

## 4.14 Features of an ideal national evidence infrastructure

Every country has a national evidence infrastructure that includes many evidence-related structures and processes. Within this national evidence infrastructure, we distinguish the evidence-support system, the evidence-implementation system, and the research system. Giving much greater attention to the evidence-support system, and ongoing attention to the evidence-implementation system, will be key to future efforts to use evidence in addressing societal challenges.



Evidence is something that decision-makers can use, while research is something that researchers do. When decision-makers ask a question, particularly government policymakers and organizational leaders, they need to be supported in a timely way in using the evidence that already exists. Decision-makers, particularly professionals and citizens, need to be supported to implement the changes that robust evidence demonstrates are needed. Meanwhile, researchers need to be enabled to invent new products and services, to develop new ways of thinking, and to critique the status quo. They also need to be encouraged to engage more actively with decision-makers to ensure relevance and applicability, to use technology more effectively to make research processes more efficient, to report their findings more transparently and without ‘spin,’ and to create versions of the evidence they produce that can be accessed, understood and made actionable by decision-makers. The evidence emerging from their research that is ‘ready for prime time’ can then be drawn into the evidence-support and evidence-implementation systems.

	Evidence-support system	Enabler	Complement
	<p>Grounded in an understanding of a national (or sub-national) context (including time constraints), demand-driven, and focused on contextualizing the evidence for a given decision in an equity-sensitive way</p> <p>Examples of infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>evidence-support coordination office (for all of government, with or without additional offices in key departments or ministries)</li> <li>evidence units with expertise in each of eight forms of evidence (e.g., behavioural-insights unit)</li> <li>processes to elicit and prioritize evidence needs, find and package evidence that meets these needs within set time constraints (and build additional evidence as part of ongoing evaluations), build capacity for evidence use (e.g., evidence-use workshops and handbook), prompt evidence use (e.g., cabinet submission checklist), and document evidence use (e.g., evidence-use metrics)</li> </ul> <p><i>While such infrastructure is most relevant to government policymakers and the leaders of very large organizations, similar types of infrastructure can be tailored to the leaders of smaller organizations as well as professionals and citizens</i></p>	<p>Enabled by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>domestic evidence intermediaries</li> <li>evidence-related global public goods (e.g., global standards and open-access publications of evidence syntheses) from Cochrane, Campbell and others</li> <li>technical assistance from the UN and other multilateral organizations, including their country, regional and global offices</li> </ul>	<p>Complemented by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>foresight initiatives to anticipate future evidence needs</li> <li>innovation hubs to invent new products and services, evaluate them, and scale those that can add value through markets or public procurement</li> </ul>

		Enabler	Complement
<b>Evidence-implementation* system</b>	<p>Grounded in an understanding of evidence-related processes, driven by a mix of demand and supply considerations, and focused on cycles of synthesizing evidence, developing recommendations, disseminating them to decision-makers, actively supporting their implementation, evaluating their impacts, and incorporating lessons learned in the next cycle (18)</p> <p>Examples of infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evidence-synthesis and guideline units</li> <li>• evidence-implementation units to prioritize what to implement, identify barriers and facilitators to implementation, and design strategies that address barriers and leverage facilitators</li> <li>• processes to build evidence into existing workflows (e.g., electronic client records, digital decision-support systems, web portals, and quality-improvement initiatives) and share it across them</li> </ul> <p><i>While such infrastructure is most relevant to professionals and citizens, similar types of infrastructure can be tailored to government policymakers and organizational leaders</i></p>	Enabled by similar things as above	Complemented by government policymakers and organizational leaders using available levers to support implementation (e.g., adding recommended products and services to a benefits package, and mandating public reporting of an indicator capturing adherence to a recommended action)
<b>Research system</b>	<p>Grounded in an understanding of disciplinary perspectives and research methods, driven by supply-side considerations like curiosity, and focused on conducting research that may or may not aim to contribute to the evidence taken up in the evidence-support and evidence-implementation systems (19)</p> <p>Examples of infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• university departments and units</li> <li>• processes to reward activities (e.g., peer-reviewed grants and publications), which could be expanded to activities with a greater likelihood of achieving impacts (e.g., engagement with and responsiveness to decision-makers)</li> </ul> <p><i>Such infrastructure is most relevant to researchers</i></p>	Enabled by research-related global public goods (e.g., open-science initiatives)	Complemented by government policymakers and organizational leaders using available levers to reward certain activities (e.g., institution-assessment exercises like the UK's Research Excellence Framework)

*\*We use the term evidence-implementation system to distinguish it from the evidence-support system. Some recent descriptions of what we mean by an evidence-implementation system have called this an evidence ecosystem.(18) We have avoided this term both because it confuses those who are used to the literal meaning of an ecosystem and because it does not capture this system's focus on implementation. If we were to use the term evidence ecosystem, we would likely apply it to a combination of the evidence-support system and the evidence-implementation system.*

Building on the first row above, an evidence-support system would ideally have the following features:

- supports decision-making by government policymakers, as well as by organizational leaders, professionals and citizens, with the best evidence and in ways that are:
  - informed by a good understanding of their context – including where and how decisions are made, the time constraints under which decisions are made, and the existing system arrangements that determine whether the right products and services get to those who need them – and of their capacities, opportunities and motivation to use evidence in decision-making
  - responsive to their decision-related needs, time constraints, and preferences for product and process formats
  - reflective of a commitment to matching the best evidence to the question asked and to working through what the evidence means for a given decision (i.e., to contextualizing the evidence), including how this may vary by groups and contexts (i.e., to bringing an equity lens to the evidence and to how it is viewed)
  - delivered with judgement, humility and empathy and with appropriate attention to identifying and managing conflicts of interest
- enabled in systematic and transparent ways both by those within government and through strategic partnerships with evidence intermediaries and producers outside government, such as domestic evidence intermediaries and purveyors of global public goods and technical assistance
- complemented by those operating in two parts of what the UN calls its 'quintet of change,' namely strategic foresight and innovations.(20) The three other parts of the quintet of change – data analytics, behavioural/implementation research, and evaluation ('performance and results orientation') – are captured in our eight forms of evidence.

Some governments have chosen to pass legislation that formalizes aspects of the evidence-support system. In the US, the bipartisan Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking (21) developed recommendations that informed the Evidence Act. Follow-up memos from the president and the Congressional Budget Office helped to support the implementation of the act. These efforts share with the Evidence Commission a focus on all types of societal challenges, but diverge in their focus on just one type of decision-maker (government policymakers, in this case in the US federal government), on just two forms of evidence (data analytics and evaluation), and on building new evidence and not also on making better use of the stock of existing evidence (such as through evidence syntheses). Some parts of the UN system have chosen to pass resolutions about strengthening evidence-support systems. In the Eastern Mediterranean region, WHO's regional committee passed such a resolution for the health sector.(22)