dynamic and adaptive agents in the sphere of educational policy and innovation, capable of addressing a broad spectrum of educational challenges and opportunities.

*Figure 6: The four categories of policy labs, from embedded in the government to outside of the government*




*Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Lewis (2021) and McGann, Lewis & Blomkamp (2020)*

The four categories of policy labs, from embedded in government to independently run are:

- **Government-owned units:** These units are entirely funded by the government and are hosted exclusively within a government department or agency. The embedded, or delivery, units described above are a common representation of this type. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in the USA provides an illustrative example: established in 2002 under a division of the US Department of Education, the WWC is tasked with assessing the quality of existing education evidence and aids the department in making informed decisions.
- **Government-led units:** Such units, although located within a government department or agency, may receive only part of their funding from the government. An example of this is the IPA's embedded unit within the Ministry of Education in Peru. This lab serves as an innovation hub for education policy, piloting and evaluating educational innovations, with an overarching goal of assisting the ministry to harness evidence for improving children's learning across the country.
- **Government-enabled units:** These units operate more like non-government organisations. However, they lean heavily on government funding, primarily accrued through contracts. The Education Endowment Foundation in the UK is a prime example of this category, despite the fact that it does not describe itself as a 'policy lab'. As an independent charity, it was launched in 2011, backed by a grant of GBP 125 million from the UK Department for Education. This grant was intended to be utilised over a span of 15 years.

- **Independently run units:** Positioned in the private, or third, sector, these units operate without any government financial backing. Their operational style and objectives often mirror those of independent research centres, think tanks or consultancies. A case in point is eBase. As a registered, non-profit entity in Cameroon, eBase actively collaborates with local health or education systems. Interviewees varied in their opinions of whether such a model could be called a 'policy lab'; for some, only 'embedded' units within governments can be called a lab. Such structures outside government were informally referred to in at least one large global programme as 'quasi-labs'.

Although this framework and others aim to encompass a wide range of policy labs, they might not capture every possible combination and function. But they do serve as a useful reference point for classification and comparison. Additionally, each model has its strengths and weaknesses, which Abeba Taddese (2021) has explored within her research. In Table 3, we highlight the elements pinpointed by Taddese that align with insights from our interviews during this review. Both our literature review and the interviews shed light on several considerations and challenges linked to the closeness or otherwise of policy labs to governmental entities.

*Table 3: Pros and cons of different institutional arrangements*

| Institutional set up | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|---|
| **In government** *(government-owned and government- led units)* | Direct engagement with top leadership enhances timely evidence delivery and identification of policy opportunities<br><br>Fosters trust and rapport with key stakeholders, including evaluators, across governmental units<br><br>Ability to set evaluation agenda and ensure research questions align with government priorities<br><br>Access to evaluation partners and agencies across government can help amplify lessons | Challenging to remain impartial amid political shifts and election transitions<br><br>Encounters with governmental red tape may delay consultations and publications, especially for sensitive findings<br><br>Limited public sector remuneration may hinder recruitment and retention of technical and evaluation specialists<br><br>Securing external funding (from certain foundations and donors) can be complex due to hesitations about direct governmental influence |

| Institutional set up | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|---|
| **Semi-autonomous/ arm's length** *(government-enabled units)* | Proximity facilitates trust-building with senior policymakers and provides insights into policy opportunities<br><br>Government affiliation can bolster influence within a sector or policy domain<br><br>Maintaining distance ensures independence from political sway and upholds credibility and scientific rigour<br><br>Collaborating with governmental evaluation partners can magnify learnings and broaden the impact of capacity-enhancement initiatives | Bureaucratic processes can delay consultations and the release of sensitive findings<br><br>Lower salaries in the public sector challenge the recruitment and retention of technical experts<br><br>Securing external funding can be challenging, especially from entities hesitant to finance government initiatives directly |
| **Independent** *(independently run units)* | Capability to secure external funding, enabling competitive remuneration for skilled researchers<br><br>Flexibility in defining the nature of engagement (e.g., embedded partnerships, short-term assistance, or singular support)<br><br>Independence from political dynamics ensures credibility, transparency, and upholds scientific integrity, even when findings are contentious | Building trust with government entities can be challenging<br><br>High competition for the attention of government advocates<br><br>Restricted funding for sustained relationship-building (e.g., meeting and briefing expenses)<br><br>Proximity issues can hinder timely identification of policy opportunities and delivery of pertinent evidence<br><br>Risk of being tied to donor goals that diverge from government interests or to strict reporting timelines that do not adapt to changing scenarios |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration, adapted from Taddese (2021)*

## Key activities and functions

**A defining feature of policy labs is their capacity for testing and experimentation to validate the effectiveness of policy innovations.** This trait is widely acknowledged in the literature. For instance, Fuller and Lochard (2016) highlight key aspects such as experimental policy testing, creativity, and the significance of a user-centric approach in tandem with collaborative stakeholder engagement. Similarly, policy labs' capacity

for innovation and testing has been discussed and outlined by several authors, including Zeigermann and Ettelt (2022), Alessandro, Lafuente and Santiso (2014), and Olejniczak et al. (2020).

Several experts interviewed for this review emphasised this defining feature: as one interviewee concluded, a policy lab is essentially 'a safe space to try things out, ideally with a degree of rigour'. Interviewees also suggested that, without the testing element, an organisation may risk inappropriately labelling itself as a 'lab'. 'The danger of setting up a policy lab [without the testing element] is you'll have a lot of people saying you're doing it wrong and you need to be more experimental', warned one interviewee.

**This review found that the entities adopting the 'policy labs' title – even beyond embedded units – undertake a diverse array of interlinked activities.** Our analysis of EdLabs spotlighted these activities in particular:

- **Evidence prioritisation:** This process focuses on pinpointing specific evidence requirements in collaboration with policymakers and the research community. Actions under this umbrella might entail crafting research agendas, setting research priorities, or engaging in horizon scanning. A practical approach to this process involves enabling the government to articulate its queries to researchers, or fostering a dialogue between researchers and government officials to determine the pertinent questions. Essentially, this activity emphasises the formulation of research priorities and aids in shaping research agendas that align with governmental objectives.
- **Evidence assessment and synthesis:** This involves evaluating existing evidence for quality and rigour, including conducting and commissioning literature reviews to identify gaps. Activities also include evidence synthesis.
- **Evidence translation and dissemination:** Policy labs engage in the crucial task of translating complex research findings into accessible and actionable insights for a diverse range of stakeholders. This includes crafting policy briefs and publishing research or reviews on digital platforms.
- **Brokering:** Policy labs often serve as essential mediators between diverse stakeholders, fostering stronger connections and building trust. They play a pivotal role in connecting and enhancing relationships among diverse parties including the research community, policymakers, practitioners, and the general public.

- **Evidence production:** This entails actively generating new knowledge through research efforts. Policy labs conduct research and assess educational programmes to produce evidence that informs policy decisions. They use data analysis techniques, both quantitative and qualitative, to analyse policy issues and generate evidence. This informs policy development, identifies trends, evaluates policy outcomes, and supports evidence-informed decision-making.
- **Testing solutions:** This function involves testing and implementing innovative initiatives to assess their viability, effectiveness, and potential scalability within the education sector. Policy labs conduct experiments and pilot projects to test and evaluate new policy interventions, approaches, or initiatives. They aim to gather empirical evidence and assess the feasibility, effectiveness, and potential impact of proposed policy solutions.
- **Capacity development for evidence use:** Policy labs' activities to strengthen capacity can encompass any or all of the capacity development approaches used in the evidence-informed policy sector. For the new What Works Global Hub in Education, funded by the FCDO, for instance, this function is expressed as a project outcome: 'Increased state capability to produce, invest in, and use evidence'.[16] This could be targeted at strengthening data, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), or research systems within government. Our review found that policy labs often have a particular emphasis on the MEL dimension, aiming to strengthen understanding and application of evaluation methodologies.

It is worth noting that not every policy lab will engage in all the functions outlined here. This list is a compilation of potential activities that labs might undertake, some of which may be more or less suited to labs situated at different places along the organisational spectrum illustrated in Figure 6. Moreover, the activities undertaken by a particular policy lab will depend on their areas of focus; as an interviewee pointed out, some labs concentrate on narrow issues – such as the role of AI in education – while others take a broader approach requiring engagement with a wider range of functions. In our analysis, we observed that policy labs often mix and match various functions, which we have detailed further in Table 4. It is also quite common for labs to evolve over time, either adding new activities to their repertoire or phasing out older ones.

16 (FCDO, 2022)

*Table 4: Activities of selected EdLabs*

| EdLabs | Evidence assessment/ synthesis | Evidence translation /dissemination | Evidence production | Testing solutions | Capacity development for evidence use | Evidence prioritisation | Brokering |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IES What Works Clearingouse | x | | | | | x | |
| Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) | x | | x | | x | | |
| eBASE | x | x | x | | | | |
| Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) | | x | x | | x | x | x |
| Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) | x | x | | | | | x |
| SUMMA - Laboratorio de Investigación e Innovación en Educación para LAC | x | | x | | x | | x |
| Center for the Development of Public Management and Educational Policies (FGV DGPE) | | x | | | x | | |
| Integral Education Evidence Center (INSPER) | x | x | x | | x | | x |
| Innovation and Education Justice Lab, CIPPEC | x | x | x | | | | x |

| EdLabs | Evidence assessment/ synthesis | Evidence translation /dissemination | Evidence production | Testing solutions | Capacity development for evidence use | Evidence prioritisation | Brokering |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MineduLab | | | x | x | x | x | |
| IPA – embedded unit, Ministry of Education, Côte d'Ivoire | | | x | x | x | x | |
| Dados para un debate democratico na educaçao (D3E) | x | x | x | | | | x |
| Comunidades de Aprendizaje, Grupo FARO | x | | | x | | | x |
| Education Policy Institute (EPI) | x | x | x | | | x | x |
| Egypt Impact Lab | x | | x | x | x | x | |
| Ghana Embedded Lab in Education | x | | x | x | x | x | |
| Rwanda Embedded Lab | x | | x | x | x | x | |
| Big Results Now, Tanzania | x | | x | | x | x | x |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

Many of the EdLabs in the Global South prioritise activities surrounding evidence production, capacity development for evidence use, and brokering. This combination suggests a comprehensive approach towards evidence-informed policy-making. These labs not only focus on generating and assessing evidence but also emphasise the importance of translating this evidence into actionable insights, thus enhancing the capacity of stakeholders for its effective use. The prominence of brokering in these labs indicates a proactive approach to facilitating relationships and connections within the education sector.

For instance, SUMMA Lab embraces a multifaceted approach, combining the critical roles of evidence assessment, production, and capacity development for effective evidence use in policy decisions. Similarly, the MineduLAB and the IPA's embedded unit in Cote d'Ivoire concentrate their initiatives on testing solutions and evidence prioritisation, coupled with a robust emphasis on building capacity for evidence use. Their concerted efforts underscore a commitment to not only generating actionable insights but ensuring these insights find practical application in shaping and enhancing educational policies and practices.

Moreover, the Egypt Impact Lab and the Ghana Embedded Lab in Education take an extensive approach. Their range of activities, from evidence assessment to solution testing, demonstrates an awareness of the multifaceted nature of these tasks, and suggests an understanding – albeit still developing – that translating evidence into policy is a complex and multi-layered process.

### *Understanding EdLabs: A proposed typology*

From our analysis of policy labs, particularly EdLabs, we have developed a typology that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of their functions and activities. This typology, visualised in Figure 7, is designed to map the dynamic interface at which policy labs operate – connecting theoretical inquiry with policy formulation and real-world applications.

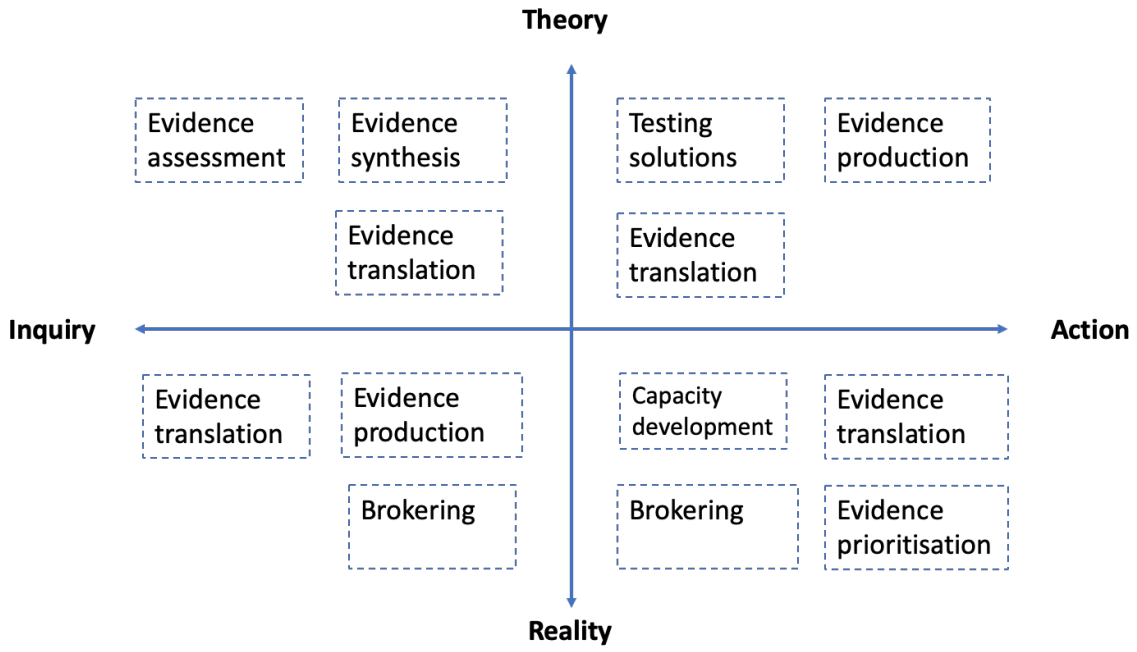
The core aim of our typology is to provide a structured lens through which the roles and operations of policy labs can be understood. When applied to EdLabs, the typology highlights their versatility, demonstrating how they fluidly navigate the intersections of theory and practice, as well as inquiry and action. This framework is not intended to rigidly classify EdLabs into distinct categories. Instead, it serves to illustrate the

*adaptable* nature of policy labs and the diverse mix of activities they engage in to achieve their goals.

A key aspect of this typology is its recognition that labs do not operate exclusively within a single domain or intersection. Rather, they are often found in multiple quadrants simultaneously, reflecting their multifunctional and dynamic character. For instance, a lab might concurrently engage in theoretical research (theory) while actively implementing policy initiatives (action).

Moreover, this typology acknowledges that the positioning of policy labs can shift over time. A lab might start primarily in the realm of inquiry, focusing on research and data collection, and gradually move towards more action-orientated activities, such as policy implementation or public engagement.

*Figure 7: Dynamic framework: Bridging theory, policy and impact*




*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

This framework is intended as an initial approximation, a starting point for deeper exploration into the diverse activities that policy labs undertake to fulfil objectives. It serves as a tool to better understand the evolving landscape in which these labs operate, bridging the gap between abstract theory and tangible impact.

***Key insights from the typology as applied to EdLabs***

- **Intersection between Theory and Inquiry:** Here, EdLabs focus on the examination of existing evidence, assessing its quality, and summarising findings for easier understanding and use by decision-makers. This work aids in making information more accessible, providing a clearer path for informed decisions and policy-making. In some instances, EdLabs may also offer recommendations on which evidence or approaches have sufficient support to be considered reliable and effective for implementation.
- **Intersection between Inquiry and Reality:** At this juncture, EdLabs bridge the gap between theoretical insights and real-world challenges. The organisation is actively engaged in both the production and translation of evidence, contributing to the body of research in the field. EdLabs generates research and various outputs tailored for diverse audiences, ensuring that findings are accessible and applicable for all stakeholders involved.
- **Intersection between Theory and Action:** EdLabs utilise research and empirical evidence to design and experiment with practical solutions. The process of testing these solutions often contributes additional evidence of their efficacy. While operating in this space, EdLabs also mediate between varied entities, enhancing capabilities for practical evidence application.
- **Intersection between Action and Reality:** At this crossroads, EdLabs interact with policy- and decision-makers, developing their capacity and translating evidence to meet individual needs. They also play a pivotal role in evidence prioritisation, assisting governments in defining their research agendas, and use their brokering functions to facilitate cohesive engagements between diverse stakeholders.

## Funding models

**As demand for policy labs surges, their budgets and operating models have evolved** to sustain their operations and fulfil their missions within the dynamic landscape of financing.

Whicher's comprehensive (2021) examination of the funding models of policy labs across the world sheds light on the strategies they employ to secure financial support. Whicher outlines five main financing models that policy labs can adopt:

1. **Sponsorship model:** A policy lab receives a designated portion of funding from one or more government departments. This financial injection is based on a clear mandate to serve the needs of these departments. While the sponsorship model provides a direct and stable source of funding, it also comes with the challenge of reliance on a single continuous funding stream within the ever-shifting landscape of politics.
2. **Contribution model:** Policy labs receive sponsorship from government departments while also recovering a portion of their costs from clients or funders.
3. **Cost recovery model:** Policy labs recover all costs from projects, often on a not-for-profit basis. This model grants flexibility in catering to a broad spectrum of clients.
4. **Hybrid model:** Labs leverage multiple sources of funding, including sponsorship, project charges, and collaborative funding. By diversifying income sources, policy labs can distribute financial risk. This model demands robust leadership and expertise in various domains and relies on an established track record to attract multiple income streams.
5. **Consulting model:** A policy lab operates akin to an internal consulting function, charging for projects with a commercial margin to generate income and foster growth.

Each financing model offers distinct strengths and weaknesses that will shape how policy labs ultimately approach their funding decisions (see Table 5). The suitability of each model will depend on the specific needs and context of the policy lab and can be influenced by factors such as credibility, track record, and available resources. The choice of model involves a strategic decision-making process and must align with the lab's goals, sustainability objectives, and capacity for financial management. Policy labs may journey through multiple funding models over time, and, notably, not all start from the same point.

*Table 5: Strengths and weaknesses of financing models*

| Model | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| **Sponsorship** | Clear mandate from government departments; stable and continuous funding | Over-reliance on a single source of funding amid shifting political dynamics |
| **Contribution** | Flexibility to serve diverse client range | Requires expertise in business development, marketing, and finance |
| **Cost Recovery** | Flexibility to serve diverse client range | Demands strong leadership across business development, bid writing, marketing, and finance |
| **Hybrid** | Risk distribution among multiple sources | Requires robust leadership and expertise across various domains; reliant on an established track record |
| **Consulting** | Enhances resilience through income generation | Requires strong leadership and expertise across various domains; reliant on an established track record |

*Source: Adapted from Whicher, 2021*

**Our review revealed particular risks for donor-funded labs in southern contexts, where the political economy of development aid is a potent factor affecting policy and knowledge systems.** In interviewees' experience, externally funded labs seem to be more prevalent in the Global South than the North – and interviewees showed a keen awareness of the potential implications of this. As Taddese (2021) cautioned, 'policy labs could be a way to ensure that evaluation agendas are country led, but only if the development community refrains from using these structures to push through donor-led evaluation agendas'. As one interviewee pointed out, if an externally funded policy lab is perceived as too 'big' or well resourced, it runs the risk of distorting incentives within the policy-making process. Two other interviewees noted the potential for open and frank learning or discussion about the role of philanthropic donors in engaging with government – given that, for many donors, this kind of 'close' government engagement is something either to be avoided or not openly acknowledged.

## Capacity development vs 'capacity substitution'

**The learning on capacity development for evidence use is clear on the need to accompany *existing* structures and systems.** Embedded policy labs aim to do this by seamlessly integrating into existing units or departments. And a deep dive into several such initiatives reveals a recurring theme: these labs are commonly nestled within pre-established departments of the ministries of education, rather than creating entirely new entities. One of the Jacobs Foundation-supported EdLabs, in Côte d'Ivoire, exemplifies this approach: it is intentionally positioned within the Directorate of Studies and Statistics, as this department is cross-functional and interacts broadly with other education ministry sectors. This strategic choice also helps to minimise any perceived inefficiencies or redundancies that a new office might entail. The overarching idea behind such placements is to capitalise on existing structures, and to amplify – rather than replace – their effectiveness through the unique perspective and tools that policy labs bring.

**Nevertheless, interviewees were keenly aware of the risks of policy labs potentially undermining existing staff units working on evidence generation and use.** 'Our role is not to replace the national government', stated one interviewee involved in evidence-brokering initiatives at a national level. Another interviewee, reflecting on experience with embedded models and 'delivery units', warned of the dangers of 'capacity substitution' rather than 'capacity development'; and a third interviewee saw an opportunity for EdLabs to focus on understanding and bringing the existing 'pieces' together within a government ministry rather than 'adding another layer' – echoing the findings from evidence diagnostics (discussed in Section 2) about the need for relationship strengthening between existing government evidence mechanisms. Yet despite the extensive existing literature on capacity development for evidence use, it was unclear from our review what the model of capacity 'transfer', from labs to other units within government, is expected to be, nor how it is typically measured. In some cases this appeared to be more an assumption of some labs than a change pathway appropriately grounded in an evidence-informed theory of change.

## Navigating politics

**Interviewees described a complex relationship between policy labs (in all their forms) and the surrounding political context, which – as we have already established – is a fundamental factor affecting any evidence use initiative in education.** Politics plays a key role in determining the ability of policy labs to influence policy. Policy labs do not operate in a vacuum; they exist within a political space, where different interests and political forces will shape their ability to inform and influence policy. Labs both within and outside the government are exposed to these forces of politics – and closeness to government does not necessarily translate into higher influence.

**Policy labs in several contexts were described as walking a form of political tightrope.** Interviews with practitioners from policy labs reveal that, for these labs to function effectively, there must be a keen awareness of the political context. This involves understanding the dynamics within relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, and closely observing ministry officials to grasp internal politics and dynamics. One interviewee mentioned that their lab shadows ministry officials to better understand these intricacies.

Embedded labs were described in practice as operating across a spectrum, with some seen as more technical or bureaucratic and others seen almost as the 'pet project' of specific, high-level political sponsors or champions. Those that attempted to retain a more 'neutral' or technical scope still had to navigate politics on an ongoing basis: 'Just because it's based within the ministry doesn't mean it doesn't face political barriers to uptake', observed one interviewee.

**Experience shared by interviewees suggested that labs that engage closely with political decision-makers may strengthen instrumental use of evidence and high-level policy impact.** This means the lab needs to invest energy in establishing trusted relationships with policymakers and not being perceived as 'remote' or disconnected from policy realities. Here, competition for attention, resources, and partnerships is heightened. These labs must vie for the limited time and interest of busy policymakers, alongside numerous other external entities like think tanks, advocacy groups, and international organisations. This competition necessitates a robust communication strategy, strong stakeholder engagement, and the production of timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.

Yet close relationships with these decision-makers can be fickle: as Taddese (2021) describes – and interviewees confirmed – policy labs must contend with challenges arising from political shifts, as changes in ministerial leadership and departmental turnover can lead to a loss of political support. Furthermore, the distinctive organisational form of policy labs renders them vulnerable to shutdowns, defunding, or neglect, making their survival contingent on sustained political patronage. Interviewees pointed to cases where high-profile labs with established structures had fallen into disuse following political shifts or the departure of an individual 'sponsor'.

Maintaining the delicate balance between proximity and impartiality is a pivotal challenge for policy labs. Although closeness to political decision-makers can foster distrust in the research community, distancing too much might render their findings irrelevant to policymakers. As one interviewee put it: 'It doesn't matter where the policy lab stands. There is always somebody that will question the neutrality of the advice given (...) if you are too close, there is risk (...) if you are too far, it might seem the evidence is not relevant for the policy makers you want to inform.'

Strategies that some labs have adopted in order to navigate these challenges include the formation of consultative committees. For instance, one policy lab established a Consultative Committee for Research in Education, consisting of government officials, researchers, and donors, in order to ensure the objectivity and independence of its research. A critical decision for labs, in order to strike the right balance between proximity and neutrality, is whether to serve as a conduit for government research priorities – thereby aligning with evidence producers, as in the Areas of Research Interest model – or to act as a facilitator between evidence producers and users, thereby fostering a broader dialogue involving more stakeholders. However, even labs outside government purview face scepticism – particularly if they appear to be influenced by specific funders or external interests. This underscores a universal challenge for policy labs: balancing financial sustainability with the imperative of impartiality.

## Effectiveness of policy labs

**Assessing the effectiveness and impact of policy labs presents a complex challenge.** The evidence surrounding the 'impacts' of policy labs is notably limited, often relying on anecdotal accounts that are highly context specific. Moreover, there is a lack of consensus on standardised methodologies for assessing the effectiveness of policy labs, given their multifaceted roles and dynamic environments. The inherent variability of policy contexts, coupled with the diverse goals pursued by policy labs, contributes to the absence of a universally agreed-upon framework for evaluation. In this section, we explore existing insights and perspectives regarding the effectiveness of policy labs and their evaluation.

### *Evidence of effectiveness is limited*

**There is a striking dearth of comprehensive evidence regarding the effects of policy labs, despite their surge in popularity.** The scope of research in this area remains limited, making it challenging to determine the real impact of policy labs in diverse settings. McGann et al. (2018) highlighted the scarcity of academic literature offering a global overview of policy labs; their research methodology, which utilised case studies, relied on literature searches to find labs that were mentioned in at least two different sources. Despite the increasing interest in policy labs – especially given their potential role in bridging the research–policy gap – it is also surprising to note that there has not been a systematic evaluation of the policy lab model in general. Moreover, our review did not unearth any evaluations specifically related to EdLabs – although there are some evaluations of the What Works approach in the UK.

One study that does exist is Olejniczack et al.'s (2020) research to understand policy labs from the vantage point of evaluation practice. Their inquiry revealed that the evaluation of policy labs echoes challenges faced by the global evaluation community, especially concerning their contributions to policies. A central concern in policy-making is establishing a causal link between interventions and observed changes. By determining which interventions work and understanding their mechanisms, policy labs can ensure accountability and optimise future financing (Olejniczak et al., 2020).

In terms of evaluating the results and impacts of policy labs, there is a tendency to emphasise short-term, process-related outcomes. Although success stories highlight

connections, network-building, and stakeholder involvement, there is a notable absence of discussions surrounding long-term, structural change (Olejmiczak et al., 2020).

As policy labs strive to demonstrate their impact and value, their ability to enact sustainable and transformative change becomes a crucial factor in their institutionalisation within government structures. The challenges of gauging effectiveness, coupled with the need for long-term impact assessment, necessitate the development of robust MEL frameworks (Olejniczaket al., 2020). Using theories of change and MEL frameworks allows policy labs to design their interventions in an evidence-informed way, and enables effective outcome measuring, progress tracking, and informed adjustments where necessary.

### *What contributes to the effectiveness of policy labs?*

For embedded labs, effectiveness is closely intertwined with learnings on organisational strategies for enhancing evidence use in policy (as outlined in Chapter 2). Zida et al. (2017) provide an in-depth examination of the intricacies surrounding the institutionalisation of policy units, focused on two policy units within Burkina Faso's Ministry of Health. Their findings underscore the importance of political will, priority alignment, leadership dynamism, and human resource capacity to effectiveness. Key factors like unwavering political commitment from government and donors alike produce tangible outcomes, such as stable funding streams and apt resource allocation, both human and infrastructural, and facilitate the emergence of policy labs as robust and effective conduits for evidence-informed policy-making.

Yet the effectiveness of a policy lab extends beyond tangible aspects such as organisational structures or procedural frameworks. It also involves the nuanced interplay of various factors like the incentives offered, dynamic leadership, and the presence of committed individuals who champion the lab's cause. These elements contribute to the overall effectiveness of a lab by enhancing its capacity to navigate and integrate within the governmental landscape.

Table 6 presents a set of indicators, facilitators, and barriers to the effectiveness of policy units, based on the findings of Zida et al. (2017).

*Table 6: Indicators, facilitators and barriers of policy unit effectiveness*

| Institutionalisation elements | Indicators | Facilitators and barriers |
|---|---|---|
| Existence of an institutional framework | • Law/regulation providing a mandate for the policy unit<br>• Institutional home identified for the policy unit<br>• Protocols/public norms set out for data information production | • Creation of an official decree or mandate ensuring favourable conditions for unit operation<br>• Institutional coordination between internal and external stakeholders<br>• Presence of a clear policy and unit champion supporting ongoing implementation |
| Consistent production of data and preparation of reports | • Explicit process designed for data gathering, compilation and transmission for decision-making<br>• Policy unit activities are regular and ongoing<br>• Protocol exists for validating research outputs in the policy unit | • Low human resource capacity for data collection and processing<br>• Lack of strategic and operational plan for short- and long-term work<br>• Lack of processing tools and mechanisms for data/research sharing<br>• Infrastructure and equipment availability and good internet connection for data production and information sharing |
| Adequate financial and human resources and infrastructure capacity to routinely produce and make use of data in policy-making | • The policy unit has annual plan of action<br>• Government budget is earmarked for the policy unit's activities<br>• Sufficient material and human resources are available for the policy unit's activities<br>• The unit's annual action plan is at least half funded | • Lack of state budget for the unit's activities<br>• Lack of multiple financial sources (donors, public and private) to support activities<br>• Lack of mid- and long-term planning for resource mobilisation<br>• Sufficient well-trained staff to support unit activities |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Zida et al. (2017)*

In our exploration of factors crucial to the success of policy labs, it is striking to observe the commonalities across various sources and experiences. The factors identified by Zida et al. echo prominently in findings from other reputable sources. For instance, the experiences gleaned from embedded labs across 11 countries, as extensively documented by the IPA (Hirji, 2023), corroborate these insights, as well as offering

invaluable learnings in their own right. The same insights also align closely with findings from a report by Martin et al. (2022), detailing IDinsight's work with governments through embedded partnerships, which highlights a series of activities essential for the success of such initiatives.

General factors in the effectiveness of policy labs, as identified within the literature, include:

- **Government priority alignment:** Data and evidence units, like embedded labs, should synchronise their endeavours with governmental objectives. Public sector representatives share techniques that ensure research objectives are congruent with governmental visions.
- **Evidence-lab value-proposition:** It is critical to elucidate how evidence labs can further key policy objectives, like education enhancements. This clarity instils a sense of worth and prompts early stakeholder buy-in.
- **Operational formalisation:** Ensuring the lab's operational consistency is paramount. Measures like a memorandum of understanding and defined operational processes secure the lab's direction, even amid personnel changes.

These observations reinforce the general consensus within the EIPM literature, as illustrated by evaluations such as the BCURE and Hewlett. Collectively, these sources converge on similar conclusions, underscoring the efficacy and impact of certain strategies and approaches in the realm of policy labs and embedded learning support.

# Where to from here?

3

# 3. Where to from here?

In the previous section, we explored the existing body of learning on evidence use and policy labs respectively. In this section, we outline the main implications of these findings for EdLabs and other stakeholders, and present opportunities to respond to, build on, and drive forward the evidence base on policy labs in education. We then set out practical recommendations and our suggested next steps for leveraging these opportunities.

| | |
|---|---|
| The implications of what we already know; the future direction of the field; and opportunities for EdLabs and others who wish to use policy labs to strengthen evidence use in education policy. | Practical recommendations for EdLabs, and others investing in or implementing policy labs to institutionalise evidence use in education. |

## 3.1. Implications and future directions

### *Could education be the 'new' health in EIPM?*

By far the most influential sector to date in shaping thinking and practice in evidence-informed policy has been the health sector. However, interest in the topic is increasingly growing beyond this sector (Oliver at al., 2014). Recent or ongoing examples of attempts to take approaches and lessons on evidence use from health and apply them to other sectors include the PEERSS partnership (PEERSS, 2023); the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges (2022); and the evidence institutionalisation checklist produced by the WHO (2023).

Our review shows that the education sector is well placed to act as a similar future arena for learning and testing approaches that can advance the evidence-informed policy field as a whole. Although interest in evidence use in education is not new, until recently it appears to have been largely confined to specific regional pockets, primarily in richer countries (for instance, the work done in OECD and European countries by the OECD's CERI; the efforts of many in the US education sector to strengthen evidence use; the What Works Centres in the UK and the growing interest in this topic in Australia).

We see an increasing interest in evidence use in education within international development contexts. This is illustrated by the presence of the more than 30 EdLabs from around the world at the Jacobs Foundation-supported convening in October 2023, as well as by the launch of major new global initiatives such as the What Works Global Hub for Education and the USAID DECODE project.[17]

Given the breadth of functions and activities that EdLabs undertake, and the overlap in aims and activities with much of the rest of the 'evidence use' sector, we believe EdLabs are well placed to share learning that can inform other efforts to strengthen evidence use.

### *Popularity versus proof: The dichotomy of widespread adoption and limited evaluation*

**As policy labs proliferate across sectors and geographies, their widespread adoption speaks volumes about their appeal.** Yet, a glaring gap persists: there is a significant shortage of evaluations that measure their success against their stated objectives.

This, then, points to a pressing need for systematic reviews and assessments to validate the increasing prominence of policy labs. Such evaluations would have co-benefits for both policy labs themselves and the evidence-informed policy sector. Efforts to document and analyse the relationships among policy labs' activities and functions, organisational models, stakeholder engagements, and different outcomes, represent an opportunity to consolidate and affirm understandings of the 'policy lab' label, increase the evidence base on the effectiveness of policy labs, and ultimately to drive the space forward.

This type of rigorous evaluation of policy labs would also contribute to resolving a perennial challenge in the evidence-informed policy sector: measuring long-term, sustainable institutionalisation of evidence use. This continues to be a key topic of discussion in the evidence-informed policy community, and in education, is referred to as studying the 'quality of use' (Rickinson et al., 2019; Finnigan, 2021; OECD, 2022; Revai, 2022).

17 'What Works Global Hub for Education is a £30 million partnership led by the University of Oxford working in 12 countries to strengthen understanding of how to achieve learning outcomes at scale, and partner with governments to use that evidence into policy and practice. It is funded by the FCDO, the World Bank, UNICEF, USAID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the British Council. DECODE (Data Ecosystems for Development in Education) is a new initiative funded by USAID aiming to strengthen data and evidence in education by integrating and amplifying locally and regionally produced evidence in global evidence ecosystems, ensuring knowledge products and processes are useful and used, and support and strengthen the Center for Education's congressional reporting, data and PPR analysis, and cost analysis efforts' (USAID, personal correspondence, November 2023).

Efforts to measure the quality use of evidence in education have the potential for far-reaching impact across other sectors and the broader evidence-informed policy landscape. For example, measurement of EIP outcomes was a key challenge identified by funders at the WHO E2P summit (August 2023). Discussants from several funding organisations pointed out the long-term, systemic and complex nature of evidence use outcomes.

### *Innovation in theory, convention in practice?*

In the complex landscape of policy development and advisory groups, we have observed that many self-identified policy labs share notable similarities with established organisations, such as think tanks and evidence brokers. This significant overlap raises important questions about the true nature of policy labs: Are they introducing a genuinely innovative model, or are they simply repackaging familiar strategies under a new label? Addressing these questions is vital to comprehend the specific role and contributions of policy labs within the broader context of policy-making.

For the future trajectory of policy labs, it is imperative to harmoniously blend innovative methodologies with the accumulated wisdom of the broader policy sector. A conscious effort to recognise and integrate insights from think tanks and similar entities will invariably fortify policy labs' capacity in sculpting more informed policies.

### *Getting better at understanding and navigating politics*

There has been a growing awareness of the politics of evidence-informed policy over the past decade, but there is an absence of clear direction on how to apply lessons and principles in specific contexts, and a lack of unified understanding of what it means to engage in the politics of EIP.

As a sector that is usually subject to detailed public and political discussion, education provides an ideal vehicle through which to contribute to this understanding. This starts from developing a more nuanced understanding of the politics of evidence use in the education sector, which can then pave the way for dismantling conventional notions of politics purely as an impediment to evidence use, showing how practical learning actually reveals an intricate dance of power dynamics, negotiations and alignments that can either impede or advance evidence use – and sometimes both at the same time. As the RISE programmes' political economy approach for education reminds us, 'Politics

isn't a barrier … it's the way change happens' (Development Leadership programme, as quoted in Gershberg, 2021).

EdLabs from across the spectrum of our typology (see page 64) can contribute to the body of knowledge by developing more nuanced analyses of the politics of evidence use in the education sector – within specific contexts or policy debates, at multiple levels of government, and across the diverse stakeholder spectrum. They can also contribute to a related, but separate, learning area: how to practically navigate politics in evidence use initiatives. EdLabs are well placed to develop and to test practical and locally led tools to navigate politics, and to share lessons with the broader evidence-informed policy and education sectors – both of which are cognisant of the politics of evidence use but neither of which appear to have yet grappled with it in depth. EdLabs' experience offers a valuable opportunity to contribute to, and perhaps transcend or reconfigure, discussions on 'thinking and working politically', and applied political economy.

### *Understanding evidence use in organisations*

**For embedded policy labs in particular, there is an opportunity to contribute to both literature and practice on 'process use' of evidence in policy-making.** These systemic types of changes are consistently identified as a need, but the research on how to achieve them is limited in comparison to that on other types of evidence use. The access that embedded policy labs have to their 'host' organisation, and the deep knowledge they develop of government institutions from the 'inside out', is of great potential value for all stakeholders seeking to understand how to strengthen systemic evidence use in policy (and also for those in the policy lab sector exploring the various dimensions of embeddedness within organisations).

It offers insights on both the development of 'formal' structures, processes and systems surrounding evidence use, and the cultivation of supportive working cultures and enabling environments. And both of these aspects offer the possibility of particularly revealing insights from the education sector, given the contested nature of its evidence base, its different 'user' groups, and its decentralised structure. Indeed, these two dimensions of evidence use within organisations – formal and cultural – have both been the subject of repeated calls for greater study and practical experimentation. Yet our review did not find any examples from the education sector of the type of in-depth work conducted and published, for instance, by the Department for Environmental Affairs in South Africa (Wills et al., 2016b). Policy labs would be well placed to fill this gap, by

developing similarly detailed, in-depth pictures of the organisational factors shaping evidence use in education.

### *Joining the dots between different methodologies and evidence types*

**Policy labs in the education sector are well placed** to take an interdisciplinary approach to expanding the research on evidence use in education – one that engages with existing evidence and draws from diverse methodologies. In all contexts, and particularly in the Global South, there is an opportunity to support calls for greater investment in education research that responds to locally identified priorities and is conducted in a way that strengthens local research systems.

First, policy labs have the mandate and methodological expertise to take a broad view of evidence for policy – one that brings together the sometimes disparate pockets of thinking around M&E systems, data use, research use and citizen evidence, and considers how all of these evidence streams combine on an ongoing basis. This 'models' the kind of broad and inclusive evidence approach that the evidence-informed policy sector has found to be most relevant.

Second, EdLabs are well placed to navigate – and perhaps transcend – some of the methodological debates that we discussed earlier in this paper and which are particular to the education sector, joining a growing effort described by Burns (2023) to find ways to combine multiple types and methodologies of evidence for use in education.

**Policy labs in education also have an opportunity, through their work on research production, to advocate for local and international investment in education research.** As we discussed earlier, education research remains underfunded compared to other sectors. In some contexts this is part of a broader problem; for instance, most African countries are lagging in their ambition to commit 1% of their GDP to research and development (Midega et al., 2021). By adopting a systems approach that integrates 'evidence use/demand' with 'evidence supply', policy labs can establish connections within the robust and burgeoning domain, emphasising the need for better funding and acknowledgment of southern educational research. We see a tangible opportunity to steer this in a direction that confronts and challenges the inequities in research systems.

### Box 9: Advocacy for education research in the Global South

The principles set forth by the African Education Research Funders Consortium encapsulate the essence of advocacy around education research in the Global South (AERC 2022). In particular, they underscore the need to:

- Foster a conducive culture emphasising the use of evidence, and conceive solutions tailored to promote evidence-informed decision-making.
- Channel direct assistance towards local educational research entities, with a sustained focus on collaborations or networks interlinking education researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers.
- Bolster the enduring capacity of local systems to produce, communicate, and employ evidence. This is supplemented by cultivating an environment conducive to evidence use and devising strategies befitting the ethos of evidence-informed decision-making.
- Reflect on the measures adopted to produce, communicate, and apply evidence, ensuring they embody values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## 3.2. Recommendations

### *For practitioners: Improving the design and implementation of EdLabs*

These three critical actions will help EdLabs be more evidence-informed in their approach:

1. **Clearly define the purpose and envisaged outcomes of each EdLab using a theory of change** with a) explicit links to existing evidence and/or evidence gaps for interventions and b) an articulation of what types of evidence use the lab is targeting (e.g., process use/instrumental use/transparent use).
2. **Use evidence diagnostics to analyse the contexts in which EdLabs operate,** identifying windows of opportunity for change and developing a deep understanding of existing government structures and ways of working.
3. **Join existing EIPM networks and communities of practice at global and regional levels** to ensure that EdLabs contribute to and draw on existing efforts.

### *For funders of EdLabs: Supporting learning*

EdLabs offer a significant opportunity to address evidence gaps in their own approach, as well as in the study and practice of evidence use. We recommend that funders:

4. **Address the evidence gap around policy labs' effectiveness** by funding a rigorous evaluation of their objectives and impacts on the policy-making process, at a sector and/or landscape level.
5. **Ensure that appropriate resources are dedicated to documenting and sharing learning** from the implementation of EdLabs, with the support of a systematic MEL approach.
6. **Package and share learning that responds to existing evidence gaps,** both on an operational level (about how to design and implement labs) and on a wider 'field-building' level (about the systems and contexts labs operate in, and their longer-term impacts within these systems).
    - As a starting point, we recommend the five key learning topics presented in Box 10).
    - Learning should be published in a variety of audience-appropriate formats and should aim to include both project reports and academic publications.
    - Learning should also be packaged and shared in languages beyond English, in order to contribute to the growing regional evidence-informed policy communities in Latin America and West Africa.
7. **Be adaptive and flexible in approaches to funding,** so that EdLabs can change their approaches over time in response to emerging learning.
8. **Make a commitment to drawing on existing evidence** in the design of programming and project work.
9. **Actively participate in learning about funders' own roles in evidence ecosystems,** including reflection on the implications of power dynamics and incentives.
10. **Develop and invest appropriately in a strong and comprehensive communication and engagement strategy at both global and country levels.** This will ensure that learning from EdLabs is informed by –and contributes to – that from the evidence use sector and from other policy labs outside the education sector.

### Box 10: Five big learning questions for further exploration

From all the various opportunities, outlined in this section, that we see arising from the pursuit of learning within the EdLab space, we have derived five key questions that we believe should be at the core of a learning agenda going forwards:

1. How does politics affect evidence use in education – for instance, in specific policy debates or contexts? And (relatedly but separate) what are the practical ways that EdLabs and other evidence use efforts can navigate this politics in the design and delivery of initiatives?
2. What is the impact of different policy lab models on evidence use by a) policymakers and b) practitioners/teachers? Does closeness to government translate into 'better' uptake?
3. How do specific approaches and activities contribute to organisational-level changes in evidence use ('process use' of evidence) in structures, systems and cultures of working within government departments?
4. Is there a role for philanthropic donors in supporting direct work with governments to support evidence use? And if so: What factors need to be considered around incentives and power dynamics, and what implications do these have for results/outcomes?
5. What is the impact of policy lab models over time? How does their role evolve? Can they act as catalysts for institutionalisation of evidence use on their own or do they require system-wide investment?

# Conclusion

# Conclusion

**In this review, we have outlined opportunities for EdLabs to both draw from and contribute to the use of evidence in education policy as part of a wider learning agenda.**

Learning emerging from EdLabs will be situated within a dynamic and rapidly expanding landscape, characterised by the 'labification' of the policy field, the expansion of global interest in evidence use following the COVID-19 pandemic, and a growing community of education stakeholders with a particular interest in evidence use. Within this context, policy labs can be understood both as 'evidence use' interventions in their own right, and as mechanisms for the delivery of other such interventions.

**The 'labification' of the policy field has led to a global landscape in which policy labs take a wide variety of approaches and deploy interventions that seek to strengthen evidence use in different ways. Yet despite their popularity, the evidence base around policy labs, their functions, and their impact is strikingly scant.**

In fact, there are multiple evidence gaps that learning from EdLabs can contribute to addressing; we have outlined these in five priority learning questions (see Box 10). We find a particularly striking gap in evidence on the *effectiveness* of policy labs – a question that goes right to the heart of the entire endeavour, and one that rigorous evaluations of EdLabs' approach could start to address. The Jacobs Foundation and its EdLabs can make a significant contribution to this effort by evaluating their own EdLabs' work.

But opportunities for learning from policy labs goes beyond the lab field itself. We also identify several key topics that the 'evidence use' sector is grappling with, to which learning from EdLabs can offer valuable insights: these include the politics of evidence use in education, transcending methodological silos, and developing better understandings of evidence use at an organisational level ('process use'). A strong communications and engagement approach, which taps into growing regional and global evidence use networks, can ensure that insights gained from EdLabs inform the broader sector and vice versa.

**There is a relevant, but dispersed, evidence base that EdLabs can draw from to inform the design of their work.** Our review illustrates that the factors affecting evidence use in the education sector echo those repeatedly identified in other sectors;

to identify how these factors manifest in specific contexts, EdLabs can draw on existing evidence diagnostic tools.

As EdLabs also carry out many of the same activities as other entities in the evidence-informed policy arena, and with the same target outcomes, we suggest that other lessons and tools from the broader evidence-informed policy field may be transferable to or adaptable for the education sector. For example, there is compelling practical evidence and theoretical research on the design and implementation of individual capacity development approaches, such as training to improve policymakers' understanding of evidence ('conceptual use'). There is also a strong evidence base, in both the education sector and more broadly, on 'knowledge brokering' approaches, which aim to fortify relationships between evidence producers and users and identify shared research priorities.

Our review took in three streams of inquiry: evidence-informed policy, evidence use in education, and policy labs. All three areas share the characteristic of rapid expansion juxtaposed with gaps in the existing evidence, and/or perennial challenges for which additional research is needed. Yet between them, they represent a rich body of existing learning that is ripe to be built on. We believe that this tension – at the intersection between the existing knowledge and the remaining gaps – represents a unique and fertile opportunity to drive all three spaces forward. The Jacobs Foundation is well positioned to contribute to this effort through the generation and sharing of learning alongside its partner EdLabs, and we believe that if the foundation seizes this opportunity, it has significant potential to inform global progress at the confluence of evidence-use, education, and policy labs.

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# Annexes

# Annex 1: Research questions

The research questions that guided the **evidence use in education element of the review** were as follows:

- What is 'evidence use' and what has been learned about how to strengthen it?
- What is 'evidence' in the context of education policy?
- What is 'institutionalisation of evidence use' and what does it look like in the context of education policy?
- What strategies can be taken to institutionalise evidence use? What has been learned from the education sector in particular?
- How can policymakers' capacity to use evidence be strengthened?
- How can cultures of evidence use be fostered and strengthened?
- Which change agents within the education policy ecosystem need to be targeted in order to institutionalise evidence use?
- What strategies can ensure the long-term sustainability of evidence use?
- Are there any unique issues, opportunities, or challenges related to capacity for evidence use and cultures of evidence use in education policy?
- What are the priorities of education sector stakeholders regarding the use of evidence in policy?

The research questions that guided the **policy labs element of the review** were as follows:

### *Definitions*

- What does the literature say about policy labs? (e.g., which sectors feature literature on this topic? What experiences are documented? from what regions? Are there any comparisons between Global South and Global North?)
- What are policy labs?
- What different definitions of policy labs exist in the literature, and how do these definitions vary across sectors and contexts?

### *Types and functions*

- What are the different types of policy labs and their functions?
- What are their functions and intended outcomes?
- What is their operational makeup (organisational structure and processes, governance models, staffing, funding)

### *Effectiveness and evidence*

- According to the literature, how effective are policy labs?
- How can policy labs monitor and evaluate the achievement of their intended outcomes?

### *Lessons learned*

- What are the key elements/factors/principles of a successful policy lab?
- How can policy labs promote cultures of evidence use?
- How can labs maintain a balance between local-context relevance and the application of global evidence-informed practices?
- What gaps in the literature need to be addressed to better understand the impact and potential of policy labs?

# Annex 2: Learning questions[18]

The purpose of the learning questions is threefold:

1. To contribute to the design of a learning agenda among the Jacobs Foundation's partners and other interested donors.
2. To inform the evidence use debate in the education sector in general.
3. To inform more specifically the design of the sessions in the convening in October 2023.

The learning questions, grouped into clusters, are shown below:

### *Framing and purpose*

- What are policy labs? What different definitions exist? What models exist and have they evolved over time?
- What are their intended outcomes and how do these vary across sectors and contexts?
- What is 'evidence use' and what has been learned about how to strengthen it?
- What approaches can ensure long-term sustainability of evidence use? What can labs learn from these approaches?

### *Functions and approaches*

- What functions do different types of labs have?
- How have different labs operated in practice? What are the 'nuts and bolts' of their operational make-up (e.g. organisational structure, staffing, funding, processes/procedures) and how does this affect their work?
  - What are the key design elements of successful policy labs?
  - What are the different governance models of policy labs?
  - Are there unique opportunities or challenges/risks to the policy lab approach in Southern contexts?

18 These learning questions were identified by Jacobs Foundation, its partner EdLabs, and OTT in June 2023. They formed the basis for the research questions in this review and for the agenda at the October 2023 convening. The 'five big learning questions' identified on page 82 represent an updated picture of the remaining priority learning topics as of November 2023.

    - How do policy labs conduct learning agenda/TOC processes and incorporate these into lab institutionalisation?
    - When and how to embed a research agenda into their activities?
    - How to articulate the different research agendas?
    - How does variability in learning feed into country research agendas?
    - What are the critical components of a robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework for policy labs?
    - What strategies can labs use to ensure their findings and recommendations are effectively communicated?
- How can capacity development for evidence use be strengthened?
    - How can policy labs support this/what role can policy labs play in this?
- How can cultures of evidence use be fostered and strengthened?
    - How can policy labs support this/what role can policy labs play in this?
- Where in government or beyond do EdLabs sit?
- What strategies are effective to secure government buy-in?
- How can policy labs maintain their independence and avoid being captured by political interests?
- How can labs maintain a balance between local-context relevance and the application of global evidence-based practices?
- How do policy labs engage the domestic research community and relevant stakeholders more broadly?
    - How do policy labs set up effective research coordination committees? How do they compare to steering committees?

### *Impact and sustainability*

- What is 'institutionalisation of evidence use'? What strategies can be taken to achieve this? Are there any examples of this from the education sector?
- How can policy labs balance short-term relevance and impact with long-term research and development?
- How can policy labs' work evolve along with government and other key stakeholders' priorities?
- How do labs interact with power dynamics in local research systems?
- What direct and indirect effects have labs had in Southern contexts?

- Can labs trigger institutional change on their own or do they require system-wide investments?
- What change agents within the policy ecosystem need to be targeted in order to institutionalise evidence use? What can labs learn from these?

### *Implications and recommendations*

- What has been learned about the design, implementation, and use of labs so far?
- What lessons can inform labs from the wider universe of efforts to institutionalise evidence use within governments? Anything specific/different from the education sector?
- How do we build a community of practice around policy labs?
- What key gaps and tensions in the existing evidence base could a learning agenda explore?
- What recommendations can be drawn for funders and implementers?

# Annex 3: List of interviewees

***Abdoul-Aziz Adama, Innovations for Poverty Action (Côte d'Ivoire)***

Abdoul-Aziz is the Right-Fit Evidence and Policy Manager at IPA Francophone West Africa, where he leads a diverse portfolio of education initiatives, including the Jacobs funded EdLab. His prior roles include M&E associate for IPA Côte d'Ivoire and research associate on agricultural and microfinance projects in Mali. He has also worked with the World Bank, where he oversaw projects related to social protection, jobs, and forcibly displaced people. His contributions extended to serving as the Development Impact Evaluation Field Coordinator and Country Coordinator in Niger.

***Vaqar Ahmed, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (Pakistan)***

Dr Vaqar Ahmed is the Joint Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). With a distinguished career spanning civil service and collaborations with organisations like the UNDP, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank Group, he holds advisory roles for USAID, the Federal Board of Revenue, and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Board of Investment & Trade. Dr Ahmed's extensive international experience includes visiting faculty and research positions at institutions such as the University of Nottingham, the University of Le Havre, and the National University of Ireland. An accomplished author, his work encompasses international trade, finance, public finance, and private sector competitiveness, with notable publications by Oxford University Press and FES Germany. He has been recognised with several awards, including the French Government's 2015 Young Leaders Fellowship and a 2021 Canadian Government grant for research on fiscal responses to COVID-19. With colleagues at SDPI, Dr Ahmed was part of the FCDO-funded Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) consortium.

***Professor Kwame Akyeampong, Professor of International Education and Development, Open University***

Professor Kwame Akyeampong is a distinguished scholar in the field of International Education and Development, currently holding the position of Professor at the Open University, UK. With over 25 years of experience, he has made significant contributions to education in low-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. His research

focuses on the political economy of education systems, educational policy and practice, and education access and equity, emphasizing disadvantaged groups. Throughout his career, Kwame has been involved in major research projects and consultancy roles, collaborating with organizations such as UNESCO, FCDO, Belgian Development Organization, and the World Bank. Notable projects include serving as a Senior Policy Analyst for UNESCO's Global Monitoring Education Report and leading the Speed Schools Project in Ethiopia. An Honorary Professor at the University of Sussex, Kwame co-chairs the World Bank and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel. Professor Kwame leads the Jacobs-funded EdLab, the Ghana Embedded Lab in Education.

### *Kerry Albright, UNICEF (USA)*

Kerry is Deputy Director and Principal Advisor for Evaluation at UNICEF, as well as the UNICEF institutional co-lead on the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition alongside the UNDP. With a social and political science background, she has over two decades of experience in research and evaluation in international development. Previously, she was Deputy Director a.i. and Chief of Research Facilitation and Knowledge Management at the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, overseeing the design and delivery of research, knowledge and capacity-development products such as 'quality assurance' and 'ethical evidence generation in research, data and evaluation' procedures; developing research management and methods training; overseeing the annual 'Best of UNICEF Research' competition; commissioning evidence synthesis products, including systematic reviews, evidence gap maps, and rapid reviews; advising on the development of evidence uptake/impact strategies; and spearheading an internal evidence survey and diagnostic process to identify opportunities to strengthen UNICEF's use of evidence in programming. Prior to this, she held senior roles at the UK Department for International Development (DFID), including as Senior Advisor for Agriculture, Data and Innovation and Head of the 'Evidence into Action' Unit. Kerry is also co-chair of the Campbell Collaboration's Child and Young Person's Wellbeing Coordinating Group and was a commissioner with the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges.

### *Jonathan Breckon, independent (UK)*

Jonathan is a consultant and policy advisor with over two decades of experience mobilising research to improve policy and practice. He is director of Breckon Consulting, focused on research and training on evidence-informed policy, as well as a policy fellow

at the UK Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jonathan was embedded in the UK Department for Education (DfE) as senior policy advisor as part of the Open Innovation Team, a demand-led, cross-government unit that works with academics to gather and communicate evidence for policy as well as to explore and test new ideas for policy. Jonathan was previously director of the UK Alliance for Useful Evidence at Nesta and a founding board member of the DfE's What Works Centre for Children's Social Care.

### *Emma Broadbent, OTT Consulting (UK)*

As a senior associate with OTT Consulting, Emma runs rapid research services for teams at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, including a particular focus on financing for human capital development. Emma has over 15 years' experience in the global development space, with a particular interest in global education. She has worked with several philanthropic organisations to develop and evaluate education programmes, including the Mastercard Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, and previously led The Varkey Foundation's monitoring, evaluation, and learning portfolio between 2015 and 2018. Emma has conducted studies of embedded technical assistance models in Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. She also has experience of working closely with national- and local-level education decision-makers in Argentina, Ghana, and Uganda to communicate programmatic research-based evidence relating to teaching quality and school leadership. Emma has a particular interest in the role of evidence in African policy debates, and conducted in-depth research in this area for ODI during 2010–2012.

### *Vinicius Campos, Parana State Department of Education (Brazil)*

Vinicus is a strategic projects advisor at the Parana State Department of Education in Brazil. He recently concluded a dissertation on evidence use in Brazilian education policy as part of a master's degree in government, politics and policy at Birkbeck, University of London. Prior to his role at the Department for Education, Vinicius worked as an education policy analyst at Movimento Profissão Docente, developing and implementing teaching policies through partnerships with state departments of education. Before that, he worked as a political analyst in a public affairs consultancy company.

### *Anne Candelaria, Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines)*

Anne is a leader in education policy reform in the Philippines. She has over two decades of experience at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, currently as Assistance Vice President for Graduate Education. She was formerly an assessor for the ASEAN University Network and a visiting fellow at the University of Melbourne. For the past decade, Anne has investigated improving capacity for evidence-informed education policy in the Philippines. As a partner in the FCDO-funded VakaYiko (BCURE) project, she led capacity-building programmes focused on the gap between evidence and policy between the Department of Education and local policymakers, as well as the gap between the executive and legislative bodies of government.

### *Donika Dimovska, Jacobs Foundation (Switzerland)*

Donika Dimovska is the Chief Knowledge Officer of the Jacobs Foundation. She joined in 2020 to spearhead the foundation's ambitious efforts to be a leading learning foundation. Prior to her role at the Jacobs Foundation, she established the education and health innovations practice at Results for Development (R4D), overseeing the Center for Education Innovations and the Center for Health Market Innovations. With extensive international development experience, she has worked with organisations such as the Council on Foreign Relations, Action Against Hunger, The Trickle Up Program, Religions for Peace International, and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. She holds an MA in international relations from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

### *Juliana Gutierrez, Universidad de los Andes (Colombia)*

Juliana, a historian from the National University of Colombia, is project lead at the Universidad de los Andes' Imagina Center. This multidisciplinary platform is dedicated to enhancing the wellbeing of children and adolescents through a comprehensive approach encompassing research, communication, capacity development, and advocacy in public policy. Juliana has been involved in the design of the Jacobs EdLab in Colombia.

### *Juan Manuel Hernández, Innovations for Poverty Action (Spain)*

Juan Manuel Hernández-Agramonte is the Senior Director of Embedded Labs program at IPA. He leads IPA's strategy to co-create embedded evidence units within

government organizations. He is also a PI in several studies in education and ECD. Earlier, he worked as IPA's Regional Director for the Latin American and the Caribbean region, and as a Country Director for IPA's Peru country office.

### *Patrick Okwen, eBASE Africa (Cameroon)*

Patrick Okwen (MD) is serving as the team lead at eBASE Africa and district medical officer at the Bali District Health Services in Cameroon. Patrick's background includes conducting systematic reviews with the Cochrane network, implementing evidence-informed projects with the Joanna Briggs Collaboration, and partnering with organisations like the World Bank, the WHO, and the Ambassade de France au Cameroun for impact evaluations.

### *Kate Ross, FCDO (UK)*

Kate is in the Education Research Team at the FCDO, where she was involved in developing the business case for the What Works Global Hub on Education, including conducting background and landscape reviews to inform its design. She acts as its current focal point.

### *Diego Sanchez, ExE (Colombia)*

Diego Sanchez is the director of Observatorio a la Gestión Educativa (ExE Colombia). His background spans educational project management, curriculum design, teacher training, university-level instruction, classroom engagement, as well as family involvement in the educational process.

### *Louise Shaxson, independent consultant (UK)*

Louise has over 30 years of experience in research management and social policy. Previously, she was director of ODI's Digital Societies programmes and head of the RAPID programmes, which focused on improving research–policy links in international development. Louise also focused on organisational approaches to evidence-use within the South African Department for Environmental Affairs as part of the VakaYiko BCURE programme. She co-led ODI's role in the SEDI programme in Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda, focused on developing a 'political economy plus' methodology and using it in context analyses across nine sectors in the three countries. Louise was previously a part of the Science Strategy Team at the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs as a management consultant/policy adviser. She was also associate editor of the Journal of Evidence & Policy between 2011 and 2018 and is currently associate editor of Development Policy Review. Currently pursuing a doctorate at Kingston University, her research focuses on evidence-informed policy-making inside a government department.

### *Elizabeth Stuart, What Works Hub for Global Education/Blavatnik School, University of Oxford (UK)*

Elizabeth Stuart is the executive director/technical policy director of the What Works Hub for Global Education (WWHGE), a new £30m collaboration between academics, NGOs, and governments to strengthen evidence-informed reforms for learning outcomes predominantly in India, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Tanzania, with additional activities in a further eight countries. The WWHGE is supported by the UK's FCDO, and other strategic partners including the World Bank and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The hub's activities include support to education policy labs in Rwanda, Ghana, South Africa, and Tanzania as well as to policy-engaged research collaborations in India and Pakistan. Previously, Elizabeth served as the executive director of the Pathways for Prosperity Commission, a global initiative dedicated to understanding the use of digital technologies for inclusive economic growth in developing and emerging countries. Her contributions extended to the publication of a significant book on the subject by Oxford University Press. Elizabeth has held a diverse career that includes leadership roles at ODI, Save the Children, and Oxfam International's Washington, DC office. She is also a former national newspaper and radio journalist.

### *Esteban Torre, CIPPEC (Argentina)*

With an academic background in education and public policy, Esteban has held key managerial positions in various institutions, including the Dirección General de Cultura y Educación of the Province of Buenos Aires, where he made significant contributions. He also played a pivotal role in the Conectar Igualdad programme under the ANSES (National Social Security Administration) and contributed his expertise to the municipality of La Matanza.

# Annex 4: Examples of government education research institutes[19]

***Saudi Arabia:* *Centre for Research in Education Policy***

Housed within the Ministry of Education, the centre seeks to establish educational policies to improve the educational system, based on best practices and using rigorous research methods. The centre produces research, comparative analyses, and policy recommendations.

***Qatar:* *Department for Educational Policies and Research***

As part of the Ministry of Education, the department is one of the sources for educational policies and contributes to all major research projects concerned with developing educational policies. It aims to inform policy and overcome obstacles based on research outcomes, data and statistics.

***France:* *Directorate General for Research and Innovation (DGRI)***

Sitting within the Ministry of Education, the DGRI steers the development of the national research strategy with other ministries and stakeholders, and provides the permanent secretariat for the Strategic Research Council. It is responsible for 'multidisciplinary scientific and technological research', 'research in the field of environmental and resource management', and 'space research' programmes. It also prepares, in conjunction with the financial affairs department, the allocation of resources allotted by the state within the inter-ministerial 'research and higher education' mission.

***Trinidad and Tobago:* *Division of Educational Research and Evaluation (DERE)***

Established in 1994 within the Ministry of Education, the DERE is involved in the planning, management, and implementation capability of the ministry, with the aim of increasing efficiency and effectiveness. The DERE conducts evaluation studies

19 The OTT team is grateful for the research support of Farah Al Hadid in compiling this list.

on educational practices, undertakes research studies and analyses, and conducts workshops to fulfil training needs within schools.

### ***Nigeria: Educational Planning, Research and Development (EPR&D) Department***

Within the Ministry of Education, the EPR&D Department is responsible for the 'coordination and development of educational policies, strategic and medium-term sector and action plans, research and documentation and leveraging international partnerships for efficient and effective education service delivery'. It collects and processes educational statistics for educational planning, conducts policy-orientated research in areas of concern, and initiates the development of policies in education arising from research reports and other documents.

### ***Singapore: Research and Management Information Division***

Housed within the Ministry of Education, the Research and Management Information Division 'conducts and harnesses research, provides leadership in data strategy and data governance'. Within the division, the Research & Evaluation Branch conducts international benchmarking studies as well as national research and evaluation studies of strategic importance to inform policy-making, programme development, and improvement of educational practice.

### ***Japan: National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER)***

As part of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the NIER is responsible for collecting and analysing academic research data in order to plan and design educational policies. It aims to present findings from research, conduct scientific surveys, provide analyses to help solve urgent issues, support education activities, gather and store educational information and data, and collect knowledge and promote information sharing for educational research in Japan and abroad. The NIER actively conducts basic research and collaborates with outside researchers.

### ***USA: Institute of Education Sciences (IES)***

The IES is located within the US Department of Education and seeks to provide rigorous evidence on which to ground education practice and policy. One of four centres within the IES, the National Centre for Education Research (NCER) funds and coordinates rigorous research to contribute to the solution of significant education problems in

the US. The NCER also funds pre- and post-doctoral research training programmes, to invest in the training and development of education researchers. The IES provides funding under several grant programmes to support research that is carried out by research institutions and state and local education agencies, working collaboratively on problems or issues that are a high priority in the field.

### *Germany: Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education (DPIF)*

Jointly funded by the federal government and the federal states, the DPIF is the 'centre for educational research and educational information in Germany'. It prepares, indexes and transfers knowledge for education, by combining research, knowledge transfer and infrastructures in a way that is unique to Germany.

### *UK: Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)*

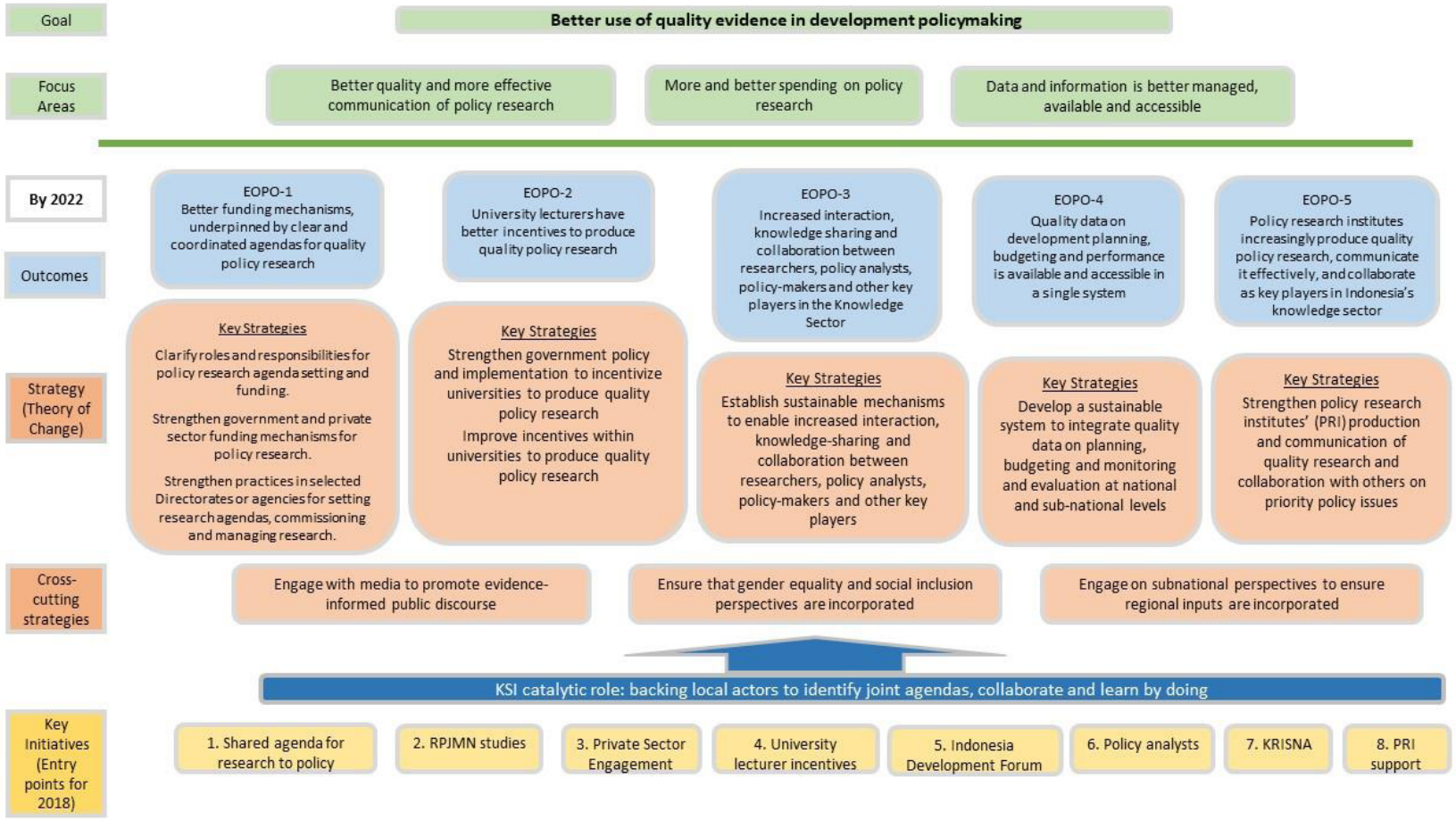
The EEF is an independent charity. It works on summarising evidence, finding new evidence by funding independent evaluations of programmes and approaches, and putting evidence to use by supporting education practitioners, policymakers, and other organisations to use evidence in ways that improve teaching and learning. The UK Department for Education endows the EEF, with a grant of £137m. The EEF also receives donations to support its work.

### *Brazil: National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Ansio Teixeira*

The institute was created in 1937, linked to the Ministry of Education. It is the federal body responsible for educational evidence and aims to produce scientific knowledge and official information for the improvement of educational public policies, contributing to the social and economic development of the country. It also subsidises the formulation, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of policies and programmes in the area of education with the preparation of research and studies. It also cooperates with public or private, national or international bodies to support its activities.

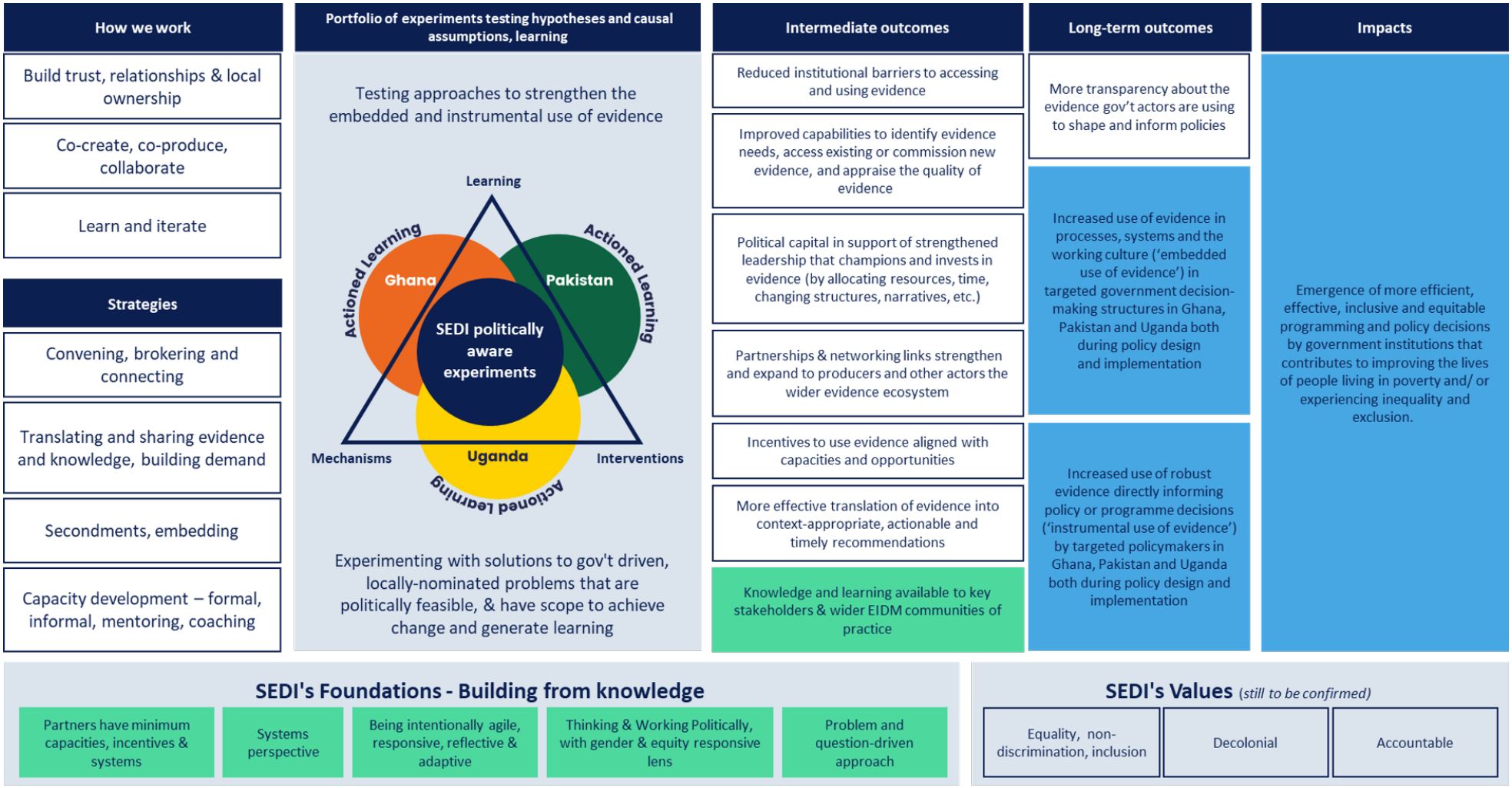
# Annex 5: Programme design and theories of change for evidence use

*a. Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) Theory of Change*




*Source: McLaren, 2018*

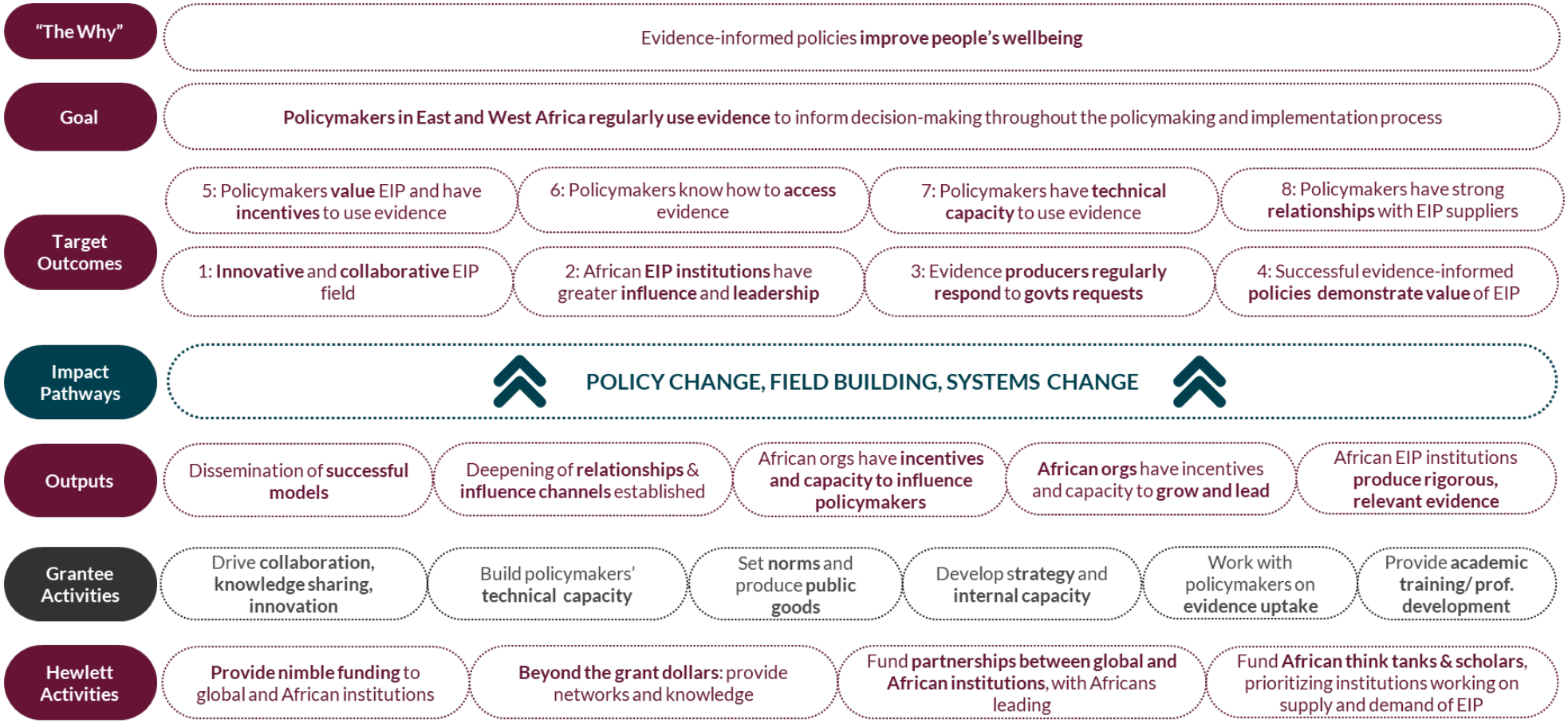
## *b. Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) Theory of Change*




*Source: FCDO, 2021*

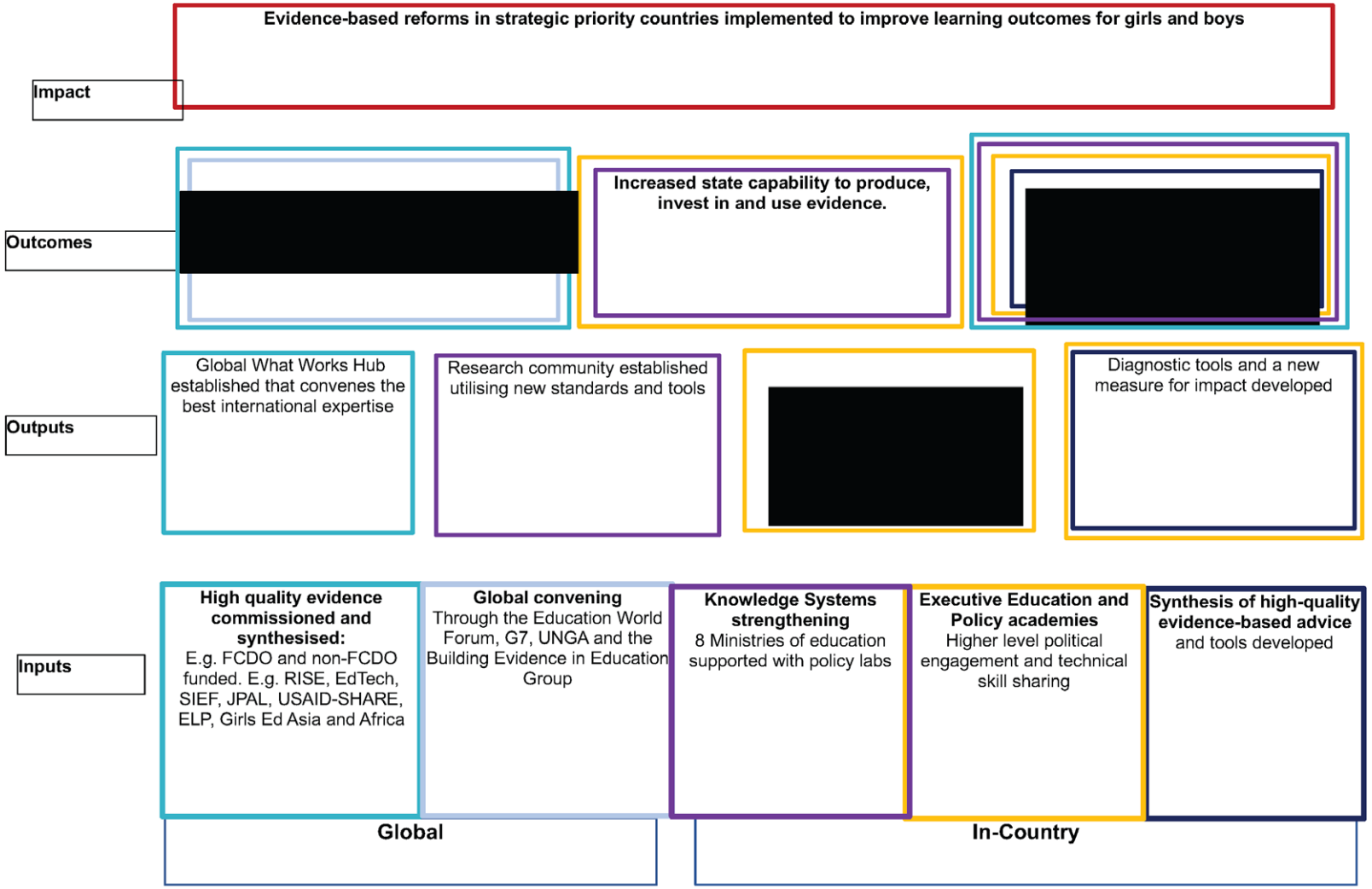
### *c. Hewlett Foundation EIPM Portfolio Retrospective Theory of Change*

## *Figure 1: Reconstructed TOC: Overall EIP and Institutionalizing Evidence Use*



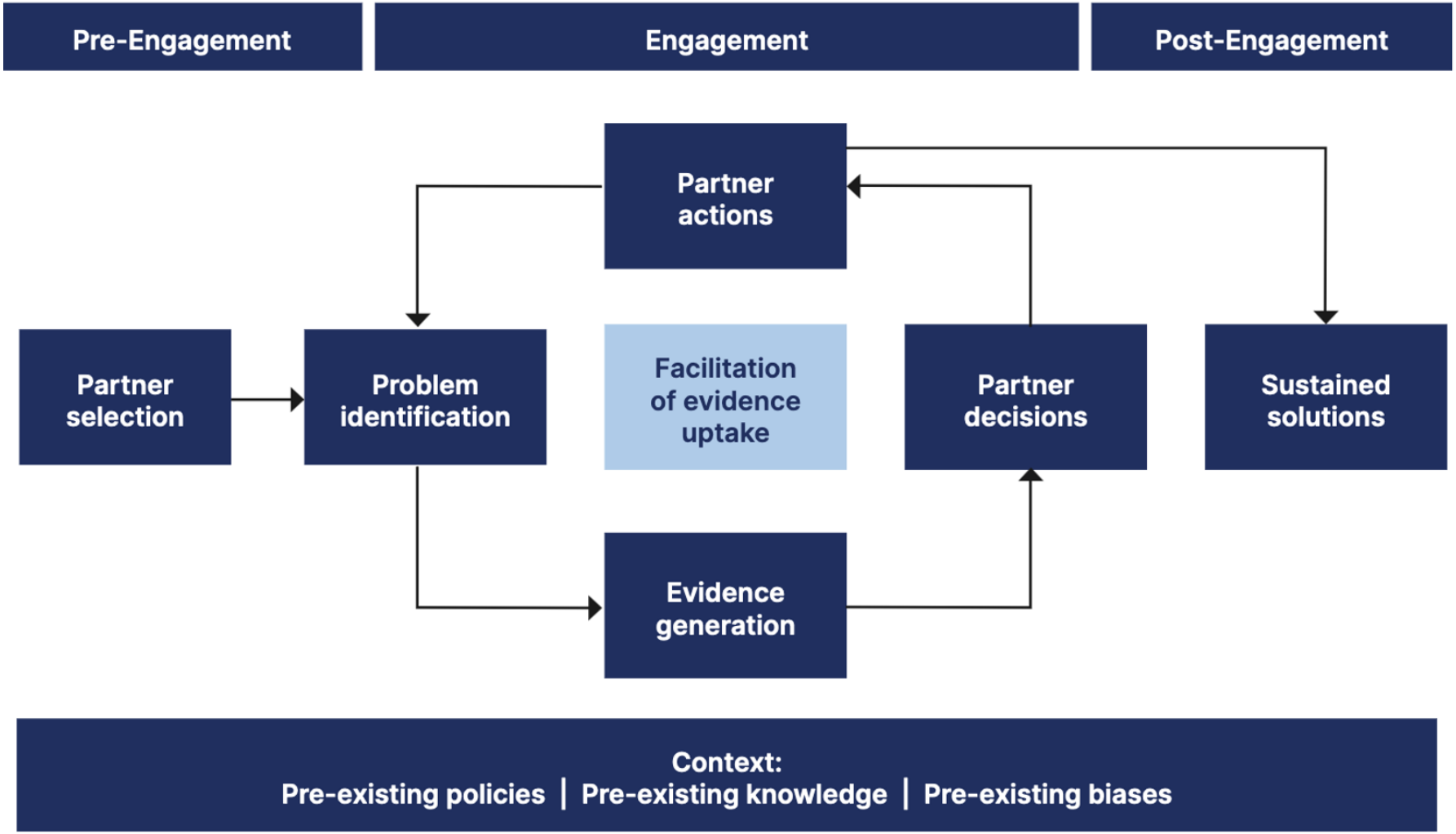

*Source: Dalberg, 2023*

### *d. What Works Hub for Global Education Theory of Change*




*Source: FCDO, 2022*

*e. IDinsight Embedded Partnerships Theory of Change*




*Source: IDInsights, 2022*

# Annex 6: Evidence diagnostic tools[20]

| Framework | Domains/categories | Government partners |
|---|---|---|
| **Understanding the Organisational Context for EIPM** (Wills et al., 2016a)<br><br>Focused at the organisational level; offers guiding principles for improving evidence use | Five guidelines and suggested good practices:<br>• Gather a broad range of evidence<br>• Link evidence needs to policy priorities<br>• Link evidence to business planning, budgeting and reporting<br>• Ensure evidence processes are inclusive and participatory<br>• Work towards co-design and co-production of evidence and policy | Developed out of a two-year partnership with the Department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa (Wills et al., 2016b) |
| **Context Matters Framework** (Weyrauch et al., 2016)<br><br>A participatory, problem-driven framework to co-identify windows of opportunity for improved evidence use with policymakers or other evidence users. Considers both macro/political economy context and an in-depth organisational element | Six interlinked domains of context, each with subdomains:<br>• Macro context/political economy<br>• Relationships across the system<br>• Organisational capacity<br>• Organisational culture<br>• Processes & structures<br>• Infrastructural and other resources | Developed through interviews and advisory support from 50+ policymakers & practitioners in the Global South<br><br>Used in organisational diagnostics (approx. 4–8 months each) with:<br>• Peru Secretariat of Public Administration, 2017<br>• Ghana Environmental Protection Agency, 2017<br>• UNICEF South Asia and East Asia Pacific Regional Offices<br>• Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda and National Tariff Commission in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2021b) |

20 This table summarises published evidence diagnostic tools; we are aware that EdLabs and other evidence-use initiatives are developing similar tools for use in programme design that are not published.

| Framework | Domains/categories | Government partners |
|---|---|---|
| **SEDI 'Political Economy +' Methodology** (Shaxson et al., 2021)<br><br>Developed to assist the SEDI programmes to identify priority sectors for evidence institutionalisation work in Ghana, Uganda and Pakistan. Covers both macro level and organisational level (with the latter approached in two stages) | A combined political economy, knowledge systems and organisational analysis:<br><br>• Foundational or structural factors<br>• 'Rules of the game'<br>• Knowledge system stakeholders<br>• Sources of dynamism and change<br>• 'Organisational PEA': 'Authority, Acceptance, Ability | First stage sectoral analyses:<br><br>• Ghana health, public financial management and economic development (Gatune et al., 2021)<br>• Pakistan: child labour, economic development, education pathways to employment, child labour (Ahmed et al., 2021a)<br>• Uganda: humanitarian, gender & family planning (Ahaibwe et al., 2021)<br><br>Second stage 'deep dive' organisational analyses using Context Matters Framework (as above) |
| **Rapid Evidence-Support System Assessment (RESSA)** (Global Commission on Evidence 2022)<br><br>Aims to identify strengths, opportunities for scale up, and gaps to address in each country's national evidence support system. Covers both macro level and organisational level | Potential features of domestic 'evidence support systems' include:<br><br>• Government policymakers<br>• Evidence-demand coordination<br>• Evidence-supply coordination<br>• Evidence support network<br>• Evidence support units focused on sectors (such as education or health) or forms of evidence (such as systematic reviews) | 12 countries currently piloting RESSAs: Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Ireland, Israel, Lebanon, South Africa and the UK |
| **Ecosystemic framework for analysing evidence-informed policy systems for agricultural transformation** (Thoto et al., 2023)<br><br>A sector-focused approach, initially for agriculture, developed by ACED and FAO | Four dimensions:<br><br>• Boundaries (including policy domains, geography, evidence)<br>• Context (historical, apolitical, economic, institutional)<br>• Stakeholders (producers, consumers, users of evidence and relationships between them)<br>• Sustainability (power, resilience, capability) | Used to produce one national case study (Benin's agriculture sector, Thoto et al., 2023). At the time of writing a pilot was underway in Cote d'Ivoire and further pilots planned for Togo, Niger, Senegal and Burkina Faso from 2024 |

| Framework | Domains/categories | Government partners |
|---|---|---|
| **Checklist: Supporting the routine use of evidence in policy making** (WHO, 2023)<br><br>Targeted at government agencies, knowledge intermediaries and researchers interested in institutionalising evidence use (health is the initial focus but can be applied to other sectors) | Six domains of context:<br>• Governance<br>• Standards and routine processes<br>• Leadership & commitment<br>• Resources & capacity<br>• Research–policy partnerships<br>• Culture<br>• As well as four stages of institutionalisation:<br>• Awareness<br>• Development/pre-institutionalisation/semi-institutionalisation<br>• Maturation or (re-institutionalisation) | Developed with input and co-authorship from policymakers around the world. Will be piloted in two countries from 2023 |

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