



Meeting Policymakers Where They Are Evidence-to-Policy and Practice Partnership Models

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Abstract

Although we are seeing progress in the quality and number of development impact evaluations, more work is needed to ensure evaluation findings and recommendations are used in policy- and practice-level decisions. This paper examines evidence-to-policy and practice partnerships as a mechanism for strengthening the demand for and use of evidence, with a focus on impact evaluations as one type of evidence tool to support better decision making. We explore how these partnerships work, the barriers that hinder progress, including power dynamics and existing funding models, and share ideas for improving them, with a focus on what funders can do. We conclude by suggesting a need for development partners to re-examine their role moving forward in two ways: first, by exploring how to shift from evaluator and implementer to a broker or facilitator that convenes, guides, and connects partners to resources; and second, by considering new funding models to support long-term partnership-building activities

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Introduction: Drawing on partnerships to advance evidence-informed policymaking

The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest public health challenge we have faced in recent times. Social and economic disruptions triggered by the virus have increased poverty, exacerbated inequalities, and created hardships for populations across the globe. While the recent roll out of COVID-19 vaccines signals progress, it is hard to dispute that the crisis is far from over. Countries are still struggling to manage the virus, with limited or conflicting evidence to guide urgent policy and practice decisions (Kirkcaldy, et al., 2020). How to slow the spread of a now mutating virus? How to deliver vaccines fairly and efficiently? How to safely reopen schools?

Faced with these kinds of questions and the many mysteries of a virus that remain unexplained, governments have leaned on research and evidence communities for critical advice in setting policy priorities and identifying evidence needs. They have forged new partnerships, more often turning to existing networks and relationships to make sense of the virus and guide the response effort.

Researchers in Canada, for example, have mobilized to create spaces for sharing, exchanging, and vetting critically needed information and evidence to improve the awareness of citizens and ensure their safety. Initiatives such as the government-led CanCOVID and grassroots-driven COVID-19 Resources Canada database emerged from these efforts (Borthwick, 2020).

In Lebanon, the Knowledge to Policy Center (K2P)—a knowledge translation platform that brings together decision makers, researchers, practitioners, and civil society members to inform and influence policy and practice decisions—launched the K2P COVID-19 Series Initiative to provide timely evidence in easy-to-understand formats for policymakers. The K2People Initiative gives citizens and the media access to reliable evidence and information for making informed decisions about the health and the safety of their communities (El-Jardali, et al., 2020). K2P quickly established itself as a trusted source of information during the pandemic because of many years of work in building broad partnerships to strengthen the use of evidence in decision making in the Middle East.

The Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI), a semi-autonomous research institute under the Federal Ministry of Health, has also been an instrumental partner in informing the government's response to COVID-19. As a trusted partner to the Federal Ministry of Health and stakeholders at the highest levels of government, including the Office of the Prime Minister, EPHI has led daily briefings and rapidly synthesized evidence to support timely decisions in the face of the pandemic.

These examples are a small sampling of the myriad ways in which governments, shaped by a shared sense of urgency to identify the best available information to inform COVID-19 policy and practice decisions, have partnered with evidence communities. In this paper we explore partnerships—ranging from evaluation units in government, to knowledge translation platforms, and donor-funded networks—that aim to promote regular and sustained exchange between evidence producers and users. We examine how they do this, with the aim of informing partnerships in impact evaluations, as one type of evidence tool to support better decision making. The premise for the paper is that although we are seeing progress in the quality and number of development impact evaluations, more work is needed

to ensure evaluation findings and recommendations are used in policy- and practice-level decisions.

We begin with a description of partnerships that are helping to inform government responses to COVID-19, to ground our analysis in current realities. COVID-19 has affected evidence production and use in many ways, from an unprecedented demand for rapid evidence reviews, to data collection and impact evaluation activities that were put on hold (Maina, 2020) or shifted to remote forms (Rose & Estes, 2021), offering a moment for honest, introspective reflection of the partnerships that are designed to bring evidence producers and users together to inform or influence decision making. What has worked well? Where is there room for future improvement?

We organize the rest of the paper as follows:

Section 1: **Background and related work** describes the motivation for this paper and briefly reviews the research that informs our understanding of evidence-to-policy and practice partnerships.

Section 2: **Understanding partnership models** reviews the definition and framework we use to categorize and distinguish evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models from one-off or time bound engagements.

Section 3: In **A closer look at evidence-to-policy partnership models**, we describe how partnerships are promoting the use of evidence in decision making.

Section 4: **Emerging observations and ideas to take forward** offers ideas that global development funders could consider, to strengthen partnerships and advance the use of evidence in decision making.

Section 1. Background and related work

1.1 Understanding whether development initiatives work

In 2006, the Center for Global Development (CGD) published a report titled, “When Will We Ever Learn: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation” that set out to examine what development partners saw as an “evaluation gap.” The report argued that too few quality impact evaluations explain whether development interventions work and how cost-effective they are. The recommendations, aimed primarily at development partners,¹ included advice to build on what already existed and to explore measures they could commit to individually, such as making more resources available for evaluations. It also called for collective action—a pooling of partner resources and efforts to take advantage of economies of scale and share costs. This recommendation spurred the formation of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). Today, 3ie is a global leader in producing, quality assuring, and synthesizing global evidence.

¹ Defined in the report as NGOs, foundations, research centers, bilateral agencies, developing country governments, and multilateral development banks.

Fast forward to 2020, when a UNU Wider Working Paper examines how impact evaluations have changed over the last 14 years. “The Impact of Impact Evaluations” reviews the progress that development and government partners have made in generating and using evidence. While there has been progress in the number of impact evaluations commissioned since 2006, the report also highlights several challenges. Particularly relevant for this paper are two observations: (1) donor-financed and commissioned evaluations, and those led by principal investigators who are primarily from the North, underplay the need for local ownership; and (2) development partners place limited emphasis on strengthening country-level capacity to produce and use evaluations. The authors of the UNU Wider Working Paper are encouraged by the novel ways in which researchers and policymakers have come together in the last 10-15 years to strengthen systems for evidence and promote its use—the evidence-to-policy and practice partnerships we examine in this paper.

The aim of this paper is to inform CGD’s follow-on research and convening activities to continue advancing the use of impact evaluations in development policy and programs. The goal is to build on the work of the last 15 years and explore how development partners can support further advancements in evidence-informed decision making to address social challenges, with a focus on funders in their role as collaborators. We acknowledge that funders are also decision makers, investing in evaluations to understand whether programs they support are achieving the desired impact, what to continue supporting, or whether to introduce a new strategy. The scope of this paper, however, is limited to examining evidence-to-policy partnerships as a mechanism for strengthening the demand for and use of evaluation evidence by country governments, with funders engaging as facilitators or collaborators. We explore how partnerships work, the barriers that hinder progress, including power dynamics and existing funding models, and share some considerations to improve evidence-to-policy and practice interactions. A brief review of relevant research related to evidence partnerships follows.

A note on how we define evidence

This background paper uses a broad definition of evidence that includes research; contextual and operational data from sources such as administrative data, surveys, and census; and experiential knowledge and insights from citizens. Our definition of research includes evidence tools like impact evaluations, systematic reviews, and quasi-experimental designs. Evidence-informed policymaking is the use of the best available evidence to inform policy decisions.

Given the focus on impact evaluation in the “When Will We Ever Learn: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation” report and follow-on reporting and research, we call out the examples that are specific to impact evaluations rather than grouping them generically as research.

1.2 Related work

Previous research signals that partnerships and engagement between researchers and policymakers are critical to promoting evidence use (Innvaer, et al., 2002; Campbell, et al., 2009; Oliver, et al., 2014). These same studies highlight the absence of a connection between researchers and policymakers, and availability and access to timely and relevant research as the most cited barriers to evidence use (Innvaer, et al., 2002; Campbell, et al., 2009; Oliver, et al., 2014).

Efforts to institutionalize or promote the systematic use of evidence in policy and practice have gained attention since the rise in impact evaluations in the early 2000s (White, 2019). White (2019) identifies direct interaction between researchers and policymakers and building knowledge portals as two approaches to institutionalizing evidence use. Several other studies also acknowledge the important role that research-to-policy interactions or partnerships play in facilitating the use of evidence in decision making (Results for America, 2017; Dumont, 2019). Other studies offer useful terms and categories for understanding different partnership models and their role in promoting the use of evidence in policymaking (Cvitanovic, et al., 2015; Rushmer, et al., 2019).

The starting point for this paper is thus an understanding that without collaboration between research and policy communities, getting evidence into policy and practice decisions is challenging. Governments benefit from the access to evidence, specialized expertise, and research methods that collaborations offer. Partnerships give researchers and funding partners access to insights on policy windows and data sets to help answer policy-relevant research questions (Lin, et al., 2018). But simply forming a partnership will not result in better evidence use. It is critical to interrogate and understand the incentives that motivate a partnership—from a government, research, and funding partner perspective. When incentives are misaligned or perverse, the evidence produced may not be as relevant for a decision process and could even undermine it (Mackay, 2007; Rutter, 2012; Witter, et al., 2017). We discuss the kinds of challenges that could arise from a disconnect in priorities below.

To begin, if the motivation for a partnership aligns with research and academic interests, including the ability to publish in peer-reviewed journals rather than the practical considerations of policymakers, research findings are likely to be of limited relevance and use to policymakers (Rutter, 2012; Witter, et al., 2017). Next, longer time frames that are specific to impact studies may mean that research results are not timely enough for the immediate decisions facing policymakers (Rutter, 2012; Witter, et al., 2017). In addition, studies that are financed and commissioned by donors to address their own programmatic priorities may not always be the right tool for answering the questions that policymakers are seeking to address. Further, donor requirements that incentivize the reporting of positive or less controversial results can weaken the accuracy of findings and the data or knowledge systems that underpin them (Sandefur & Glassman, 2014). Finally, budgets and timelines rarely acknowledge the time and level of effort needed to build relationships and develop an insider's understanding of organizational and institutional-level reform opportunities.

On the policy side, governments or other relevant partners are less likely to consider using evaluation evidence when they have limited involvement in identifying priorities and designing studies. If evaluation findings are not easily accessible and understandable by policymakers, they are more likely to find a home on a dusty office shelf than to feature in a decision process. A policymaker's capacity to understand and apply evidence, the available organizational and institutional supports, and underlying values and assumptions about evidence also influence its use. These capabilities—at every level of a knowledge system—are critical to incentivizing the use of evidence. Do policymakers have the skills and space to translate evaluation evidence to policy implementation? Do they have systems for collecting data and undertaking quality reviews? Is legislation in place to incentivize evidence use? Is the use of evidence recognized and rewarded? Are there consequences for not using evidence? These questions draw attention to the kinds of capacity dimensions that can

influence the success of a partnership. In the last section of the paper, we explore ways to better align incentives in the evidence-to-policy process, including funding for partnerships with the goal of supporting systematic use of evaluation evidence in decision making.

In the next section, we discuss the definitions and framework we use to categorize and distinguish evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models from other engagements.

Section 2. Understanding evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models

For this paper we define evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models as spaces that allow for interaction and systematic collaboration between evidence producers and decision makers to inform policy and practice-level decisions. We distinguish this space from one-off engagements or static databases and portals as a structure that is established with a long-term vision of supporting ongoing collaboration, communication, and exchange between evidence producers and users, such as a program, institution, community, or network.

Evidence-to-policy partnerships can play a key role in promoting the use of evidence in decision making when partner motivations for engaging are aligned. They offer a structure or space for co-creation, for example, by bringing government decision makers and research partners together to design an evaluation and debate findings, and through this helping to build a shared understanding of what evidence is needed and why (Bednarek, et al., 2019). This can foster collaborative knowledge generation (Greenhalgh et al., 2016) and by extension strengthen policymaker ownership of and capacity to use evidence (Transfer Project, 2020). Regular and responsive interactions can help ensure that evaluations reflect policy priorities and research findings are produced and shared in a timely manner for decision making. The trust and collaboration that partnerships foster can also reduce the time that it takes for evidence to make it into policy and allow change to happen faster (Bednarek, et al., 2019; Rushmer, et al., 2019). During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is these pre-existing and trusted relationships that decision makers turn to for their most immediate and priority evidence needs (El-Jardali, et al., 2020; Tseng, 2020). Figure 1 and Table 1 briefly summarize the primary objectives of evidence-to-policy partnerships.

In Section 3 we highlight different types of partnership models to illustrate how evidence and policy communities come together in different contexts.

Figure 1. The what and why of evidence-to-policy partnerships

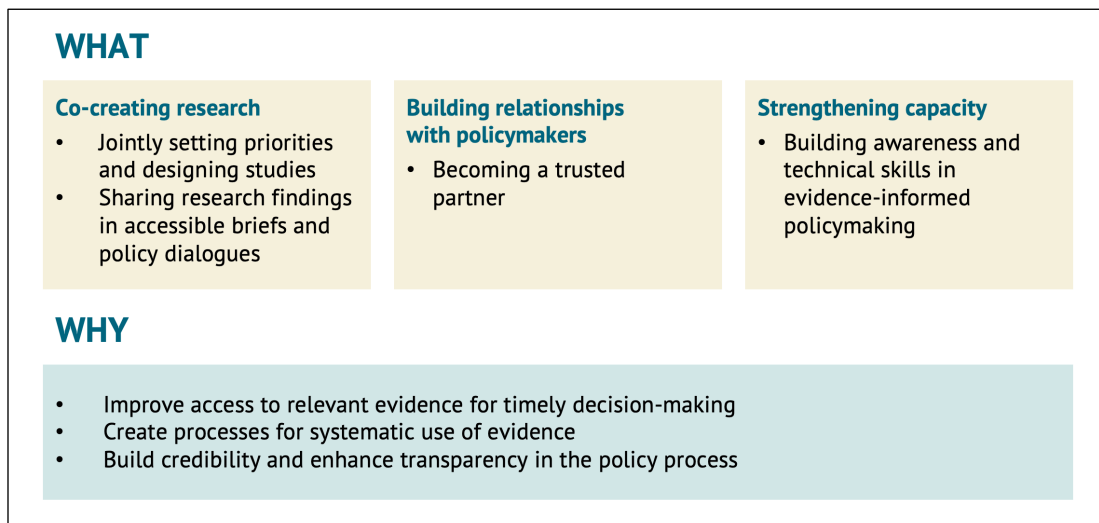


Table 1. Three primary functions of evidence-to-policy partnerships

Function	Why this is important	Example from a partnership
Knowledge co-creation and sharing	<p>Evidence/evaluation findings are more likely to be used when decision makers or the intended users of evidence/evaluation are centered and have ownership in the research process, including the design of studies and review of findings (Orem, et al., 2012; Oliver, et al., 2014)). This can help to build an evidence culture (Transfer Project, 2020).</p> <p>Evaluation and implementation projects where tacit and experiential insights of policymakers can help inform study design and analysis may be best suited for co-creation (Williamson, et al., 2019).</p> <p>Evidence that is synthesized in formats that are accessible and easy to understand is more likely to be used (Orem, et al., 2012; Oliver, et al., 2014).</p>	<p>Canada’s CanCOVID network gives vetted researchers from across the country a structured forum for ongoing exchange and collaboration with health and policy communities in setting priorities and co-producing evidence to inform issues ranging from clinical trials, to testing, and treatment. To facilitate the rapid sharing of information that is needed in a crisis and prevent a duplication of research efforts, members communicate with each other in real-time using Slack, an online messaging and communication platform (CanCovid, 2020). The network is fully funded by the government of Canada and has a user-friendly website with knowledge products that include short, accessible briefing summaries on emerging evidence and a speaker series available on YouTube.</p>
Relationship building	<p>Relationship building, whether at an individual level (between researchers and policymakers) or an institutional level (between government agencies and partners), helps to build trust and increases opportunity for policy engagement (Sohn, 2018; Bogenschneider, 2020; Oliver, et al., 2014).</p>	<p>Since its establishment in 2013, Lebanon’s Knowledge to Policy Center has worked to position itself as a trusted partner to decision makers, citizens, the media, and other stakeholders in the region’s evidence community. The K2P Center regularly facilitates policy dialogues with partners in government, the research community, and civil society. The Center also conducts training activities to strengthen the participation of media groups and citizens in policymaking. Additionally, it hosts citizen consultations to invite input on planned policies and support decision makers in bringing transparency to priority-setting processes. This history of engagement and relationship building quickly positioned K2P as a credible source of evidence during the pandemic (El-Jardali, et al., 2020).</p>
Capacity strengthening	<p>Skill building and awareness creation activities aimed at strengthening a policymaker’s understanding of a research process or a researcher’s ability to engage with policy can help to increase policy impact (Oliver, et al., 2014)</p>	<p>The Development Impact West Africa (DIWA) initiative is piloting a capacity strengthening approach that includes a component to help policymakers improve how they commission, manage, and use impact evaluations and another to help strengthen the ability of researchers to conduct impact evaluations. A matchmaking program that pairs policymakers with researchers to conduct impact evaluations offers an opportunity for a kind of practical and participatory training (Vogel & Punton, 2018).</p>

2.1 Categorizing evidence-to-policy partnership models

The literature on evidence-informed policymaking uses several terms—somewhat interchangeably—to describe the who and how of the knowledge exchange that takes place in a partnership. Commonly used terms include “knowledge broker,” “boundary spanner,” “intermediary,” and “translator,” each summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Commonly used terms to describe the who and how of knowledge exchange in partnerships

Term	Definition/trait
Knowledge broker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An individual or organization that facilitates exchanges between research producers and users, engages in debate about what the evaluation/evidence says, and helps decision makers translate research into policies and programs. • Knowledge brokers are typically embedded in a research organization (Cvitanovic, et al., 2015). • Knowledge brokers often undertake outreach and networking activities, including dissemination of research findings, and building and nurturing networks of knowledge users and producers (Olejniczak, et al., 2016), and their engagement usually has a capacity strengthening dimension focused on the skills of policymakers (Ward, et al., 2009).
Knowledge translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The act of making evidence/research accessible—easy to find and understand. • The synthesis, exchange, and application of knowledge to policy and practice (Rushmer, et al., 2019).
Boundary spanner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like a knowledge broker but operating as a separate entity that is not typically embedded in a research organization (see Bednarek et al., 2019; Cvitanovic, et al., 2015).
Intermediary/translator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often used interchangeably with knowledge broker.

These terms are valuable not as rigid classifications, but for acknowledging and naming the roles that are necessary for the knowledge exchange and co-creation that we described briefly in the preceding section. In this paper, we broadly refer to organizations and programs that fill these roles as “evidence-to-policy partnerships,” and find that many of them have the traits of a knowledge broker or boundary spanning organization. While individuals can also play this role, our paper’s focus is on organizations.

We categorize partnerships according to the specific tools they use to promote evidence use (Table 3) and list a few examples to clarify this approach. Several of the examples could fit into multiple categories, for example, as both a nongovernmental policy organization and a network that fosters collaboration between researchers and policymakers. We offer these

categories to structure the discussion rather than as a definitive framework, and we review the pros and cons of different institutional arrangements later in the paper.

It is worth acknowledging here that evidence-informed policymaking does not end with the production and communication of findings to decision makers. The policy process, with overlapping phases that typically include some form of an agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation phase is messy and nonlinear. Although the agenda setting and policy formulation stages often command the spotlight, the practicalities of how a policy will be implemented or translated to practice is an equally important consideration. Policies fail when they are implemented poorly. From our research and conversations, however, we observe that the role of knowledge brokers typically does not extend to implementing the policies or program changes they help to inform. Whether this is the right role for them merits further research and discussion, but the need for implementation support in addition to priority setting and policy formulation should not be overlooked.

Table 3. Framework for categorizing evidence-to-policy partnerships

Category	Criteria for inclusion	Example
National-level government agencies/evaluation or policy units		
In government	Agency or unit within government that is responsible for evidence-building and promoting the use of evidence in government policies and programs	Evaluation unit (e.g., Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), South Africa), innovation lab (e.g., MineduLAB, Peru), knowledge translation platform (e.g., Knowledge Management and Transfer Unit for Burkina Faso, Ministry of Health; Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse, US)
Semi-autonomous/arm's length	Institution with a mandate to conduct research and provide advice that informs government policy and practice	Research/technical arm of government agencies (e.g., International Health Policy Program (IHPP), Thailand; Ethiopian Public Health Institute)
Nongovernmental research and policy organizations		
Regional/local	Stated mission of building partnerships with government actors to improve the use of evidence in decision making through the provision of timely, accessible, and policy-relevant evidence, and capacity strengthening activities	Research/policy organizations (e.g., African Institute for Development Policy, (AFIDEP) Kenya; Partnership for African Social and Governance Research, Kenya (PASGR), Africa; Knowledge to Policy Center (K2P), Lebanon)

International	Stated mission of building partnerships with government actors to improve the use of evidence in decision making through the provision of timely, accessible, and policy-relevant evidence, and capacity strengthening activities	Research/policy organizations (e.g., IDinsight, global; J-PAL, global; IPA, global)
Community	A diverse group of partners, including researchers, policymakers, civil society members, and practitioners, who come together to find, debate, and ensure evidence is used in decision making	Policy dialogues, stakeholder engagement fora (e.g., Utafiti Sera/PASGR, Africa; PAL Network Policy Dialogues, Africa and Asia)
Network	Formally established forum for researchers, policymakers, civil society members, funders, and practitioners that promotes collaboration, peer learning, and exchange to strengthen research, with a focus on policy engagement	Groups that come together at structured intervals to learn from each other, share experiences, build new capacity (e.g., Transfer Project, Africa; Evidence Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet), global; International Network for Government Science Advice, global (INGSA); East Africa Social Science Translation Collaborative (EASST); Evidence in Governance and Politics, (EGAP))
Researcher–policymaker exchange programs	Formal mechanism that supports a temporary transfer of researchers to government departments or public officials to academic or research institutes; a formal mechanism for pairing researchers and policymakers	Pairing/twinning schemes, fellowships, secondments, matchmaking (e.g., Development Impact West Africa (DIWA); US Intergovernmental Personnel Act; UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology Fellowships)

As noted earlier, this paper’s focus is on partnership models that promote ongoing communication, exchange, and co-creation between evidence producers and users, namely country governments, and their research partners, whether local or international. It is not a review of one-off or timebound evaluations commissioned by development partners. If we discuss research initiatives, it is to highlight how they engage with policymakers to inform and influence policy. We examine partnership models that fall under each of the categories in Table 3, selected because they are promising and ranging from nascent to more established across different sectors and geographies. The paper is also not an exhaustive review of partnership models, but a high-level showcase of examples to illustrate different models and draw out insights that could be useful in directing future support for partnerships from global development funders, from foundations to bilateral and multilateral donors. Future research on partnership models could go a step further in understanding which partnership models might be best suited for addressing a specific research or policy question or for supporting a particular stage in the policy cycle. What we have gleaned from this initial research is the importance of flexibility in partnerships—motivated by a commitment to meeting policymakers where they are.

Our observations about the different models are based primarily on desk research. Semi-structured interviews with experts from a few of the partnerships provide additional insights. In the next section, we take a close look at these models.

Section 3. A closer look at evidence-to-policy partnership models

3.1 What roles do evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models play?

Nearly all the partnership models we reviewed came into existence around or in the years following the 2006 “When Will We Ever Learn” report. Exceptions include Colombia’s Results-Based Management and Evaluation System (Sinergia) established in 1994 and Thailand’s International Health Policy Program (IHPP), established in 2001 (Thaiprayoon & Wibulpolprasert, 2017).

All the partnerships that we profile start on the research side, but they differ from traditional supply-side research initiatives in the focus that they also bring to the demand-side—that is, in understanding the decisions that governments seek to make. Broadly, the partnerships aim to (1) ensure that decision makers have access to policy-relevant evidence for timely decision making, (2) create a structured process or a space for engagement and discussion that helps to promote more systematic use of evidence, and (3) bring transparency to the use of evidence in the policy process by making evidence public and accessible.

Most of the partnerships engage in activities that include a combination of knowledge co-creation and sharing that involves government decision makers and research partners, networking and relationship building, and capacity strengthening to build the awareness and skill of decision makers (see Ward, et al., 2009 for more on the role of knowledge brokers). The partnerships take an explicit approach to capacity strengthening—for example, offering courses or developing resources and tools to improve the design and implementation of evaluations. In some examples, however, capacity strengthening is a byproduct of policy engagement work, through which partners in government improve how they understand and use evidence, and evidence producers improve the relevance of their research.

Next, we describe the activities of several partnership models and the kinds of decisions they help to inform. For each, we attempt to highlight the practices or approaches partners are using to advance and institutionalize the use of evidence in policy and practice decisions.

3.2 Five types of evidence-to-policy and practice models

National-level government units/agencies

Government agencies such as evaluation units in public institutions, and arm’s-length research and advisory bodies have a central role in producing evidence—commissioning and undertaking research studies, evaluations, and systematic reviews, and hosting citizen dialogues. Many of these units also provide capacity-strengthening support to build awareness about evaluations and help decision makers better understand how to interpret and act on evaluation findings.

Colombia’s Results-Based Management and Evaluation System’s role is to commission evaluations to help ministries gather the evidence they need to inform decisions, not to audit the performance of programs (Cassidy et al., n. d.). Sinergia uses a mechanism known as the Inter-Sectoral Committee for Evaluation and Management of Results to facilitate

collaboration in the design, implementation, and review of evaluations commissioned to external consultants on behalf of ministry partners. Established by a decree in 2002, the committee comprises representatives from the highest level of office—the president’s office, national planning and budget authorities, and the line ministries and agencies that are being evaluated (Results for America, 2017; Mackay, 2007). The institutionalized decree incentivizes the committee’s engagement. And the co-creative process it fosters helps to build ownership and increase the likelihood that ministries will use evaluation findings. Although Sinergia does not enforce the use of evaluation findings, the unit actively engages with ministry partners, makes its findings public and easy to understand, and offers technical evaluation support to ministry partners (Cassidy et al., n.d.).

The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME) in South Africa also provides evaluation training to national departments. DPME offers four training courses covering management and the design of evaluations for new entrants in government, and notably, one that is targeted to senior leaders at the director general, deputy director general, and chief director levels. This course aims to ensure that the leadership of national departments buy into the value of using evaluation evidence and engaging with DPME to produce and use evidence for decision making (Results for All, n.d.-a).

Ghana’s Ministry of Monitoring and Evaluation (MoME) is a recently (2017) created government evaluation unit. MoME’s key priority is to monitor the implementation of the government’s high priority flagship programs in real time, conduct rapid evaluations of interventions, and build a national system for monitoring and evaluation in government.

The MoME uses an open-door policy to signal its commitment to supporting partner ministries every step of the way, as they develop, implement, and monitor their performance frameworks. A core aim is to ensure that ministry staff have a basic understanding of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) principles as the MoME has observed a higher level of engagement from ministry staff who understand the linkages between desired program results and the activities they are monitoring. The MoME also coordinates a network of focal points—senior-level directors from each ministry who oversee M&E. Ministry partners appreciate the MoME’s outreach efforts, which are helping to elevate M&E in government ministries and build awareness about the value of assessing program performance in the public sector.

Thailand’s International Health and Policy Program (IHPP) is a semi-autonomous unit established under the Ministry of Health to strengthen health systems research and policy. It is widely credited for its role in informing Thailand’s implementation of universal health coverage in 2001. To ensure that its staff had the training and skill sets needed to inform health systems research and policy, IHPP made early investments in developing a critical mass of researchers who received their training from research apprenticeships, and international study and fellowship programs (Pitayarangsarit & Tangcharoensathien, 2009). The unit’s location within the Ministry of Health gave IHPP researchers direct access to key decision makers and policy questions about the universal health coverage scheme, while an arm’s-length relationship helped to limit political interference and assure research integrity. IHPP’s research aimed to address policy-relevant research, including cost and budget requirements for implementing universal health coverage (Pitayarangsarit & Tangcharoensathien, 2009).

Nongovernmental organizations

Nongovernmental organizations such as think tanks and policy research organizations can play an important role in equipping and empowering policymakers with the skills and evidence they need to make informed policy and practice decisions. For this paper, we focus on think tanks that are partnering with governments to help them change how they make decisions, beyond typical policy influence or issue advocacy activities to promote the uptake of the research they are generating.

The African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) is an African-led, regional nonprofit policy think tank established in 2010 with a central mission of bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice in Africa. AFIDEP takes a collaborative and co-creative approach to working with government—putting them at the center, jointly identifying policy questions, developing proposals for external funding, and translating research insights into actionable recommendations. Strengthening policymaker capacity to use evidence systematically is at the core of AFIDEP’s existence and mission. AFIDEP has been a leader in supporting the demand-side of the evidence-to-policy process in Africa with a focus on strengthening institutions through a range of approaches including learning networks, training programs, evidence use guidelines, and policy dialogues.

IDinsight is an organization whose mission is to help decision makers access and better understand the evidence they need to make informed decisions. In 2015 IDinsight introduced embedded learning partnerships as a demand-led support mechanism to help governments address the challenges they face in using evidence to inform policy and practice decisions. These challenges include capacity constraints and a lack of access to relevant evidence that is delivered in time to inform decisions. IDinsight staff work closely with partners in government, often as embedded advisors who develop a close understanding of the local context and bring the flexibility to respond to dynamic and evolving policy priorities using the most appropriate tools. IDinsight draws on different methodologies, from rigorous impact evaluations to rapid evaluations, and landscape and evidence reviews to support specific decision points in a policy process.

Communities

The Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) launched its first Utafiti Sera House in 2014. PASGR’s website describes Utafiti Sera as a “process,” “place,” “forum,” “platform,” or “vehicle” for transforming research evidence-to-policy decisions. We classify this as an example of a community and not a network because the Utafiti Sera Houses are thematically organized as distinct spaces that are not necessarily interconnected. As a forum, Utafiti Sera brings together different voices from research, policymaking, and civil society communities to debate, exchange, and reach consensus on priority development policy issues. The motivation for creating Utafiti Sera comes from concerns raised by government actors about the low quality and limited relevance of research available to them for informing policy. The House engages partners in reviewing, appraising, and debating evidence, bringing different voices to the table to ensure that emerging policy and practice decisions reflect the priorities of affected communities. By hosting conversations in neutral spaces outside of government, the Houses are an innovative way to create a safe and trusted space for policy discussions.

Networks

Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) is a global network for research, evaluation, and learning established in 2009 that facilitates partnerships between researchers and practitioners from government and nongovernmental organizations. Through the network, academic research partners work alongside practitioners to accumulate knowledge, inform policy, and set learning agendas on topics related to governance, politics, and institutions. EGAP's tri-annual meetings offer a regular forum for the network's institutional members, researchers, and practitioners to build relationships and get feedback on research design and analysis plans. A policy forum held just before each meeting offers researchers an opportunity to share the state of the evidence on a topic and to engage in networking and matchmaking with practitioners—the partners they need to ensure the relevance of their research.

Established in 2008, the Transfer Project is a multi-country cash transfer research network that brings international partners and researchers, national governments, and local researchers together to collaborate in conducting impact evaluations and using findings to inform social protection policy and program decisions. The Transfer Project invests in building long-term relationships and trusted partnerships with government policy actors to ensure the evidence it produces responds to government priorities and to increase the likelihood of its use. Beyond demonstrating technical expertise, this has often entailed getting to know partners on a personal level in and outside of the workplace. The Project uses different research tools over the lifetime of an evaluation, including baseline analyses, rapid assessments, and qualitative work, to respond flexibly to immediate decision-making priorities. Alongside the focus on co-creating rigorous research with country-level partners, the Project is committed to ensuring findings are shared in accessible and actionable formats (Peterman & Balvin, 2016).

Researcher–policymaker exchange programs

Formal mechanisms like secondment programs that facilitate a temporary exchange—placing a researcher in a government office or giving government staff the opportunity to spend time in an academic or research setting—create opportunities for greater interaction between researchers and policymakers. They can be a way for researchers to gain a better understanding of a policy process and likewise, for policymakers to strengthen technical research or analytical skills. The exchanges can also improve collaboration and co-creation, increasing the likelihood for evidence to inform a decision process. (O'Donoghue Jenkins & Anstey, 2017).

Established in 2019, Development Impact West Africa (DIWA) is a partnership between the Center for Effective Global Action and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). DIWA uses a matchmaking process, bringing US academics, Ghanaian academics, and Ghanaian policymakers together to explore opportunities for three-way research collaborations on priority questions. Although not a transfer program, DIWA's matchmaking encourages close collaboration between researchers and policymakers over an extended time. In the US, the Intergovernmental Personnel Act facilitates the temporary secondment of research and academic partners to the Office of Evaluation Services, to apply behavioral insights to government programs and conduct randomized impact evaluations using administrative data. Through the program, the agencies gain access to researchers with deep subject expertise who help develop studies and assess data needs

(Federal Agents of Change: Behavioral Insights Power Evidence-Based Efforts to Improve Government, 2020).

The partnership models raised in this section provide a nonexhaustive overview of relevant examples that offer several insights about the broad objectives of evidence-to-policy partnerships that are consistent across different models and supported in the literature (summarized in the earlier Figure 1 and Table 1 as the what and why behind the partnerships).

3.3 Institutional arrangements of evidence-to-policy partnerships

The institutional arrangements of partnerships vary depending on what they aim to achieve. In Ghana, the MoME's position within the government is critical to building trust and encouraging ministries to take advantage of its open-door policy. PASGR's Utafiti Sera facilitates open dialogue outside of government, allowing for different perspectives and voices and creating a safe space for open and trusted conversations. Through the embedded learning partnership model, IDinsight is closely attuned to the evidence needs and decision timelines of government actors. Table 4 explores the pros and cons of different partnership arrangements. One additional factor to consider in the discussion about institutional arrangements is the role evidence champions and leaders can play in advocating for transparency in the use of evidence or in ensuring sufficient funding and resources for evidence-to-policy and practice efforts, potentially helping to mitigate the disadvantages of a particular arrangement (Peirson et al., 2012).

Table 4. Pros and cons of different institutional arrangements of evidence-to-policy partnerships

Institutional arrangement	Advantage	Disadvantage
In government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to build trust and close relationships with key decision makers and evaluation partners across government agencies and departments • Proximity to senior leadership and access to decision making process can facilitate identification of policy windows and timely provision of evidence • Ability to set evaluation agenda and ensure research questions align with government priorities • Access to evaluation partners and agencies across government can help amplify lessons and extend the reach of capacity strengthening efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to maintain independence from political influence and navigate the politics and transitions of election cycles • Government bureaucracy can slow consultations or the publication of findings, especially when controversial • Low public sector wages can make it hard to attract and retain technical/evaluation experts • Can be difficult to raise funding from outside sources (e.g., foundations and funders that do not fund government directly)

Semi-autonomous/ arm's length

- Close enough to build the trust of senior decision makers and gain access to insights about policy windows
- Affiliation with government can help with influence in a sector or policy domain
- Distance can give independence from political influence; ability to maintain credibility and scientific integrity
- Access to evaluation partners and agencies across government can help amplify lessons and extend the reach of capacity strengthening efforts
- Government bureaucracy can slow consultations or the publication of findings, especially when controversial
- Low public sector wages can make it hard to attract and retain technical/evaluation experts
- Can be difficult to raise funding from outside sources (e.g., foundations and funders that do not fund government directly)

Independent (think tanks)

- Ability to raise funding from outside sources and offer competitive salaries to attract qualified researchers or evaluation experts
- Ability to define engagement offer (embedded learning partnerships vs short-term technical assistance vs one-off support)
- Distance can give independence from political influence; ability to maintain credibility and scientific integrity and ensure transparency and accountability in the reporting of findings, including contested results
- Difficult to build trusted relationships with government actors
- Competition for the attention of government champions can be high
- Limited funding for long-term relationship building activities (costs of collaboration are high – being available for meetings and briefings, etc.)
- Distance can make it challenging to identify policy windows and facilitate the timely provision of relevant evidence
- Potential to be beholden to funder priorities that are not aligned with government priorities or to rigid reporting cycles that make it difficult to respond to evolving contexts
- Onerous reporting requirements for funding can make it challenging for local organizations to enter or expand their presence in this space

The significance of trust in evidence-to-policy partnerships

The literature on organizational trust identifies the core traits of trustworthiness as (1) ability/competence, (2) benevolence or a commitment to the good of the trustor, and (3) integrity (**Haynes, et al., 2012; Mayer, et al., 1995**).

In evidence-to-policy partnerships, ability can relate to the technical skill and know-how of research partners and their understanding of the policy process and contextual factors informing policy and practice decisions. It can also refer to the effectiveness of an evaluator's communication skills—the ability to craft clear and compelling messages and contextualize disappointing findings. Benevolence can be a way to describe the commitment research partners bring to producing policy-relevant evidence in a timely manner. It can mean being accessible to actors in government, collaborating to address policy priorities, and bringing flexible approaches to fill specific evidence needs. Co-creation processes that involve government actors from the outset of an evaluation process, and throughout, to ensure buy-in of findings and processes that foster learning together also signal commitment. Integrity can speak to the independence and transparency of evidence and the measures that are put in place to ensure it is publicly accessible.

3.4 Exploring the impact of evidence-to-policy partnerships: A few examples

Existing theories offer a useful framework for understanding how the evidence that is generated in a partnership by government, NGOs, researchers, funders, or other partners could inform a policy or practice decision (Weiss, 1979). In instrumental use, evidence is used to identify a policy- or practice-level solution. When policymakers change how they think about an issue or solution because of evidence, it is conceptual use. In symbolic use, research is used to justify a particular solution.

There is less clarity on how to assess evidence-informed policymaking, in particular institutional change and its long-term horizon, and the processes that are not always easy to observe (Zulu, 2018; Buffardi, et al., 2020).

We share a few examples here to illustrate how partnerships engage in the evidence-to-policy process with a focus on policy or practice level change stories. We end this section with a description of two nascent partnerships that hold promise for evaluation-to-policy efforts.

The Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA): CEGA is home to a wide network of researchers, including scholars from low- and middle-income countries. CEGA researchers use rigorous evaluations, tools from data science, and new measurement technologies to assess the effects of large-scale social and economic development programs. Established in 2011, CEGA's East Africa Social Science Translation (EASST) Collaborative aims to promote the evaluation of social and economic development programs in East Africa. EASST invites scholars from the region to attend a four-month fellowship program at the University of California, Berkeley, where they receive mentoring and training support and access to competitively awarded research and policy engagement funding. EASST scholars have gone on to conduct large-scale impact evaluations that have informed social programs. In Tanzania, for example, the work of an EASST scholar comparing capitation grants sent to schools with performance-based teacher incentives found that combining spending on school inputs with student performance-based teacher incentives raises student test scores and thereby improves the cost-effectiveness of public spending on education (Center for

Effective Global Action, no date). Today, all primary and secondary schools in Tanzania administer capitation grants informed by the study. EASST inspired the newly created Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa (NIERA), comprising former fellows who are keen to build on their experiences, and increase the scope, rigor, and influence of impact evaluations in East Africa.

Transfer Project: Evaluations and studies of the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) program in Ghana, a program that provides cash and health insurance to poor households in Ghana, helped to reframe negative perceptions about the program (Davis, 2016). The studies, co-designed with government and implemented by a consortium of partners including the Institute for Statistical, Social and Economic Research of the University of Ghana-Legon (ISSER) and the University of North Carolina (UNC) under contract to the Government of Ghana and 3ie, provided evidence showing that the program works, and positioned it as an improving and growing program (Transfer Project, 2020). This improved LEAP's credibility in government and resulted in a tripling of funding for transfers and changes that made it easier for target populations to access health insurance benefits (Davis, 2016). The findings from the evaluations and studies were communicated in accessible and easy-to-understand formats, and the media was strategically engaged to help promote social protection and the role of LEAP (Davis, 2016).

Utafiti Sera: The Nairobi Urban Governance and City Transformation Utafiti Sera House began its work in January 2018. Hosted by the Kenya-based Pamoja Trust, the House brings together a community of researchers, policymakers, civil society members, and advocates working to improve policy outcomes on issues related to urban governance, specifically to challenge infrastructure development policy to consider social dimensions. The decision to establish the House emerged from research to understand urban governance policy priorities and concerns raised by advocates about infrastructure decisions that were being made without the input of communities. In some neighborhoods, the construction of highways was literally dividing houses and families into two. Because of the evidence presented and discussed in the House, the Kenya National Highways Authority has adopted a stakeholder engagement framework that guides how it engages with citizens.

Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI): The recently launched Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI) brings together a broad and diverse coalition of governments, (inter)national and local development organizations, and M&E experts to pool financial and technical resources to strengthen evidence use in government decision making. The initiative builds on the infrastructure and the partnerships that already exist in different countries, to institutionalize M&E processes and frameworks and ensure contextually relevant solutions. GEI's overarching aim is to help governments build capacity to track the progress of their policies and programs, and to use evidence systematically in responding to routine decisions and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight this initiative as a promising partnership because of its demand-led approach and focus on long-term support to strengthen institutions and build a culture of evidence use in government. Improvements in monitoring and evaluation capacity and data systems could help advance impact evaluation activities in countries.

WHO African Health Observatory Platform on Health Systems and Policy (AHOP): The African Health Observatory Platform, another recently launched initiative, is a network of national research institutions from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Senegal that are producing and sharing evidence on health systems and policy development in Africa. The

research conducted by each institution is country-led, and shared in formats ranging from policy briefs, to longer comparative studies, to policy dialogues that bring partners in government together around key decision points. Each institution coordinates a country-level research program, including engagements with Ministry of Health partners aimed at identifying health systems and policy research priorities. As a network, the institutions come together to share evidence and health systems experiences at a regional level and promote policies to improve the wellbeing of citizens. We highlight this model for the country-led research programs and emphasis on learning across countries to accelerate the spread of evidence-informed health systems policies.

Section 4. Emerging observations and ideas to take forward

4.1 Factors that fuel evidence-to-policy partnerships and barriers that limit potential

Our research led to several insights about the factors—barriers and enablers—that influence evidence-to-policy partnerships. We make a few general observations below (summarized in Table 5) and find more similarities than differences across the partnerships.

Observation 1: Relationships are critical to the success of a partnership

- Policymakers want to engage actively in setting priorities and defining research agendas. Not only does the Transfer Project design and implement impact evaluations of transfer programs in consultation with policymakers, implementers, researchers, and development partners to ensure the studies address program priorities, it also designed the overall project with partners in government.
- It takes time to build trust in partnerships—to arrive at a place where everyone’s contributions are centered, commitment is shared, and interactions are transparent. Quick turnaround projects, while sometimes needed to address urgent priorities, can limit opportunities for co-creation and make it hard to develop a deep understanding of policy and reform opportunities. Where timelines are short, it is helpful to set clear expectations about co-creation at the start of an engagement. A model like Utafiti Sera that is designed to exist in perpetuity as a space for ongoing policy debate and dialogue is one approach that partnerships are using to build and maintain trust.
- Governments value reliability and stability in the relationships they form with development partners. High staff turnover in a partner organization or government agency can impede progress in building trust on both sides. And in the absence of trust, co-creation that fosters shared ownership in the production of evidence is challenging (Williamson, et al., 2019).
- During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have turned first to trusted partners, like the K2P Center in Lebanon.

“Working with government is hard, but you can’t engage effectively on policy issues without strong relationships.” – Expert interviewee

Observation 2: Partnerships need convening power to be effective

- “Convening power” is the capability and resources needed to mobilize policymakers, researchers, development partners, and others around key policy or programmatic issues and catalyze collective action. Importantly, convening power is about creating space and opportunity for responsive dialogue and action.
- The ability to foster shared or collective action is key regardless of institutional arrangement. It requires a commitment to ensuring the right people are at the table as priorities and policies are debated and decided on. A government evaluation unit draws on a combination of technical expertise, resources, and approval from senior leaders to gain the respect of agencies and build support for evaluation findings. A nongovernmental organization works in the same way to bring different voices to the table around a policy issue.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, strong prior relationships have helped to facilitate the transition to virtual convenings.

“Local organizations have a better understanding of issues and policy opportunities.” – Expert interviewee

Observation 3: Most partnerships have a capacity-strengthening component aimed at addressing barriers that limit the engagement of government actors, citizens, and other partners in decision processes

- At an individual level, there may be a lack of understanding of the role and value of using impact evaluations. Challenges at the organizational and institution levels can include access to basic infrastructure such as the internet, weak data systems, and limited country-level research capacity. The capacity-strengthening efforts of the partnerships reviewed for this paper typically include workshops and tools offered by the host organization of the partnership, to improve the design and implementation of evaluations and use of evidence in government. The K2P Center conducts workshops to strengthen the communication skills of researchers, policymakers, civil society members, and the media. Several partnerships also provide professional development and mentoring support for research and impact evaluation scholars.
- Evidence-informed decision making requires capacity at each of these levels. It demands both a “bottom-up” approach to building the technical skills of staff and a “top-down” approach to motivating evidence use at the organizational level (Vogel & Punton, 2018). The training program for senior leaders offered by South Africa’s

DPME is one approach to building awareness and buy-in for evaluations from high positions in government. In addition, we can expect a training program that is offered through an evaluation unit working across government like DPME to reach more technical staff than an externally led training initiative that may be smaller in scale and specific to a sector, research topic, or agency partner. Outside of government, NIERA offers a series of trainings aimed at helping different stakeholders—decision makers in and outside of government, the media, funders—build a better understanding of impact evaluations so they can more effectively support them and communicate and apply findings.

- Capacity-strengthening efforts that align with what governments are trying to accomplish (e.g., IDinsight’s work with the Ministry of Monitoring and Evaluation in Ghana to build capacity in conducting rapid evaluations of public programs); that go beyond one-off training (e.g., the Transfer Project’s ongoing workshops that promote learning and exchange); and that are practical and participatory (e.g., EGAP’s tri-annual meetings that bring researchers and practitioners together to get feedback on research designs, share the state of evidence, and network) are likely to be most successful. The final evaluation of the FCDO²-funded Building Capacity to use Research Evidence Program (BCURE) offers additional insights about effective capacity strengthening to support evidence informed decision making (Vogel & Punton, 2018, p. 36).
- The Strategic Purchasing Africa Resource Center (SPARC) is a new approach to capacity strengthening that aims to expand the pool of health systems experts in Africa and connect them to countries implementing health systems reforms through coaching and mentoring that is led by local and regional partners. SPARC is helping to shift the power dynamics in dominant health systems and research capacity strengthening models that perpetuate a one-directional flow of expertise from the Global North to partners in the Global South. The International Decision Support Initiative (iDSI), a network of evidence-to-policy partners working to support governments in designing and implementing health economic analysis, guidelines, quality standards and pathways to tackle major health challenges, offers another approach to capacity strengthening. A key focus of the network is on building and strengthening the institutional, technical, and informational capacities that would allow evidence-informed priority setting to be self-sustaining. Of note is iDSI’s commitment to identifying and securing funding sources to help governments institutionalize these capacities as they support near-term policy-relevant priorities.

Observation 4: Researcher and funder incentives for engaging in evidence-to-policy partnerships aren’t always aligned with government priorities, even when policy change is the goal

- When funder priorities don’t align with the needs of government, the power dynamics between under-resourced public agencies and well-resourced international organizations can be a source of tension. IDinsight’s learning partnerships and the Transfer Project’s investment in building trust and personal relationships are

² Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, formerly the Department for International Development (DFID).

examples of strategies that programs and organizations are using to better understand local contexts and tailor research and evaluations to the specific priorities governments seek to address.

- On the research side, the pressure to publish can distract from ensuring research has a policy-relevant focus and limit researchers' engagement with policymakers. This pressure can come from researchers and funders. EGAP's collaborative Metaketa research initiative which brings researchers and practitioners together to generate evidence about governance issues has a two-step process in the expression of research interest phase—requiring researchers to work with practitioners in deciding on the research and then in designing the research. This close collaboration helps to ensure that research aligns with program and policy questions raised by practitioners. As one example, EGAP's research team worked directly with police precincts in Monrovia, Liberia to help the national police understand how to build the trust of the community. Findings and lessons from this work were used to inform the country's national policing policy.

“There is more funding going to publishing health research and to data science, AI stuff. What do you do?” – Expert interviewee

Observation 5: Traditional funding structures do not accommodate efforts to build and sustain long-term partnerships

- 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. While pre-planned events and a country presence provide opportunities for relationship building, the ability to respond to new windows of opportunity with additional activities once a project or program is underway is also key.
- Partnerships often have limited resources for skill building, awareness creation, or training activities targeted to researchers, given the often-primary focus of funders on policy impact. Here, we are specifically referring to fellowship programs and other initiatives aimed at strengthening individual research capacity. Pay-offs from these types of initiatives take time and funders tend to be impatient. While partnerships also draw on matchmaking programs and collaborative research designs to facilitate practical and participatory capacity development, there is often tension in the balance between the focus on capacity development and the production of research.

“Donor X only pays for what you say you will do in the project; we have zero flexibility in our work.”

“All of our programs are existentially in flux.”

“Donors kept saying we aren't seeing policy impact.”

– Expert interviewees

Observation 6: There is room for improved coordination in policy engagement among development partners

- Funders with the largest portfolios often command the attention of senior government officials with decision-making authority. This can create a challenging environment for smaller evidence-to-policy initiatives and make it difficult for them to gain traction. It can also encourage competition over collaboration.

“There aren’t that many champions in government, so we tend to rally around one person and compete for their time rather than coordinating efforts.” – Expert interviewee

Observation 7: We need to better understand how to measure the impact of partnerships on evidence-informed decision-making processes

- There is uncertainty across all contexts—high-income countries and low- and middle-income countries—about how to define changes in evidence systems and structures, specifically, the institutional changes that shift the culture of evidence use and how best to track these changes.
- We also need to better understand what makes evidence-to-policy partnerships effective, to make the case for these initiatives to funders and to foster evaluative learning and growth. What are we learning about partnerships that are inviting different voices and working to address power imbalances? How effective are they in promoting strong evidence use? In building evidence cultures and achieving systems change?

“We need to track shifts over time and move away from just saying we had dialogues.” – Expert interviewee

4.2 Ideas to take forward

COVID-19 has changed the way many partnerships work. The switch from in-person activities to virtual engagement is challenging for communication and relationship building. While ramped-up virtual workshops and webinars are reaching more people, the technology divide and limited access to the internet in many contexts also pose real constraints. And although many existing relationships are weathering the pandemic, the experts we spoke with uniformly acknowledge that it is hard to build trust virtually, particularly in new or first-time engagements.

Here we draw on our observations to share some ideas for aligning incentives in partnerships, taking into consideration the issues the pandemic has unveiled. Our suggestions target funders and highlight where there is room for improvement and actions

to help strengthen the use of evaluation evidence in decision making. Many of the points are closely linked.

1. Anchor evidence-to-policy efforts in country-level institutional structures like evaluation units or policy labs

- These bodies typically have wide reach and access to multiple levels of government and decision-making processes. Entering through these institutions 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.
- The African Health Observatory Platform on Health Systems and Policy, in which national research institutions will build country-led research agendas in partnership with government policymakers, is one model to consider.
- Complement or partner with initiatives like the Global Evaluation Initiative, whose mandate is to strengthen the capacity of government evaluation units. To do so, it is important to have a way of easily identifying what these initiatives are, where there may be a need for additional support, and what different partners could bring (see also coordination below).

2. Prioritize capacity strengthening and challenge power imbalances

- COVID-19 has illuminated the weak state of data and research systems in countries across the globe. A critical starting point for any capacity strengthening conversation is to understand the role development initiatives have played in capacity-strengthening efforts to date, and explicitly, how this could shift as technical assistance efforts are reimagined or decolonized. While this question is not new, it has moved to the forefront of discussions in the development community because of recent social protests. As the UNU WIDER report observes, despite the progress that countries are making, principal investigators from the North still lead most evaluation activities. This reinforces the traditional “doer” role of development partners over the facilitator role (Nastase, et al., 2020) that we observe many partnerships starting to play and suggests that local research capacity strengthening is not being sufficiently prioritized.
- In addition to strengthening evaluation capacity at the institutional level, efforts to build the technical capacity of individuals—be they policymakers in government or local researchers—are needed to advance evaluation activities. There are critical gaps in research and methodological skills and a need to focus on shifting norms and perceptions about the value of impact evaluations in government and how they can improve decisions.
- There are many parallels between the SPARC model described in the previous section and several of the initiatives we described earlier—EASST, NIERA, and DIWA. A structure or facility that invests in and builds on the approaches taken by these types of networks, to expand the pool of impact evaluation researchers in Africa, could help ensure governments have access to local evaluation experts to help inform the design and implementation of

policy and programs. The matchmaking and secondment programs described earlier are other promising practices that can be used to strengthen the production of actionable evaluation finding in government as the DIWA pilot aims to do. These approaches respond to a growing acknowledgement in the global development community that local researchers and advisors, with a close understanding of the contexts in which they live and work, are best positioned to facilitate policy engagement. With nearly no international travel during COVID-19, the development community has a critical opportunity to rethink capacity-strengthening strategies to focus more intentionally on building needed cadres of local experts and investing in young researchers.

- When it comes to power dynamics, research partners and funders must also do more to promote equitable funding for research and challenge imbalances in the authorship of impact evaluation-based papers. Whose research is prioritized? How is it prioritized? Who prioritizes it? Funders can help shift these dynamics by creating incentives and requirements to encourage the participation of local researchers and importantly, to center them as key contributors.

Supporting national universities in their efforts to champion evidence in policy and practice

Established in 2004, Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a consortium of 124 African universities from across 38 countries that, among other objectives, aims to strengthen the role of universities in producing research to inform agricultural policy and practice. RUFORUM partners are not yet positioned as knowledge centers that can engage in development policy and practice through research in the eyes of government and private sector partners (Nakweya, 2018). A core challenge in building national research capacity and infrastructure has been limited funding at the country level and a reliance on donor funding, which can contribute to misaligned priorities (Ezeh and Lu, 2019). Efforts to strengthen the use of impact evaluations in development policy and practice should not leave national-level universities and research centers behind and could consider support for new and innovative models aimed at building strong country-led research institutions (Ezeh and Lu, 2019).

3. Strengthen coordination of evidence-to-policy partnerships

- Consider a formal structure like Local Education Groups (LEGs) that are led by national governments and include education development partners, donors, teacher associations, civil society organizations, and private education providers. The LEGs develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate Education Sector Plans at the country-level. A similarly structured local evaluation group could bring greater coordination to the design and implementation of country-level evaluation activities, and the equally important sharing of evidence and lessons learned.

4. Change funding structures to support long-term partnerships

- A focus on strengthening the capacity to use evidence—enhancing individual skill and awareness, improving data collection systems, instituting

policies, and creating norms—is a commitment to holistic, systems-level change. This type of change is best supported by a facilitator-based approach that centers partners in government and gives advisors a role in guiding the change process (Nastase, et al., 2020). Promoting dialogue, cultivating trust, and building relationships are essential to this approach. Funding models should be flexible enough to support these types of partnership-building activities.

- While attitudes about flexible and unrestricted funding in development are shifting, a lot of resistance remains, much of it centered on the need to show tangible results to trustees (Edwards, 2019). As these conversations continue, there are three changes funders could consider accommodating to support the long-term partnership-building focus that evidence-to-policy efforts demand:
 - Value and explicitly fund partnership building as a component of project activities where relevant. Consider allocating a percentage of project budgets to partnership-building work: make it a routine cost like overhead or administrative costs, a kind of core support for partnership building.
 - Build flexibility into the budgets that are developed for partnership-building activities. Shift from rigid, outputs-focused indicators that call for a precise number of events or conferences to allow grantees to flexibly respond to partner needs and policy windows. Give grantees the space to build partnership activities that respond to unfolding opportunities and challenges. The focus of partnership activities should be on adaptively tackling the barriers that stand in the way of effective evidence use, which we know to be a complex and nonlinear process. With this understanding of the policy process, we need more than one-off workshops and conferences to effect policy change.
 - Fund projects for longer time frames to accommodate partnership activities and the complexities of systems change. Allow time for the scoping, building, and maintaining of partnerships—the foundational work that is needed to successfully convene and engage with partners on evidence-to-policy and practice decisions.
- 5. Invest in understanding how to measure the impact of evidence-to-policy partnerships, specifically how they contribute to building a culture of evidence use**
- To start, there could be value in supporting a routine diagnostic process in government to benchmark progress in building a culture of evidence use and identify barriers to using evidence. UNDP’s online self-assessment tool (SDG Online Tool Home page, n.d) for national evaluation diagnostics is one approach.
 - Another idea could be to support countries in incentivizing the use of evaluation findings and recommendations following Mexico’s national

evaluation agency, the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) as one example. CONEVAL supports partner agencies in developing action plans to improve programs that are made public to improve accountability and tracked to ensure progress (Results for All, n.d.-b).

- Finally, a standardized theory of change focused specifically on strengthening the demand for and use of evaluation evidence in decision making, adaptable to different contexts, could help build a shared understanding of desired outcomes and impact in institutionalizing the use of evidence.

Table 5. Summary of observations and approaches for mitigating challenges

Observations	Select examples of partnership approaches
Relationships matter	Commitment to engaging with partners at every stage of research (Transfer Project); using legal authority to promote co-creation of evaluations (Sinergia); matchmaking researchers with policymakers (DIWA, EGAP)
Convening power is critical	Working with local partners to create neutral spaces for ongoing dialogue (Utafiti Sera); facilitating collaborative learning networks that bring diverse stakeholders together—policymakers, researchers, funders (Transfer Project); hosting policy dialogues for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other non-state actors (PAL Network)
Capacity strengthening is an important dimension	Top-down and bottom-up training programs (DPME, South Africa); flexibly aligning support with government capacity needs (IDinsight’s support in helping the MoME build capacity in conducting rapid evaluations); peer and collaborative learning focus that builds trust through the process of learning together (Transfer Project, EGAP, EVIPNet, International Network for Government Science Advice)
Misaligned incentives slow progress	Long-term embedded partnerships to work alongside government and deepen understanding of local context (IDinsight); investing in personal relationships to develop understanding of government priorities and gain access to information about reform priorities (Transfer Project); introducing requirements to ensure research is decided on and designed with practitioners (EGAP)
Observations	Ideas to take forward
Country-level institutional structures with wide reach and access are critical partners in evidence-to-policy initiatives	Invest in national evaluation offices and policy labs to ensure research agendas are locally led , in coordination with other partners
Capacity building and efforts to address power imbalances in partnerships are not prioritized	Invest in capacity-strengthening approaches that challenge power dynamics, ensure equitable funding for research and address imbalances in research authorship

Development partners are not coordinated in policy engagement

Establish a coordinating body at the country-level led by national governments, funders, research partners, and other stakeholders

Traditional funding structures do not sufficiently acknowledge relationship building

Allocate **a percentage of budgets to partnership-building work; build flexibility into budgets** for partnerships; fund for **longer time periods**

More work is needed to understand how best to monitor the impact of partnerships

Support governments in **routinely assessing progress in building a culture of evidence use; introduce a standardized theory of change** to build a shared understanding of how to assess partnership efforts to institutionalize evidence use; commission research to support **evaluative learning and improvement**

Conclusion

This paper presents key observations about evidence-to-policy partnerships from desk research supplemented with interviews. It showcases a range of models to demonstrate the potential of evidence-to-policy partnerships for development impact evaluations and the factors that can fuel and constrain them. It is promising to see how several of the partnership models in Africa that we reviewed contribute to an interlinked and growing ecosystem of researchers and policy actors, with initiatives inspiring and supporting each other. The paper suggests a need for development partners to re-examine their role moving forward in two ways: first, by exploring how to shift from evaluator and implementer to a broker or facilitator that convenes, guides, and connects partners to resources; and second, by considering new funding models to support long-term partnership-building activities.

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Interviews

Name	Organization
Andre Zida	Knowledge Management and Transfer Unit for Burkina Faso
Charles Amoatey	Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA)
Chris Chibwana	IDinsight
Jacklyn Leaver	Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP)
Kwabena Agyei Boakye	Ministry of Monitoring and Evaluation (MoME), Ghana
Martin Atela	Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) Utafiti Sera
Maya Ranganath	Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA)
Ofori Asante Agyei	Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ghana
Rose Oronje	African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP)

Examples of Evidence-to-Policy Partnership Models

Organization	Model	Sector	Region/Country
<u>African Health Observatory Platform on Health Systems and Policy (AHOP)</u>	Network	Health	Multiple (Africa)
<u>African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP)</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Health, education	Multiple (Africa)
<u>CanCOVID</u>	Network	Health	Canada
<u>Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA)</u>	Network	Multiple	Africa, Asia
<u>Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME)</u>	Knowledge broker/evaluation unit	Multiple	South Africa
<u>Ethiopian Public Health Institute</u>	Knowledge broker/policy unit	Health	Ethiopia
<u>Evidence in Governance and Politics</u>	Network	Governance	Global
<u>Evidence Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet)</u>	Network	Health	Global
<u>Ghana Ministry of Monitoring and Evaluation</u>	Knowledge broker/evaluation unit	Multiple	Ghana
<u>IDinsight</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Multiple	Global
<u>Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Multiple	Global
<u>Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse</u>	Knowledge translation platform	Education	US
<u>International Health Policy Program</u>	knowledge broker/evidence unit	Health	Thailand
<u>International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Multiple	Global
<u>International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA)</u>	Network	Multiple	Global

<u>JPAL</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Multiple	Global
<u>Knowledge to Policy Center (K2P)</u>	Knowledge broker/think tank	Health	Lebanon
Knowledge Management and Transfer Unit	Knowledge broker/evidence unit	Health	Burkina Faso
<u>Ministry of Education, Peru (MineduLAB)</u>	knowledge broker/policy lab	Education	Peru
<u>National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL)</u>	Knowledge broker/evaluation unit	Multiple (social sector)	Mexico
<u>Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa (NIERA)</u>	Network	Multiple (social sector)	Multiple (E. Africa)
<u>Office of Evaluation Services</u>	Secondment	Multiple	US
<u>PAL Network (People's Action for Learning Network)</u>	Community/forum	Education	Global
<u>Partnership for African Governance and Social Research (PASGR)/Utafiti Sera</u>	Community/forum	Governance/social policy	Multiple (Africa)
<u>Results-Based Management and Evaluation System (Sinergia)</u>	knowledge broker/evaluation unit	Multiple	Colombia
<u>Royal Society Pairing Scheme</u>	Secondment/pairing	Multiple	UK
<u>The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES)</u>	Knowledge broker/evidence unit	Health	Uganda
<u>The Transfer Project</u>	Network	Social sector/social protection and cash transfers	Multiple (Africa)
<u>UK POST: UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology</u>	Secondment	Multiple	UK
<u>US Intergovernmental Personnel Act</u>	Secondment	Multiple	US