

# Policy labs and evidence use in education

*How far have we come and what  
have we learned?*

January 2024





# About the OTT team



## **Advisor**

Enrique  
Mendizabal,  
Director, OTT



## **Project lead**

Clara  
Richards,  
Senior  
Associate, OTT



## **Project team**

Emily Hayter,  
Senior  
Associate, OTT



## **Project team**

Marcela  
Morales,  
Associate, OTT



## **Project team**

Jane Lewis,  
Comms, OTT







# About the review

Evidence use in education	Policy labs
<p>This section covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How has the EIPM field evolved?</li><li>• What is 'evidence use' and what do we know about how to strengthen it?</li><li>• What is 'evidence' in the education policy context?</li><li>• What does 'institutionalisation of evidence use' mean and what does it look like in education policy?</li><li>• What strategies can help institutionalise evidence use?</li><li>• What has been learned about strengthening evidence use capacities and culture in education?</li><li>• Which are the best change agents to target in the education policy ecosystem?</li></ul>	<p>This section covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are policy labs and how are they understood in different contexts?</li><li>• What are different types of policy labs and the main roles they play?</li><li>• How effective have policy labs been in influencing policy?</li><li>• What key lessons have been learned from their operations?</li><li>• What contributions have policy labs made; what challenges have they faced; and what is their main potential for the future?</li></ul>





# Methodology

## Desk review

- Academic and grey literature selected across three distinct themes: policy labs, evidence use, and education.
- Languages: English, Arabic, French, Spanish
- Practical emphasis (project documents, Theories of Change etc)

## Key Informant Interviews

- Structured semi-formal conversations over two rounds with 16 experts (researchers, policy makers, practitioners)

## EdLabs Review

- Reviewed 27 existing EdLabs (functions, activities, institutional setup)





# Our definitions



# What are policy labs?

- Our definition of policy labs was intentionally broad. We wanted to encapsulate both theoretical understandings and practical implementations.
- Policy labs wear two hats in the realm of evidence use:
  - as 'evidence use' interventions themselves (e.g., through embedded units).
  - as implementers of other evidence-based interventions (e.g., training or dialogue facilitation).
- While definitions and characteristics may vary, the heart of a policy lab remains the same: to help governments make better decisions.



# What is ‘evidence’ for education policy?

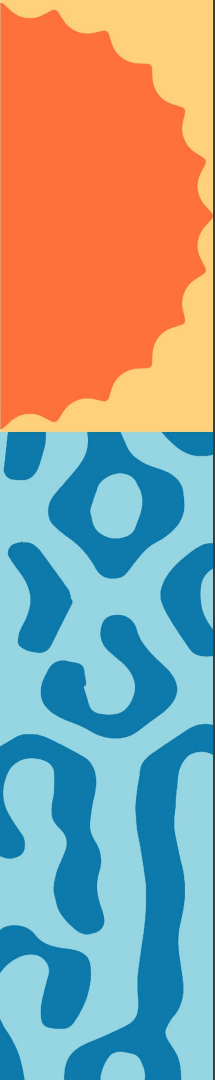
*“The field [of research use] is grounded in the premise that **research is not the only legitimate form of evidence** used in policy and practice” (Supplee et al 2023)*

- Research, data, practice informed experience, citizen knowledge

*“Credible evidence can take multiple forms...quality standards should avoid being narrow and restrictive, and support a **diverse set of approaches and models**” (African Education Research Funders Consortium)*

*“Many grantees and government officials... reported that policymakers most value having access to a variety of data and evidence options that can be tailored to their specific policy challenge in real time, suggesting that a **focus on promoting just one type of data or evidence is not the best way to reach the EIP goal**”. (Hewlett Foundation EIPM Evaluation 2023)*





# Lessons learned: evidence use in education policy



# Evidence use is shaped by contextual factors

- Political economy context
- The evidence ecosystem
- Organisational factors within ‘user’ agencies
- Individual characteristics of evidence users

*“An evidence ecosystem at a country level cannot be fully understood and appreciated without locating it in the context of a political and knowledge economy.”* Stewart, Dayal, Langer et al 2019.

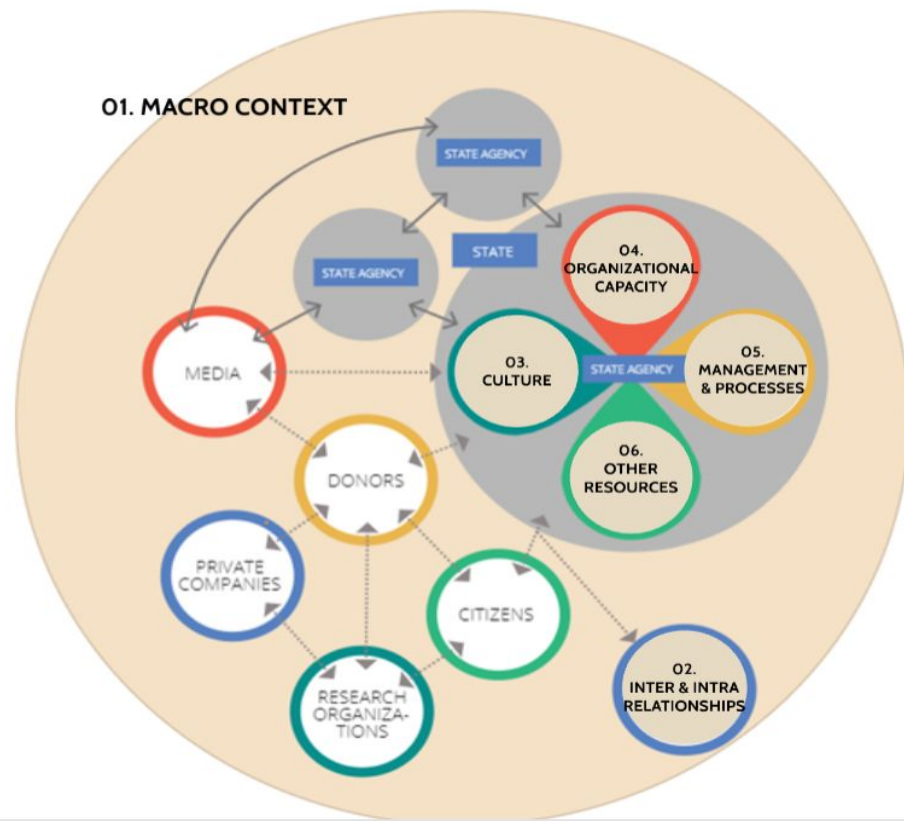


Image: Context Matters Framework (Weyrauch et al, 2016)



# Quality Use of Research Evidence (QUIRE) Framework

Quality use of research evidence in education is defined as... the thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organisational enabling components within a complex system.



## CORE COMPONENTS

### APPROPRIATE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The need for research evidence to be not only methodologically rigorous, but also appropriate for the educational issue, the context and intended use.

### THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Critical engagement with the research evidence, shared deliberation about its meaning and effective integration of aspects of the evidence within practice.

## ENABLING COMPONENTS - INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

### SKILLSETS

The knowledge and capabilities that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

### MINDSETS

The dispositions, attitudes and values that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

### RELATIONSHIPS

The interpersonal processes and connections that are required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

## ENABLING COMPONENTS - ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

### LEADERSHIP

The organisational vision, commitments and role models that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

### CULTURE

The organisational ethos, values and norms that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

### INFRASTRUCTURE

The organisational structures, resources and processes that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

## SYSTEM-LEVEL INFLUENCES

The complex interactions and inter-dependencies across the education sector to support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.





# Factors with particular salience in education

- “Education is a political hot potato”
- Policy & practice go hand in hand (or not)
- Complex, decentralised stakeholder landscape
- Lack of consensus on outcomes: “You can’t reduce education to a number”
- Tensions between global and local priorities
- Evidence production systems affect evidence use





So we  
need to  
understand  
entry points

*“In reality, many initiatives have insufficient knowledge of the local practice and context that they are trying to address.” - OECD  
2020*

Evidence diagnostics aim to:

- Identify windows of opportunity for improved evidence use in the political economy environment *as well as* within organisations
- Build understanding of existing structures, capacities, working cultures in organisations where change is targeted
- Co-define priorities for improved evidence use with policymakers
- Provide a basis to prioritise and target interventions (ie codefine problems first)



# Evidence diagnostic tools

Tool	Produced by	Uses so far
<b>Guidelines and good practices for EIPM in a government department</b> (2016)	ODI and South Africa Dept of Environmental Affairs	Developed out of a partnership between ODI & DEA under BCURE programme
<b>Context Matters Framework</b> (2016)	Politics & Ideas and INASP	Developed out of BCURE programme Piloted in Ghana and Peru Used in partnerships with two UNICEF regional offices and SEDI programme (Uganda & Pakistan)
<b>‘Political economy+ approach’</b> (2021)	SEDI consortium (OPM, 3ie, INASP, ODI, SDPI, EPRC, ACET)	Used in 9 sectors in Ghana, Uganda & Pakistan
<b>Rapid Evidence Support-System Assessment</b> (2022)	Global Commission on Evidence	Currently being piloted in 12 countries
<b>Checklist: supporting the routine use of evidence in policymaking</b> (2023)	WHO	Currently being piloted in 2 countries



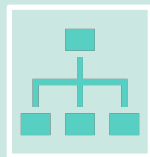
# A multidimensional approach to implementation

## *Cross cutting principles:*

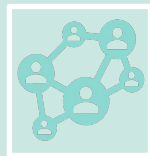
- Combine interventions across all levels
- Hard & soft factors: political, social, cultural
- Accompany existing initiatives rather than imposing new ones
- Quality of design and implementation (eg of training, or relationship strengthening)
- Change is complex and nonlinear-needs adaptive approaches



**Individual level:** training and other skills/knowledge development support for policymakers



**Organisational level:** new or revised structures, processes, systems, standards within government agencies to shape how evidence is planned for, budgeted and used



**Brokering relationships across the system:** events, networks, pairing schemes & other initiatives to strengthen research-policy networks. *“If you want long term/sustainable approaches, invest in relationships that last even if structures are gone”*

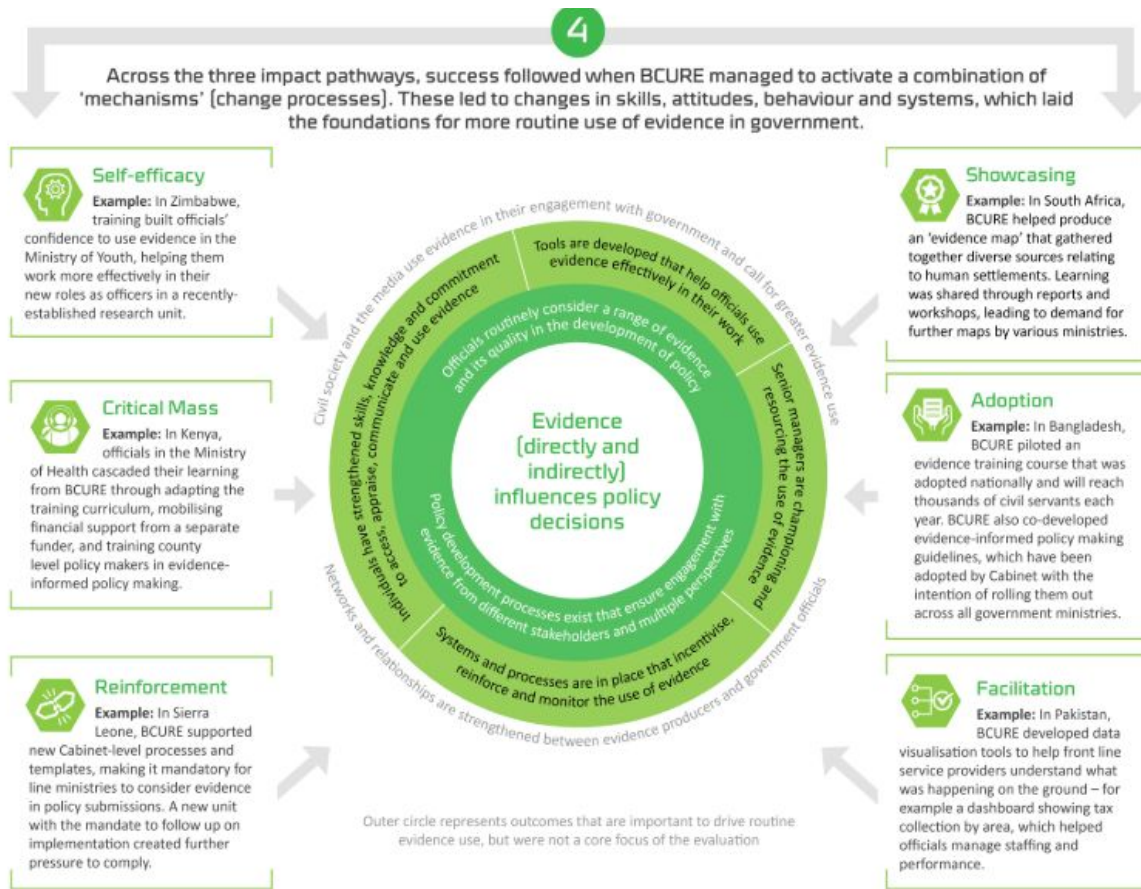


# BCURE evaluation

*“Working with governments to build capacity for evidence use requires a politically informed and multidimensional approach.*

*Capacity gaps should be viewed as just one element of a tapestry of factors that block or disincentivise evidence-informed policymaking.”*

BCURE Evaluation 2018





# Planning for sustainability

*“As non-state actors, it is prudent that we invest in initiatives that will entrench a culture of evidence use within governments, and keep these institutions going strong, long after donor funding and external support has wound down...”*

*Sustainability can take many forms[...] to ensure EIDM practice outlives individuals and regimes.”*

Diana Warira (JPAL), keynote address on receiving the Africa Evidence Network Leadership Award 2022







What have we  
learned about policy  
labs?





# The 'labification' of the policy field

---

The policy world has witnessed a **pronounced uptick in the establishment of policy labs**, leading to what many experts dub the 'labification' of the policy domain.

---

The growing allure of the 'lab model' is driven by its promise of incorporating experimental frameworks geared towards devising innovative solutions to societal dilemmas.

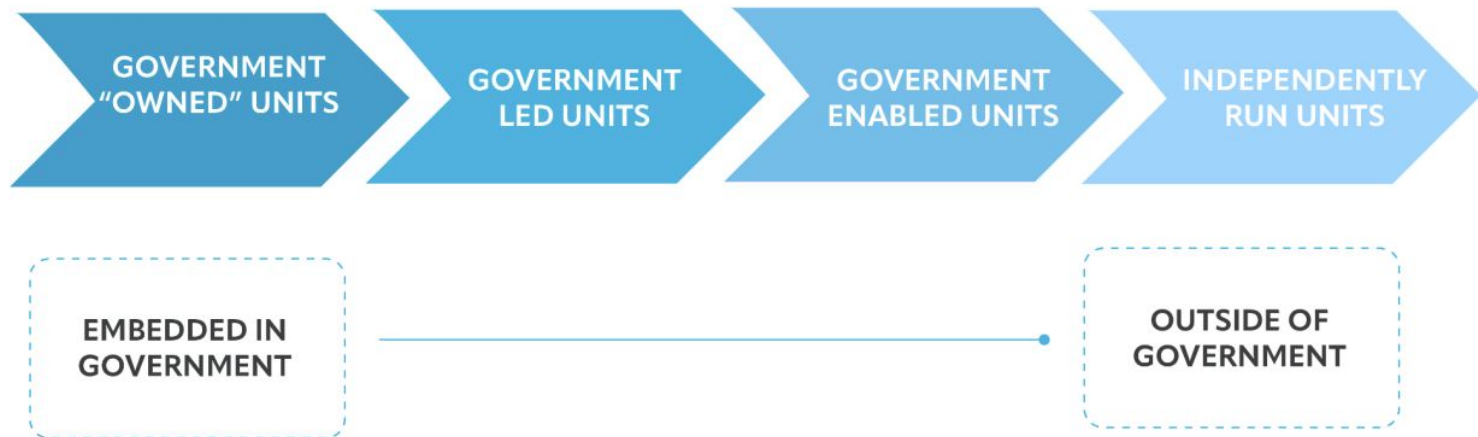
---

This emergent trend signifies a **broader shift in governance**, with the modern-day policy arena demanding adaptive mechanisms to navigate its complex and ever-evolving challenges.



# Inside or outside of government?

- EdLabs have various organizational structures, each deeply influenced by their level of integration or proximity with governmental entities. This closeness determines their operational dynamics and responsiveness to governmental needs and objectives.



*Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Lewis (2021) and McGann, Lewis & Blomkamp (2020)*



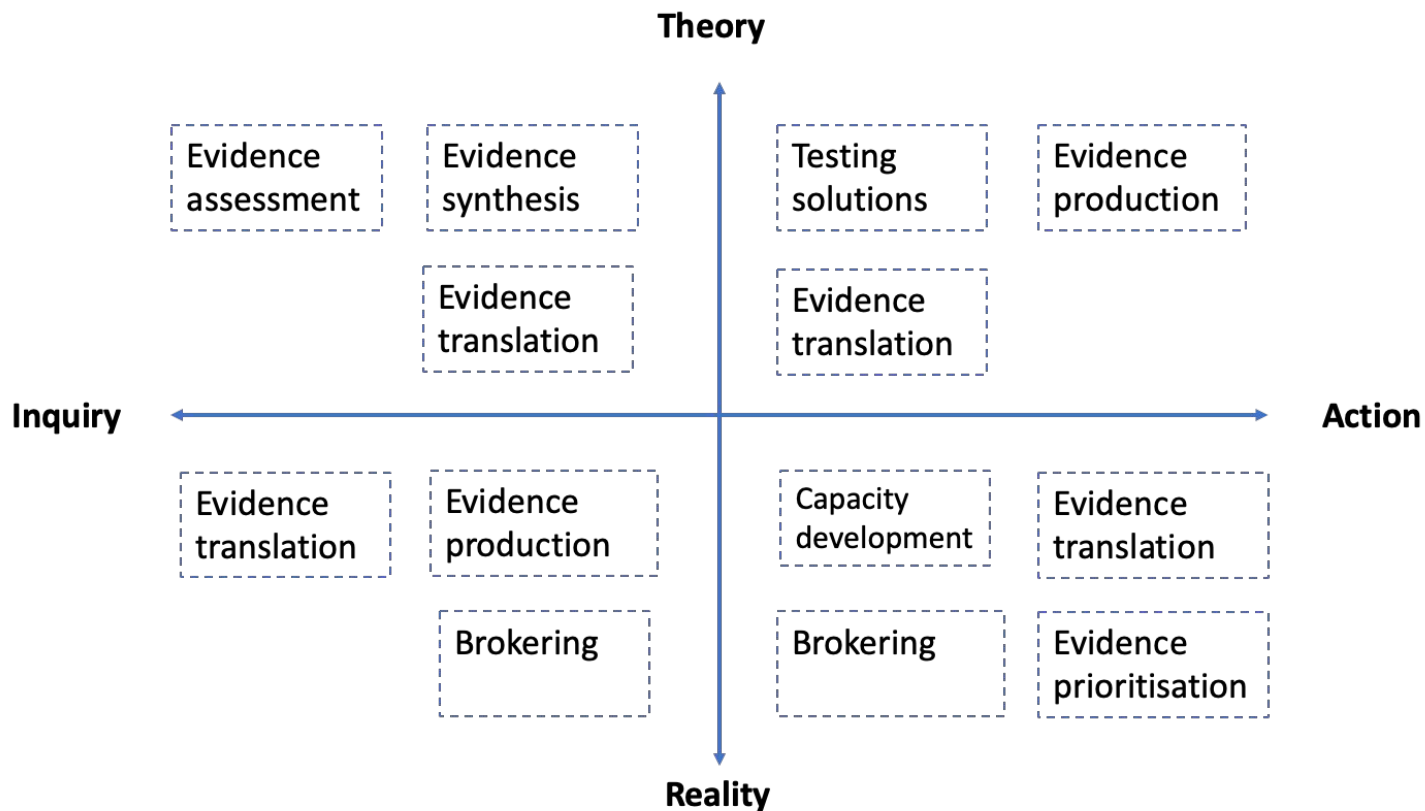


# Activities of EdLabs


- **Evidence Prioritization:** Collaborative setting of research agendas with policymakers.
- **Evidence assessment and synthesis:** This involves evaluating existing evidence for quality and rigour, including conducting and commissioning literature reviews to identify gaps.
- **Evidence translation and dissemination:** Policy labs engage in the crucial task of translating complex research findings into accessible and actionable insights for a diverse range of stakeholders.
- **Brokering:** Policy labs often serve as essential mediators between diverse stakeholders, fostering stronger connections and building trust.
- **Evidence production:** Policy labs conduct research and assess educational programmes to produce evidence that informs policy decisions.
- **Testing solutions:** This function involves testing and implementing innovative initiatives to assess their viability, effectiveness, and potential scalability within the education sector.
- **Capacity development for evidence use**



# Understanding EdLabs: A proposed typology





	Evidence assessment/s ynthesis	Evidence translation / dissemination	Evidence production	Testing solutions	Capacity development for evidence use	Evidence prioritisation	Brokering
<a href="#">IES What Works Clearinghouse</a>	x					x	
<a href="#">Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)</a>	x		x		x		
<a href="#">eBASE</a>	x	x	x				
<a href="#">Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)</a>		x	x		x	x	x
<a href="#">Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis</a>	x	x					x



# Edlabs walk a political tightrope

## Political Tightrope:

- Policy labs often walk a delicate balance amidst politics.
- While embedded labs have structural similarities, their operation varies: from technical/bureaucratic to being a high-profile political project.
- Being within a ministry doesn't shield labs from political barriers.

## Engagement with Political Decision Makers:

- Close engagement can lead to immediate use of evidence and impactful policy decisions.
- However, political shifts pose threats: changes in leadership or department turnovers can erode support.
- Labs are vulnerable to shutdowns, defunding, or neglect without consistent political patronage.

## Challenges for Non-Government Labs:

- Need to establish trusted relationships with policymakers and avoid seeming 'remote.'
- High competition for attention and resources, necessitating strong communication, stakeholder engagement, and timely, actionable evidence production.



# Effectiveness of policy labs

- Despite a surge in policy labs' popularity, comprehensive evaluations remain scarce.

## Limited Evidence



- Policy labs' multifaceted roles and varying environments hinder a universal evaluation approach.

## Diverse Roles & Contexts



- Success stories often highlight network-building, connections, and stakeholder involvement, sidelining long-term

## Emphasis on Short-term Outcomes





# Driving Policy Lab Effectiveness



Factors influencing the success of policy and EdLabs, as outlined in the literature, align with broader evidence use findings.



**Alignment with Government Priorities:** Ensuring lab efforts reflect governmental visions.



**Operational Consistency:** Memorandums of understanding and positioning labs within ministry objectives.



**Relationship Building:** Establishing trust and delivering tangible results.



**Understanding Operational Context:** Recognizing incentives, decision-maker dynamics, and the broader ecosystem.



**Institutionalization:** Political will, priority alignment, and leadership.





# Implications and future directions for funders





# How can EdLabs contribute to research and practice on policy labs and evidence use in education?

## *Could education be 'the new health' in EIPM?*

- Much of the EIPM literature so far has been dominated by health
- But education may be well placed to develop approaches and tools which can inform efforts to strengthen evidence use in other sectors

## *Innovation in theory, convention in practice?*

- Labeling every new initiative as a 'lab' can mask the intricate dynamics of evidence use, which is too diverse to be encapsulated by a single label.





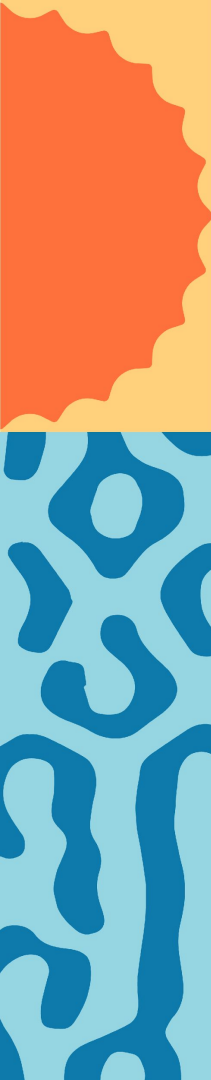
### *Joining the dots between different methodologies and evidence types*

- “Policy labs are very qualified to bring diverse evidence sources to the table”
- Also to connect sometimes disparate pockets of thinking around data, research and evaluation systems

### *Advocate for greater local and international investment in education research*

- Education is reportedly underfunded vs other sectors of research not only in LMICs but also in OECD countries
- Supporting locally generated/prioritised research
- A particular opportunity for labs spanning evidence production and use mandates





## ***Popularity versus proof: the dichotomy of widespread adoption and limited evaluation***

- Regular introspection can be useful. More research is needed to understand the real-life impact of policy labs and compare their results with other entities.
- Policy labs and other actors in the ecosystem can create repositories of their trials, failures, successes, and lessons learned.

## ***Doing funding differently***

- *“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.”* -Taddese, CGD review 2017
- *“Short-term funding and budget inflexibility limit the capacity of KBlS to be strategic in the medium- and longer-term [...] where possible aim for longer cycles of funding and upfront endowments that encourage strategic flexibility”*- Gough et al in OECD 2022





# For funders of EdLabs

EdLabs offer a significant opportunity to address evidence gaps in their own approach, as well as in the study and practice of evidence use. We recommend that funders:

- **Address the evidence gap** around policy labs' effectiveness by funding a rigorous evaluation of their objectives and impacts on the policy-making process, at a sector and/or landscape level.
- Ensure that **appropriate resources are dedicated to documenting and sharing learning** from the implementation of EdLabs, with the support of a systematic MEL approach.
- **Package and share learning** that responds to existing evidence gaps, both on an operational level (about how to design and implement labs) and on a wider 'field-building' level.
- Be **adaptive and flexible in approaches to funding**, so that EdLabs can change their approaches over time in response to emerging learning.
- Make a **commitment to drawing on existing evidence** in the design of programming and project work.
- Actively participate in **learning about funders' own roles in evidence ecosystems**, including reflection on the implications of power dynamics and incentives.
- Develop and invest appropriately in a strong and **comprehensive communication and engagement strategy** at both global and country levels. This will ensure that learning from EdLabs is informed by -and contributes to - that from the evidence use sector and from other policy labs outside the education sector.



# Learning questions for further exploration

From all the various opportunities, outlined in this section, that we see arising from the pursuit of learning within the EdLab space, we have derived five key questions that we believe should be at the core of a learning agenda going forwards:

1. How does politics affect evidence use in education – for instance, in specific policy debates or contexts? And (relatedly but separate) what are the practical ways that EdLabs and other evidence use efforts can navigate this politics in the design and delivery of initiatives?
2. What is the impact of different policy lab models on evidence use by a) policymakers and b) practitioners/teachers? Does closeness to government translate into ‘better’ uptake?
3. How do specific approaches and activities contribute to organisational-level changes in evidence use (‘process use’ of evidence) in structures, systems and cultures of working within government departments?
4. Is there a role for philanthropic donors in supporting direct work with governments to support evidence use? And if so: What factors need to be considered around incentives and power dynamics, and what implications do these have for results/outcomes?
5. What is the impact of policy lab models over time? How does their role evolve? Can they act as catalysts for institutionalisation of evidence use on their own or do they require system-wide investment?



# Resources

**Review - Policy labs and evidence use in education. Available in:**

<https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Review-policy-labs-and-evidence-use-in-education.pdf>

**Learning Brief:**

[https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Learning-brief\\_policy-labs-and-evidence-use-in-education.pdf](https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Learning-brief_policy-labs-and-evidence-use-in-education.pdf)

**Contact authors:**

Emily Hayter, [ehayter@onthinktanks.org](mailto:ehayter@onthinktanks.org)

Marcela Morales, [mmorales@onthinktanks.org](mailto:mmorales@onthinktanks.org)



# Interested to join or learn more about the consortium?

Contact Busayomi Sotunde  
[osotunde@onthinktanks.org](mailto:osotunde@onthinktanks.org)

Facilitated by



**OTT**  
A global consultancy  
and platform for change