

HOW CAN WE ADVANCE THE FIELD OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING?

This document presents, in draft form, ideas generated at “Strengthening the Evidence-Informed Policymaking Field,” a gathering of evidence champions hosted by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s Global Development and Population Program, and held at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Conference Center, August 28-September 1, 2018. Participants worked together to outline activities that could advance the larger field, and agreed that an immediate next step would be to gather feedback on these ideas. This document was prepared by Hewlett Foundation staff based on concepts developed by meeting participants. It is intended to serve as a point of departure for discussion. This summary has not yet been reviewed by Bellagio meeting participants. We welcome comments, which can be directed to any of the individuals listed below, and/or to the Hewlett Foundation at EIPfield@Hewlett.org. For additional background on the Hewlett Foundation’s approach to evidence-informed policymaking, please [see our strategy](#).

Background – Why does advancing the field matter?

If you are reading this, you are likely an evidence champion. You probably work inside or outside government¹ to advance the use of data and evidence to improve government decisions about what policy priorities to set; how to design, target, and implement programs; how to allocate budgets and expend resources; how to monitor progress and respond to shortcomings; how to conduct oversight functions; and ultimately how to improve the well-being of citizens.

You are in good company. You are among researchers in think tanks and universities that promote policy research tailored to their national contexts, including by tapping into bodies of evidence from other countries. You are among national evaluation units, statistical offices, and research centers that generate data and evidence from within the heart of government. You share common cause with data scientists that leverage big data and machine learning to generate new insights on intractable development challenges. You are in a community with people helping increase parliamentarians’ and executive branch officials’ capacity to find and use evidence.

You may be motivated by a sense of duty to the citizens you serve, or by the recognition that there is a human cost — not just a financial cost — when a job training program fails to lift families out of poverty or when an education initiative fails to help children succeed. You may have a conviction that private interests or the most powerful in a society should not disproportionately influence national policy priorities, and one means of full representation is through effective use of data. Or you may be dedicated to ensuring that scarce government resources are allocated where they can bring most benefit. You probably believe government use of evidence is a crucial element of a functioning democracy, and of government accountability to citizens.

¹ “Government” and “public sector” refer to all branches of government at all levels, from national to local. Likewise “policymaking” refers to all steps in the policy process including but not limited to policy formulation, program design and implementation, budget allocation and resource expenditure, monitoring, course correction, oversight, and evaluation.

Whatever your particular line of work, or your individual motivations, you have something in common with all other evidence champions – you often feel like you are swimming upstream. You face the same challenges they all face, including the lack of incentives or routine systems for policymakers to use evidence. You may see a mismatch between pressing policy questions and available research and data to answer them, or you may be frustrated when existing evidence sits on a shelf. You might not feel you have the time or skills necessary to discern among different studies, or analyze increasingly complex data sets. You might struggle to make the case for why evidence use matters, or find funding that allows you to be flexibly responsive to opportunities that arise in your context. You are not alone in facing these barriers, and you cannot be alone in overcoming them.

The question is, what could a broad group of evidence champions do together to improve the conditions in which we all work? In other words, how can we strengthen the field of evidence-informed decision-making?

That is the question put to a small but diverse group of people at the “Strengthening the Evidence-Informed Policymaking Field” gathering. This group generated the seeds of ideas presented below. These ideas now need to be discussed, questioned, improved, or even replaced by the broader evidence-informed decision-making community. Hewlett Foundation staff produced this document by synthesizing concept notes authored by Bellagio participants, but this summary has not yet been reviewed and does not necessarily represent a collective view. Rather, this document is simply a means of inviting reactions to these ideas, and soliciting alternative or complementary ideas about how to strengthen the field.

The ideas below are mutually reinforcing. Each could be taken forth independently, with potential for both near-term impact and contribution to a longer-term agenda. In total, they could constitute a vision for advancing the field of evidence-informed policymaking – from engaging a broad base of supporters to developing and sharing a set of experiences around the all-important “how” of system change.

As you review the concepts described below, please keep in mind three big questions: 1) Which of these ideas would most help advance your work? 2) What other ideas do you have for advancing the field? 3) Who should be involved in next steps of consultation around these ideas and in taking them forward? More detailed consultation questions are in the last section of this document.

Ideas for Action – Four ideas to advance the field of evidence-informed policymaking

Idea for Action 1: Conceptualizing the field

Currently, evidence professionals most often come together based on topical or methodological communities, rather than to focus on systematically integrating evidence throughout government decision-making. As a result, there are missed opportunities to learn from or collaborate with others working towards similar goals, or to offer solidarity in the face of opposition. Moreover, the current state of fragmentation promotes unhealthy competition around funding and standard-setting among evidence champions that could see each other as allies. This fragmentation may be due in part to a lack of clarity about shared goals and approaches. Therefore, Bellagio participants were attracted to the idea of laying a stronger foundation for the field by clarifying shared goals, principles, norms, and conceptual understanding. This could define and unite a sustained global movement that connects across generations, domains and disciplines. This would include grappling with questions like:

- What is the value of evidence-informed decision-making? Why is there an urgent need to advance the field at a global level? What is the moral and instrumental imperative?
- What are the foundational goals, principles, and theories of change of evidence-informed decision-making?
- How can organizations that work to advance evidence articulate the value of evidence in a more cohesive and compelling way?
- How can we define key concepts such as “evidence,” “data,” and “use” so that they are sufficiently precise to advance our thinking, and yet broad enough to include the full range of theoretical and empirical contributions?
- What is *excluded* from the concept of evidence-informed decision-making? For example, do we discourage efforts to cherry-pick data or use evidence as an instrument to advance preexisting agendas?
- What, in at least a stylized form, are the opportunities for evidence to be routinely integrated into the policy process in governments at all levels as well as in international organizations, from formulation through to implementation and measurement?
- To advance the field, what are the highest-priority needs – i.e., new platforms for sharing experiences, new mechanisms to obtain commitments, new curricula for schools of public policy and/or training programs for government officials, etc.?

One way to answer these questions could be through a working group or commission, possibly in the spirit of the Alma Ata Conference that laid the ground work for “primary health care” to become a field within public health and medicine. The commission could be charged with advancing an affirmative consensus about the meaning and modes of evidence-informed decision-making. This would require leading inclusive consultations across evidence communities defined by geography or discipline, as well as generating or commissioning background work and pilot projects that contribute to conceptualizing the field and possibly to advancing the ideas described below.

Next steps to advance this idea could be to form a commission comprised of highly respected and diverse individuals who have already made significant contributions to evidence-informed policymaking within their own spheres. These individuals would engage with an open-minded perspective in discussion and action to advance a diverse field (rather than focus on their own individual methods or ideas), and lead consultation with the broader evidence community.

Idea for Action 2: Strengthening messaging and stimulating public engagement

If voters actively support evidence-informed decision-making, policymakers are much more likely to practice it. This may seem like a tall order given the seemingly abstract nature of evidence-informed decision-making and the many competing demands on the time and attention that members of the general public have for engagement in policy debates. However, there are examples of citizens coming together to do just that. For example, in Canada, the non-profit Evidence for Democracy led a successful citizen campaign to preserve the long-form census, despite the government’s plans to cut it.

The recent Marches for Science in many countries around the world show that the current “post-truth” moment provides a rallying point for citizens to come together. In every country, scientists, university students, teachers, and other professionals use scientific information in their work and are often well respected and influential. Evidence for Democracy’s experience suggests that a small group of citizen champions can achieve change.

With this as inspiration, the vision for this idea is that governments feel a push from citizens to use evidence in decision-making, and that the evidence community is able to articulate the value of evidence in a more cohesive and compelling way. This idea has two parts. First is development of a messaging framework, adaptable across contexts, which brings in the most compelling arguments for evidence use. The second is a set of campaigns, leveraging effective messaging, to stimulate public engagement around government use of evidence.

Next steps to advance this idea could be to commission background work on messaging, drawing on the existing literature, polling, market research and surveys of existing evidence champions, as well as collect lessons from other public-interest campaigns. The resulting messaging framework would stand alone as a resource for the evidence community, and also feed into campaigns. Pilot campaigns could be launched in several countries with strong existing actors, favorable environments, and tractable goals – such as changing a specific governments’ budget allocations or decision-making processes. These could be honed to resonate locally, and serve as a testing ground for future work in other places. Later steps could include implementing various modes of campaigning, potentially using mass media, targeted media, person-to-person outreach, mobilization (e.g., March for Science), and political engagement (e.g. working on political platforms), either within more countries, or potentially at a regional or global level.

Idea for Action 3: Institutionalizing evidence use through support and accountability

Many governments have made rhetorical commitments to using data and analysis for the design and implementation of policies and programs, and yet consistently fail to live up to those commitments. This may be because government agencies lack the systems and mechanisms to make evidence use a routine part of decision-making, and/or because the shortcomings in their decisions are not visible or subject to sanction. Thus, the vision underlying this idea is that public sector organizations are motivated and better able to serve the needs of their people by using the most appropriate quality evidence. This implies that executive branch organizations and parliamentary bodies have the systems and practices to routinely use evidence for decision-making, implementation, oversight, and accountability; and citizens feel more informed and engaged in policy processes because routine systems and decisions are more transparent.

This requires two key pieces: support to systematically embed evidence use into public sector organizations’ routine practices; and accountability to ensure these systems are used and used well.

While institutionalizing evidence use necessarily has to happen at the individual country level, support and accountability systems for it can, in part, be developed and informed by the broader field. For example, initial steps to increase support could be to identify the common, routine points in public policymaking, program design, resource allocation, procurement decisions, and program implementation at which particular types of data and analysis are essential to facilitate even the most basic forms of evidence-informed decision-making. Initial work could include creating a clearinghouse for information about legislative and regulatory approaches to promote evidence use and accountability

for evidence use, and actively sharing that information at the global and national levels through existing communities of practice (e.g. civil service commissions, associations of parliamentarians, networks of government officials, etc.). It might also be useful to develop case studies of experience with different types of technology assessment bodies, performance monitoring frameworks, evaluation polices, independent evaluation entities, “show your workings” regulations, and so forth.

Accountability has two core components: answerability (can you be compelled to answer for evidence use, disuse and misuse?) and enforceability (can you be rewarded or sanctioned for evidence use, disuse, or misuse)? Initial steps to increase accountability along both of these dimensions could include establishing norms for systematic and transparent evidence use, and then assessing countries’ practices against those norms, potentially with some type of ranking or rating. It could be useful to explore whether bilateral and multilateral agencies might use adherence to these norms as a condition for support, or whether country governments would respond to a set of eligibility criteria for joining a global community of evidence leaders. One approach could be developing shared operational tools like a set of indicators to motivate evidence use through government officials’ performance agreements, or regulations that require transparency of program data or consideration of evaluation findings before program renewal.

Starting in a small number of countries, next steps could include supporting a coalition of evidence actors (e.g., think tanks and other research institutions, evaluator networks, other evidence champions) to assess the strength of existing mechanisms for institutional and individual accountability, design improvements, and advocate for their adoption. In addition, it could include supporting independent watchdog organizations or networks that would track and publicize high-priority instances when strong evidence was ignored, or celebrate when it was used well, during the formulation and/or implementation of public policy.

Idea for Action 4: Inspiring global commitments to systematic use of evidence

The evidence movement is, on one hand, based on a simple idea – that in making and implementing policy that affects people’s lives, there is an obligation to use evidence to do the most good possible. Yet it is much more complex in reality. To name just a few challenges: there are many forms of evidence and that evidence is rarely dispositive; many people are involved and they sometimes work at cross-purposes; political contexts are complicated; throughout the system there is variable and sometimes very limited capacity. Given this, what could serve as a catalyst to get all of these forces working together toward common, practical goals? The vision for this idea is that governments make global commitments that create space, incentives and resources for a complex set of actors to pull in the same direction to improve systematic use of evidence in a given context.

A multinational vehicle or platform could give policymakers an incentive to commit to using evidence. For example, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and other global initiatives allow government officials to gain international attention and credit for pledging to change how their governments do business. These platforms can also provide incentives to follow through on those commitments, by recognizing and rewarding governments that act on the commitments (and in some instances, by excluding governments that do not). Participating governments could select from a “menu” of commitments, including the mechanisms to improve accountability developed under idea #3 above. Actors in the global and national evidence community could be mobilized to support governments in implementing their commitments, and public engagement campaigns could increase the incentives for public officials to follow through on commitments. Potentially, this could be a new

platform or an add-on to one or more existing multinational efforts, such as OGP. Alternatively, it could be implemented through a series of add-ons to specialized multinational initiatives, such as the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, various health-related partnerships (GAVI, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria), the Global Partnership for Education, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, and so forth.

Initial steps to advance this idea could include background work to understand the models and lessons of other global platforms, as well as the potential to build onto any existing platforms. Building on this work, a small but diverse group could lead a participatory process to consider key operational questions such as: What are eligibility criteria for membership? Does the platform emphasize support or accountability for implementing commitments? What are the respective roles of government and civil society actors? What are options for a secretariat or host, and what are funding needs?

Next Steps – Improving and advancing ideas for strengthening the field

The group that seeded these ideas is confident that if evidence-informed policymaking champions work together, we can improve the conditions within which we all work, clarifying and advancing our collective goals. However, we do not assume that these ideas are the only -- or the best -- way to do this. The next step is to solicit candid feedback to pressure test, and to refine, complement or even replace these ideas. Questions for discussion include:

Assessing and improving these ideas:

1. Would these ideas advance your work, and the work of other evidence champions you work with? What would be most valuable? What is least valuable?
2. All of these ideas are ambitious and challenging. Where do you expect there is most traction to get started? The least traction?
3. Should these ideas move forward as a cohesive package? Or would it be more valuable (or feasible) to advance some or all of these ideas independently?
4. Do you anticipate risks or potential unintended consequences?
5. What examples of similar ideas succeeding (or failing) should we learn from? Can you point to or help gather lessons from similar initiatives?
6. What are the most promising starting points to develop and pilot ideas 2-4? For example, are there countries that are particularly promising testing grounds for stimulating public engagement, or for piloting mechanism to improve institutionalized use of evidence?

New ideas:

1. What are other high-value opportunities to advance the field of evidence-informed policymaking, either of similar scope and ambition as the ideas in this note, or more granular opportunities?

Next steps

1. Who else (individuals, organizations, and communities of practice) should be invited to provide feedback on these ideas?
2. What organization or set of organizations is well-positioned to serve as the institutional home to advance any of these ideas? Any set of institutions or individuals selected to advance these ideas would need to have relevant substantive expertise, capacity to lead and manage complex consultative processes, and legitimacy across audiences that span a broad spectrum of geography, discipline and power.
3. Are you motivated to help advance any or all of these ideas? If so, what are you most excited about working on, and what role would you like to play?

Participants² at the “Strengthening the Evidence-Informed Policymaking Field” gathering have agreed to support broader consultation around these ideas. You probably received this document from one of them, so please share your ideas directly with that person. These participants will come together virtually in December 2018 to discuss the feedback received. If you received this document another way, please send your feedback to EIPfield@Hewlett.org.

We will collectively move towards action in January 2019 if feedback suggests that some version of these ideas, or new ideas to advance the field, is worthwhile, and if there is a cadre of individuals eager to take them forward.

² The following individuals participated in the “Strengthening the Evidence-Informed Policymaking Field” gathering in their personal capacities: Abeba Tadesse, Alex Ezeh, Brad Parks , Buddy Shah, Eliya Zulu, Gonzalo Hernández Licona, Ian Goldman, Kalipso Chalkidou, Katie Gibbs, Kerry Albright, Nicholas Muchiri Nyaggah, Omar Seidu , Peter Taylor, Philipp Schönrock, Rhona Mijumbi-Deve, Ruth Stewart, and Yamini Aiyar. The following individuals from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation participated: Norma Altshuler, Sarah Lucas, Ruth Levine, and Larry Kramer.