Evidence-Into-Policy Partnerships: Insights and Patterns. Final Insights

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Executive summary

Giving Evidence and OTT Consulting were commissioned by a client interested in evidence-into-policy/practice (EIP). We were asked to study various organisations with long track-records in producing and using sound evidence to influence policy and practice, and in particular to study partnerships that they have with EIP goals. This document is the executive summary of our report to our client.

The partnerships we explored in this project broadly focus on increasing the use of evidence by policymakers (which we took to be public policymakers, mostly, but also international, private and NGO decision-makers on matters of public interest). These partnerships include, for instance, policy labs within governments, large-scale partnerships with governments or NGOs to pilot (often through a Randomized Controlled Trial) or scale-up a successful intervention, embedding staff within government, etc. The list of organisations in the set are listed in annex 1 below.

While the findings and recommendations were developed with our client's interests in mind, the study's results may be relevant and useful to the organisations we interviewed for it. Hence we have created this summary to respond to and support a wider audience and the broader EIP community in collectively learning about improving all of our EIP work.

Key findings

A first comment is that we see many organisations which run interventions at a small scale (and funders who fund them). We often advise funders to support more systemic work, which, if successful, will influence much larger, existing budgets and programs. We liken this to how a little tug can direct a massive tanker. Much good philanthropy is about tugs and tankers. This project is a welcome and important opportunity to think about the relative effectiveness of various types of tug.

This project highlights the importance of thinking carefully about the tankers. Tankers (governments, etc.) have their own directions of travel. Moving them effectively requires careful calibration of force and skill, and not all tugs (e.g., research-houses) are right for every tanker.

Our key findings include the following:

1. **Organizations have diverse approaches / models for evidence-into-policy (i.e., theories of change) and therefore many different forms of partnerships**: The set of organizations that we considered for this study contains several types of tug. They variously seek to inform and influence many types of tankers (e.g., NGOs, national governments, regional governments, academic thinking), and they use various business models with different assumptions about how producing and using research will help. To frame our study, we identified what we refer to as organizations' 'ABCs':

    A. Determining the research questions: How is that done, and whose priorities are involved? Who is consulted and involved?

    B. Producing the research: Who is involved in that?

    C. Gaining uptake, implementation, or influence from the findings: For example, dissemination (to whom, and via what channels?) and engagement with potential users.

    The organizations in the set vary considerably in their ABCs. On A (determining the research question), some organizations only produce research questions that an identifiable practitioner / policy-maker asks. Others take their lead from the academic discourse and/or their funders. On B (producing the research), most organizations produce research, though not all. Finally, on C (gaining uptake), approaches vary hugely: from embedded labs to organisations designed for implementation, whereas some organizations do very little, trusting that others will take on the research they produce and communicate it or use it. Together, A and C are an organization's work on evidence-into-policy / practice (EIP): B is 'just' producing research.

In our view, an organization's ABC - specifically the resources that it puts into A and C, and whether it involves the people / the communities it hopes will use the research - is a good indication of what and who the organization really cares about – or, at least, what its core function is.

One of the main questions motivating this study was around the cost-benefit of the various models and partnerships used for EIP work. The first finding of our review is that some organizations in the broader field do rather little EIP work (very little at either A or C) and cannot be said to have partnerships for it. Of course, they may have partnerships for other things, e.g., with other researchers for producing research, but those are different.

Certainly **the most substantial partnerships that we found are between various research organisations**.
Therefore, a comparison of the value for money of each type of partnership would not necessarily deliver useful results. Each partnership needs to be assessed by its own merit.

2. **Very homogenous group**, in terms of location, people, disciplines and research methods: the set of organizations we examined in this study are mainly economists, who share their main research methods (mainly primary experimental research: we found very little formal evidence synthesis). The organizations we studied are mainly based in the Global North. These factors combine to mean that the many of the people in these organisations are white men in rich countries, mainly the US. The organizations are strikingly inter-linked, sharing many individuals among their leadership and research cadres. We would caution to be concerned that other voices are adequately represented and empowered.

3. **Evidence of outcomes (the benefits) is scarce and patchy**: Clearly, we understand that organizations working on change at scale and/or doing system-related work intended to have broad influence often cannot formally measure their impact, in the sense of doing rigorous, well-controlled studies which indicate causation: the sample size is inadequate, and the costs of such a study vastly outweigh the benefits of the answer. Yet there are probably changes in the world which can reasonably be argued to be related to their work: we call these their 'outcomes'. However, almost no organization in the set routinely collates examples of its outcomes. That was a surprise.

   In the absence of data about outcomes, all we had was data on activities and outputs, e.g., research reports, conference attendance, etc. These are almost certainly a poor proxy for outcomes. Moreover, using data on outputs is dangerous because it will always favor less intense partnerships: by definition, those can 'touch' more people yet maybe too light-touch to achieve anything with any of them.

4. **It is hard to be precise about the inputs (the costs) of the various organizations' EIP work**: The direct costs would need to be split from the indirect costs (costs borne by the organization, rather than any individual EIP engagement, such as building its whole network and reputation. In some cases, the communication of research is mainly done elsewhere in the organization. Thus, considering the costs of EIP work, without considering the cost of other activities undertaken by the

organization (e.g., producing research) or even by other organizations (e.g., when the organisation uses someone else's research to advocate or support change), risks creating a false sense of cost-effectiveness.

However, it is obvious that effective EIP is attractive because its costs are small compared to the budgets and practice that it can influence, if successful: tankers are large. Even the more intensive EIP partnerships such as embedded labs are extremely cheap relative to their tankers. Hence the view of Amrita Ahuja, whose family foundation funds some of them:

"Even if only one in 20 works, that's still great value… Even if they cost twice what they say, that's still good… In my mind, they [these labs, etc.] are the most cost-effective investment you can make". We should note, however, that there is a counterargument to this analysis. Experimenting in weak institutional settings can lead to further weakening of the very institutions that the experiments are attempting to strengthen. Even small failures can have important and long term political consequences.
Clearly, increasing the proportion of the more intensive partnerships that succeed would be a great leverage. In addition, having better outcome data and a context-specific explanation for both successes and failures should enable people to identify the conditions necessary for success.

5. Given all this, **each research-producing organisation (and funders who fund them) should be clear about their theory of change** – and ensure that prospective partners and funders are clear. There should be a clear and feasible plan of how the research might influence policy or practice. We are somewhat sceptical of the EIP value of organizations that only do B (which are in our Groups 1 and 2 on our categorization, shown herein), or which do not involve in A and C the organizations and communities intended to benefit from the EIP efforts: theories of change that do not involve doing A or C seem to us to make many assumptions (notably that somebody else will do that work) which seem unlikely. The onus is on the research-producers to explain and show how their activities will help any poor person. Funders can take a view on whether they believe those assumptions. In our work over many years, we have found that many research-producing organizations seem to delegate their EIP to chance[1]. Handily, there are organizations (think tanks, NGOs, grassroots entities, and others) that produce research and effectively engage and network with others with the mandate and capacity to bring about change.
6. **Unrestricted funding makes a positive difference:** There are two reasons for this, both related to effectiveness. First, EIP work inevitably means responding to changing circumstances: a new minister, a policy window, a minister suddenly wanting an announcement for a speech, a change in priorities, a pandemic. Only flexible funding enables organizations to respond to those. And second, crucially, it enables organizations to respond to the needs of the policy-maker or practitioner in front of them - rather than those of a funder, probably a long way away, who does not know the detailed context on the ground. We heard of externally-imposed agendas achieving nothing and harming trust because it is clear that the 'partner' is not doing what matters here.
7. **Many people to whom we spoke in this study were interested in the findings - in becoming better at EIP**. It seems that many organizations have realized that 'the old model' - which we call 'publish and push' - is inadequate and are trying to figure out what works better.

[1] One of us, Caroline, gave a keynote about exactly this at the Global Evidence and Implementation Summit in Melbourne: www.giving-evidence.com/geis2018

Implications

Based on these and other findings, we outline the following implications to consider. These are in three categories: strengthening the current model; maximising impact by somewhat rethinking the model; and ensuring sustainability of the work. We discuss each in turn:

Strengthening the current model

1. **Have a clear theory of change for how their research can reach and influence decision-makers, and ensure that the necessary pieces for that theory of change are in place**. Some of those pieces can be in other organisations: what matters is that there is a feasible pathway. We found some organizations which did not seem to have a feasible or complete pathway for their work to influence action.
2. **Measure all the costs**. To assess the costs of EIP work, all the costs should be included - including those producing, communicating, and using evidence - and not just the marginal costs of partnership activities themselves.
3. **Consider unintended consequences of the model**: For instance, Northern research organizations can potentially crowd-out local researchers from decision-making spaces and deplete local research capacity from local organisations, in ways that are undesirable. Exploring these unintended effects may help funders and Northern researcher organisations strengthen the effectiveness of their work.
4. **Systematically collect outcomes**: We suggest a more systematic monitoring of outcomes. We appreciate that this might even be just collecting anecdotes. And further, that researchers and funders analyse these to find clues about the contribution of grantees towards these outcomes and patterns in what leads to policy change successes.

Maximising impact – a rethink of the model

5. **Shift funding and agency to Southern-based organizations**: Strong research networks and organizations in the Global South can produce high-quality research and communicate it to local governments. They live closer to the governments they seek to influence than Northern-based organizations can and often have longer-standing personal relationships (e.g., they were at college together).
6. **Consider research synthesis – and particularly locally**: Synthesis is necessary for interpreting a mass of primary studies. Arguably it is dangerous to rely on individual studies without considering the full set of available evidence.

   In particular, we suggest that research synthesis be conducted locally. This is because doing so increases the chance that the precise question addressed by the synthesis is relevant locally (i.e., that local policy-makers are involved at stage A). It can also reduce the chance of mismatched research objectives which can arise because of differences between what Northern research programmes want to study and what Southern policymakers need to know.
7. **Strengthen the users of evidence**: By strengthening the capacity of local decision-makers to find/commission, analyse and use evidence (from all sources), funders could enable sustainable and transformative changes across governments. We saw examples of Northern-based organisations doing this through training, but also where in-country organisations can do it more strongly and consistently because they are there all the time and often have known the individuals for years – and in the case of local universities, they are already source of policymaking cadres; initiatives such

as PASGR in Africa focus precisely in developing undergraduate and graduate courses across a region.

Ensuring sustainability of the work

8. **Promote transparency**: We found examples of government partners not knowing the source or scale of the research-producing organization's funding for the partnership: that creates suspicion (that the 'partnership' is being used to make money), which reduces trust and effectiveness. Greater transparency can lead to stronger and more sustainable partnerships.
9. **Consider sustainability of the model and an exit strategy**: Given that the outcomes of these efforts are likely to take years to realise, people involved in evidence-into-policy partnerships may want to explore if the models are financially sustainable in the long run (for instance, if funding was lost, would the partnerships remain? Can the organizations do more to find alternative sources of funding for them?) and how research-producing organisations may build into their strategies plans to empower local organisations to take up their missions (including accessing research and uptake funding directly).
10. **Consider learning directly from implementers or possible implementers (the government, NGOs or other organisations who might run the program)**: Our study focused on the partnership model from the perspective of the research-producing partners. But better understanding what implementers need and care about may be useful: , for example, what skills, data, research, other capabilities or resources they need, and the constraints that they face in finding and applying evidence, or running programmes. Asking them directly may help address many of the assumptions and questions raised in this study.

Annex 1: Organizations interviewed by Giving Evidence/OTT for This Project

The number of ticks indicates the number of separate interviews. We often had more than one person in the interview: many were two and some were three.

Organization	**Interview with the organization**	**Interview with their partner**
Innovations for Poverty Action	✓	✓
J-PAL	✓✓	✓✓ (two orgs)
ID Insight	✓	
MIT GOV/LAB	✓	
Evidence Action	✓✓✓	✓
Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI)	✓✓✓✓✓*	
Brookings Africa Growth Initiative (AGI)	✓	
IPE Small and Medium Enterprises program	✓	
Agricultural Technology Adoption Initiative (ATAI)	✓	
Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP)	✓	
Busara Center for Behavioral Economics	✓	✓
International Growth Centre	✓	
CGIAR	✓	
International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)	✓	

*PEI is a little different, because the 'partners' it seeks to influence are governments which are not its direct partners. Instead, it works through World Bank teams, and we spoke to some of them. In total, we held five interviews in relation to PEI.