

Prioritizing the Use of Evidence to Improve Policy Implementation

About Results for All

We launched [Results for All](#) in January 2016 as a knowledge building and learning initiative. Through research and consultations, we aimed to develop a better understanding of how governments in low- and middle-income countries are building a foundation for evidence use in policymaking and explore how to accelerate these efforts. The briefs in this series reflect observations from this work.

Background

To learn about evidence use in government, Results for All conducted desk research and engaged policymakers and NGO partners in consultations and interviews over nearly four years. The challenge of translating policy into programs and services that deliver results for citizens sometimes referred to as the "implementation gap," emerged as a priority concern in our discussions.

The policy cycle is usually described in stages that include a version of problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Rather than a linear or standard sequencing of these stages, policymaking is an iterative cycle of formulating, testing or implementing, and evaluating. The reality, however, is that implementation is often treated as a downstream activity, separate from the policy formulation stage. And while the announcement of a new policy frequently commands the attention of the media, and the appetite for monitoring and evaluation in government is growing, implementation rarely appears in any limelight. In July 2018, we convened a [peer-learning workshop](#) for 40 policymakers from 9 countries, donors, and NGO partners to discuss challenges, lessons learned, and accomplishments in using evidence to inform policy implementation. The workshop was a direct response to the need for more support in policy implementation that we had heard in our consultations.

Poor policy design, weak administrative and management capacity, lack of support from key partners, and limited technical expertise in using evidence to troubleshoot activities that are not achieving desired results are some of the factors that contribute to implementation challenges. Often, these challenges arise because they are not taken into consideration at the outset – during the planning and design phase of a policy.

The peer learning workshop explored the disconnect between national-level policy planning and design and subnational implementation. One participant shared how several years after the introduction of a new national policy, he still was called on to explain details to implementing practitioners at the district level, noting that it is challenging to implement a policy you don't fully understand. Another observed that county-level program data were collected and sent up the chain to national partners, without a clear understanding of why the information was collected and how it was being used – introducing a higher potential for inaccurate or incomplete data.

Reflecting on What We Learned

Results for All's [landscape review](#) highlights a range of mechanisms – policies, programs, processes, and operational practices – that governments are putting in place to promote the systematic use of evidence in policymaking. Many of these mechanisms aim to improve the production and use of evidence, *specific to policy design*. A few are specific to monitoring and evaluation. It is much harder to discern those with an explicit focus on policy implementation. But a focus on policy design alone is not enough. Even well-intended policies that are based on the best available evidence can fail to achieve desired objectives if decision makers lack the skills and resources to translate these policies into meaningful programs and activities for citizens. Weak policy implementation can mean that family planning services fail to reach women in rural communities, that children in marginalized communities cannot access quality education, or that violence against women and children continues to go unaddressed. When policies are designed with implementation in mind – reflecting insights from other activities or contexts – they are more likely to succeed in mitigating these consequences and achieving positive outcomes.

Participants who attended the peer learning workshop were eager to learn from each other and hoped to acquire practical tools and guidance for using evidence to address their implementation challenges. In preparing for the workshop, we were struck by the dearth in literature covering policy implementation in low- and middle-income countries, particularly experiences and lessons learned in promoting the systematic use of evidence, a likely explanation for the limited discussion on implementation in the landscape review. What types of policies, programs, processes, and operational practices could help to ensure evidence is consulted routinely in policy implementation – to troubleshoot service delivery challenges, accurately identify target populations, and build buy-in and mobilize support for activities, among other measures? One workshop participant noted, "We don't need more policies – we need to figure out how to implement what we already have." Below, we share two key observations from the workshop.

Operational data provide a good starting point for identifying challenges and successes in implementation. Workshop participants were most inspired by a session that highlighted the potential of routinely collected operational or administrative data. Some shared that they did not have a robust or reliable process for routine data collection, an issue they intended to address upon returning to their office. Others had light bulb moments as they realized the kinds of insights they could glean from data they were already collecting. Like other types of data, administrative data also have limitations

related to quality, reliability, accessibility. Nonetheless, they offer a fast and less expensive way for governments to collect information about the individuals affected by the implementation of a policy and conduct [real-time monitoring](#) to ensure programs achieve desired results. Used in conjunction with research, surveys, and other types of data, administrative data hold promise for governments seeking to use evidence to improve program implementation.

Using evidence in policy implementation demands more than technical ability. We received over 55 applications for nine spots at our peer learning workshop and were surprised to see communication challenges in implementation featured prominently in a significant number of responses. Applicants wanted to know how to communicate evidence, information, and learnings gathered from the implementation of programs to build buy-in for programs, advocate for more funding, and improve how they engage with citizens. Results for All hosted a separate workshop for 3ie (the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation) aimed at helping evaluation offices think strategically about the role an effective communication strategy can play in building consensus, informing key partners, and garnering support for policy reform. We wanted to understand the challenges government offices face in communicating evidence and validate skill-building in communications as a priority for decision makers. The workshop was equally well-received and affirmed that soft skills are as critical to using evidence in policy implementation as the technical skills – to find, critically appraise, and use evidence – we commonly reference in evidence-informed decision making.

Practical Insights

The peer learning workshop confirmed a strong demand from government decision makers for practical tools and experiential knowledge, which we heard throughout our research and consultations. Participants came from diverse contexts and represented varied sectors but shared a common interest in learning from the experiences of others and gathering new ideas to address specific implementation challenges. They wanted practical "how-to" guidance for linking data across multiple agencies, identifying and collecting evidence to inform the scale-up of pilots, and improving how they engage with the media. In this spirit, below, we list a few additional resources that could be useful to decision makers who are implementing policies and programs in government.

- Simple [diagnostic tools](#) can be used to document, track, and troubleshoot challenges in collecting and using evidence during planning, implementation, and after the completion of activities. This [guide](#) includes a series of checklists that serve as reminders for addressing key implementation issues related to planning, governance, and monitoring and evaluation. Led by independent practitioners and applied at different decision points, the [UK's Gateway Review Process](#) is designed to ensure decisions are informed by evidence and to allow for adjustments over the life of the program.
- Communication is more than a one-way push of evidence or information that happens at the end of a program. It is a strategic tool that governments can use to improve public awareness and support for programs, generate positive media coverage about an initiative, and solicit feedback from citizens – to achieve desired program results. This [agency roadmap](#) starts with

big-picture questions about communication infrastructure and offers tips for written and oral communication interventions.

- [Peer learning](#) is a promising approach for facilitating the sharing of tacit knowledge and experiences in using evidence in policy implementation. It can help to address questions such as "how did you develop a learning agenda in your evaluation plan" or "how did you use evidence to build buy-in for your policy. Questions that don't necessarily have technical fixes and that, as a result, lend themselves well to experiential learning and exchange.
- New [adaptive management](#) and [rapid feedback approaches](#) that promote continuous and iterative learning are a way to more rapidly identify sticking points in policy implementation and make better decisions faster.

Importantly, we learned from our work that the process of translating policy to action deserves more attention – clear incentives, policies, and systems for using evidence, if governments are to make progress in addressing social challenges and achieving the results they desire for their citizens.

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