



**Evidence in
Practice**

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Evidence In Practice: Toward an Integrated Approach

By Rodrigo Canales, Tony Sheldon, Tory Grieves, and Brendan Lehan





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Introduction

The **Evidence in Practice research project at the Yale School of Management**, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, was conducted from January 2016 to January 2018 in order to better understand the conditions under which rigorous evidence can be effectively integrated into public policies and non-governmental organization (NGO) practices in the field of international development.

The research followed a rigorous methodology comprised of three broad elements: First we conducted an initial round of expert interviews with individuals who have spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice, including academics, government officials, foundation program

officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank directors. Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of the stakeholder groups, or individuals who could clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role.¹

International development work seeks to substantially improve living conditions for low-income households, using scarce resources judiciously and efficiently. Achieving this requires that organizations and governments base their work on the best available knowledge and evidence—about both the science that may support policies and programs as well as the organizational, political, and social mechanisms that can ensure effective design and delivery. Too often, however, practice in the field of international development, encompassing both government and NGO policies and programs, lag behind state-of-the-art research and evidence. In some cases, research and evidence fall outside of

what is realistic or actionable because of a gap between academic research and its practical implications. In others, relevant and actionable research fails to reach practitioners because of breakdowns or misalignments in the communication, incentives, language, timing, and relationships across actors. To ensure that policies and programs are designed using the best available evidence, it is first critical to understand why key actors, many of whom are committed in principle to integrating evidence into practice, struggle to systematically do so. This requires an exploration of how structural constraints and incentives—which we conceptualize as the assumptions, operational constraints, field-realities, career and organizational pursuits, and conceptual models—are shaping the current “evidence-to-practice ecosystem.” Our research seeks to better understand where incentives between actors are in alignment, where they are misaligned, and the potential strategies and structures that various stakeholders can take to leverage the former to mitigate the latter.

¹ See the detailed description on [Data + Methods here](#)



Our work takes a practice-centered approach² to analyze the predominant paradigm for the integration of evidence into practice, identify common barriers, and look for leverage points. Our analysis illustrates key practices that actors can engage in to transform how problems are defined and solved, as well as how and when different stakeholders collaborate to integrate knowledge and evidence into practice and thus achieve broader impact. Taken together, the proposed changes suggest a new paradigm that shifts its emphasis from the *translation* of evidence *into* practice towards the *integration* of evidence *in* practice.³

² See, for example, Bechky, B. A. (2011). *Making organizational theory work: Institutions, occupations, and negotiated orders*. *Organization Science*, 22(5), 1157-1167.

³ This is consistent with Carlile's (2004) discussion of the effective integration of knowledge across organizational and disciplinary boundaries. See Carlile, P. R. (2004). *Transferring, translating, and transforming: An integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries*. *Organization Science*, 15(5), 555-568.

⁴ We use the term "beneficiaries" to indicate those whom a specific policy or program is intended to help. Different analytic frameworks use various terms to describe this group, including clients, users, recipients, etc.

⁵ Further information on design thinking in development can be found in the following articles: M. Mintrom and J. Luetjens (2016), "Design Thinking in Policymaking Processes: Opportunities and Challenges" *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 75, no. 3: 391-402; Mark Evans and Nina Terrey (2016), "Co-design with citizens and stakeholders," in *Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences: Methods that Matter* (Bristol: Policy Press), 243-262; Emma Blomkamp (2017), "Co-Design for Government: Magic Bullet or Magical Thinking?," [Access here](#); M. Mintrom and J. Luetjens (2017), "Creating Public Value: Tightening Connections Between Policy Design and Public Management," *Policy Studies Journal* 45: 170-190; Andrew Gunn & Michael Mintrom (2017), "Evaluating the non-academic impact of academic research: design considerations," *Journal of Higher Education and Policy Management* 37: 20-30.

Evidence-based Practice in Context

The field of international development has become increasingly sensitive to a basic question: How do we know if what we are doing is truly helping? This has reoriented the field around the specific needs of and outcomes for intended beneficiaries,⁴ which in turn has opened two broad and complementary lines of inquiry: **How do we know if we are asking the right questions?** And, **how do we know if we are investing in the right solutions?** The first question is influenced by the expansion of design thinking principles and methodologies into different fields, including economic development. This user-centered approach to development involves a set of rigorous and systematic tools to deeply consider the intended beneficiaries' perspectives in the identification of problems and potential solutions.⁵ The second question is influenced by the development of increasingly rigorous analytic tools in the social sciences. This evidence-based approach to development focuses on the rigorous evaluation of the extent to which a proposed solution actually delivers its desired outcomes.⁶ Our work centers on the latter question and seeks to identify current roadblocks that inhibit the integration of the best-available evidence into the design and delivery of development solutions.

⁶ Our research focus on evidence-based practice is an extension of recent work to incorporate findings from experimental economics, behavioral science, cognitive psychology, and behavioral economics into the various stages of public policy analysis and design. See especially: Abhijit V. Banerjee, Esther Duflo (2011), *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs); M. Gopalan and M.A. Pirog (2017), "Applying Behavioral Insights in Policy Analysis: Recent Trends in the United States," *Policy Studies Journal* 45: S82-S114.



A variety of actors, including academics, philanthropists, impact investors, and development practitioners,⁷ have grappled with the question of how to identify, support, and implement the “right solutions.” Their efforts to understand what constitutes evidence, how to apply it to a particular context, and the implications for each party’s respective roles have led to vigorous and often contentious debate on the meaning and implications of a growing “evidence imperative” within development. These debates have evolved alongside broader changes in the priorities of public and private funders and an increased separation between implementing organizations and those that provide funding and oversight.

Our research starts from the current state of the relationships among development actors and its implications for the integration of evidence into development practice. It is important to acknowledge that what is considered relevant, timely, and useful evidence is itself contested. Similarly, there is disagreement on what it means to actually integrate evidence into practice. Thus a broad understanding of the various types of knowledge that qualify as ‘evidence’ and the different approaches that qualify as ‘integration’ is an essential starting point to the study of how to better integrate evidence into development practice.⁸

Based on the identification of the structural barriers encountered in the integration of evidence into practice, we articulate several encouraging practices which have been adopted by a wide array of actors to mitigate or overcome these barriers, summarized below. These observations illuminate a set of structural adjustments that could be made to the existing system to shift it in the direction of a new paradigm centered on the ethos⁹ of evidence-based practice. We summarize the five clusters of encouraging practices here and then explore them in depth later in this report.

From Incentive Misalignment to Value Alignment

Encouraging practices mitigate misaligned incentives by: 1) convening various organizations to develop a shared understanding of a problem before launching program design, and 2) negotiating a project structure that allows actors from diverse organizations to provide their unique contributions to the integration of evidence into a project while also complying with their own, disparate incentives. A negotiated collaboration among stakeholders can make explicit the contrasting (and converging) incentives and constraints across the various actors, as well as compromises and adaptations that may be required to ensure integration of evidence into practice.

A new paradigm of “evidence in practice” would thus start from the identification of a compelling, shared problem as a convening place where the common values that are shared by all and the unique needs of each actor are specified upfront.

7 Throughout the text we will use the term “practitioners” to refer to the government actors, NGOs and implementation partners, and others who are responsible for designing and executing development projects and programs.

8 Alternative definitions of evidence are addressed in Julius Court, and John Young (2003), “Bridging research and policy: Insights from 50 case studies,”; G Reid et al. (2017), “Minding the gap: the barriers and facilitators of getting evidence into policy when using a knowledge-brokering approach” Evidence & Policy: A Journal Of Research, Debate & Practice 13 no. 1: 29-38; Craig Mitton et al. (2007), “Knowledge transfer and exchange: review and synthesis of the literature,” Milbank Quarterly 85, no. 4: 729-768.

9 By ethos we mean the interdependent set of values and practices that determine how a community of practice defines its work. See Fayard, A. L., Stigliani, I., & Bechky, B. A. (2017). How nascent occupations construct a mandate: The case of service designers’ ethos. Administrative Science Quarterly, 62(2), 270-303.



From Disparate Definitions of Evidence to Bodies of Evidence

For stakeholders to develop an understanding of the critical principles and features of a particular intervention, the evidence they use must have both a certain level of robustness and contextual nuance.¹⁰ In our research, this happened most effectively when actors across stakeholder categories focused on cultivating *bodies of evidence* for a *particular problem*, comprised of complementary types of evidence, including RCTs, qualitative studies, and practitioner experiences.

A new paradigm would explicitly create the mandate and the supporting structure to incorporate multiple sources and types of evidence. This would start from the collective understanding of a shared problem, would emphasize *situated* (vs. abstract) knowledge, and would identify which types of evidence can be most relevant and useful to different types of stakeholders and at different junctures in the process.

From Timing Misalignments and Lack of Trust to Long-term Collaborative Relationships

Asynchronous time cycles across stakeholder groups get in the way of starting or maintaining trusting relationships. They can be mitigated through the deliberate cultivation

Taken together, the proposed changes suggest a new paradigm that shifts its emphasis from the *translation* of evidence into practice towards the *integration* of evidence in practice.

of long-term relationships that purposefully span the cycles of various stakeholder groups. Strong yet flexible relationships are key to developing bodies of evidence and integrating them into practice. Building relationships that span multiple instances of evidence generation and integration can create a “scaffolding” that supports the pursuit of broad-based, lasting change.

In a new paradigm, formal structures would naturally convene (and demand the participation of) the necessary diversity of stakeholders around a compelling and shared problem. Such structures would provide funding, project management, and governance mechanisms to explicitly establish long-term, collaborative, transparent, and fluid relationships.

From Fear of Failure to Learning in Process

The most successful examples of evidence integration lessen the distinction between evidence generation and incorporation. Instead, they design iterative approaches that simultaneously generate (different types of) rigorous *situated* evidence and integrate it into practice. With an emphasis on *learning*, these projects transform the need to negotiate evidence generation and integration into an asset rather than a roadblock. This

¹⁰ This questions the frequent treatment of ‘knowledge’ as an abstract, codified, and transferable asset and emphasizes the nature of situated knowledge, or the fact that knowledge is always enacted in practice. See, for example, Bechky, B. A. (2003). *Sharing meaning across occupational communities: The transformation of understanding on a production floor*. *Organization Science*, 14(3), 312-330.



To ensure that policies and programs are designed using the best available evidence, it is critical to understand why key actors, many of whom are committed in principle to integrating evidence into practice, struggle to systematically do so.

explicit commitment to learning opens the door for different types of information flows across stakeholders to share experiences, perspectives, and insights.

In a new paradigm, collective learning to better solve a shared problem would be the central mandate of a collaboration structure, paired with dedicated funding, resources, and mechanisms to promote and disseminate learning.

**From 'Champions' to
Structured Collaboration**

In our research, successful integration of evidence into practice was possible because of the (often extraordinary) actions of individuals at both the informal and the institutional levels. These champions' passionate commitment to exploring a problem allowed them to focus more on integrating evidence to enhance impact than on the role, job, or career imperatives imposed by their stakeholder affiliations.

In a new paradigm, the collaboration structure would formalize many of the tasks that champions must currently perform, which they often discover only through trial and error and which often entails substantial personal risks. The new paradigm would still benefit from such champions, of course, but it would provide a structure to quickly identify them and formalize their work so it can be appropriately valued.

We explore these themes in more depth below, after our exploration of the existing paradigm and the barriers within it.



The Pathways of Integration

At the most basic level, to integrate evidence into practice means to identify what works, to do more of it, and to do it in more places. In turn, it also means that actors will become better at the process of identification, replication, and transfer of evidence. Thus, a useful framework for identifying whether evidence has been integrated into practice is to consider three pathways that are mutually reinforcing but have differing scopes and timelines. We will refer to them broadly as *scale*, *spread*, and *structure*:

Scale

The most basic goal of evidence-based practice is to identify 'what works' and to do more of it. *Scale* therefore describes the extent to which specific programs are improved and expanded in their original settings. The accumulation of evidence on the effectiveness of a program justifies increasing the resources invested in it; thus if the evidence generated shows positive outcomes, there will be a higher probability of scaling.

Spread

A second goal of evidence-based practice is to promote learning across settings and organizations. *Spread* refers to the adaptation and application of key concepts to new organizations and contexts. The spread of evidence-based practice depends on the ability to evaluate whether evidence for a certain intervention is timely, relevant, and useful for adaptation to different contexts. This mode of integration is by definition more diffuse, harder to measure, and longer term, but is often the way that integration achieves a broader impact. Spread often occurs through social and organizational networks or across levels of an organization. Spread can be supported by deliberate efforts to move beyond simple broadcasting of (non-situated) information towards the creation of communities of practice that build connections between relevant actors, organizations, and disciplines; help identify and situate relevant evidence and useful practices; and jointly create situated evidence to improve collective practices.

Structure

A third goal of evidence-based practice is for participating actors to increase their organizational capacity for integrating evidence over time. *Structure* thus describes enhanced organizational capacity to generate, analyze, and integrate evidence into the design and implementation of interventions, as well as into overall performance evaluation.

Addressing the Three Pathways

The case study on Pratham offers an insight into all three pathways discussed above: it has achieved major scale in its own operations in India; its work has spread to adaptations of its pedagogical methodology in other countries (including Ghana); and its ongoing partnership with researchers to generate and analyze ongoing evidence is reflected in an organizational structure based on evidence-informed practice.

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The Pathways in Action

The Indian NGO Pratham, and the scale and spread of its signature remedial tutoring program, “Teaching at the Right Level” (TaRL), provide a helpful illustration of the three pathways in action. In 2001, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology approached Pratham because it was considered unusually data-driven and able to scale interventions quickly and inexpensively. The researchers conducted evaluations which demonstrated that Pratham’s TaRL program was cost-effective and led to significant learning gains for children. The evaluations also confirmed Pratham’s ability to administer programs at scale. Over the ensuing 16 years, the researchers and Pratham have continued their collaboration, expanding Pratham’s signature program to 29 states in India as of 2017. This growth represents significant **scale**, informed by (and enriching) the evidence of TaRL’s effectiveness.

As the evidence accumulated it created increased opportunities for the **spread** of evidence-based approaches to remedial education. One example is Ghana’s Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI), an education reform project coupled with a randomized control trial that was conducted between 2010 and 2013. Pratham’s “Teaching at the Right Level” tutoring program provided the evidence and key design aspects for TCAI. This project was a direct result of the professional and personal connections between the researchers working in India and those wanting to launch a similar program in Ghana. The impetus to adapt the program to Ghana was both to advance the compelling research agenda and to work with a national government partner to explore implementation at a national scale.

In addition to reaching an impressive scale in its educational programs, Pratham is considered unique among education NGOs in India for its investment in building internal capacity for monitoring and evaluation,



its willingness to expose itself to evaluation by external researchers, and its commitment to sharing evaluation results publicly. Pratham’s commitment to learning is summarized well by CEO Rukmini Banerji and co-founder Madhav Chavan:

“The major lesson for Pratham was that the journey of transformation of communities and of systems is a long one, with continuous learnings at every step. Internally as an organization and externally as a major player on the Indian scene, Pratham learned that it is important to be flexible and nimble, to seize and to create opportunities, and to continue to push the learning agenda on every available forum.”

This capacity for continuous learning exemplifies the **structures** that have resulted from Pratham’s long-term investment in evidence-based practice. Pratham’s approach has also transformed how the government evaluates education, as Pratham helped design the national survey that is now at the heart of policy design and evaluation.



Existing Paradigm

Better integration of evidence into practice in international development requires an assessment of the ways in which evidence is (and is not) currently incorporated into policy and practice. A conceptual model of this process is useful for identifying the structural reasons behind the failures, as well as the useful practices behind the successes that can become leverage points for broader change.

Our research involved, among other things, exploring how actors in international development view themselves and others within the field. Their perspectives broadly and consistently described the integration of evidence into practice as residing within an ecosystem where a set of archetypical stakeholder groups interact. This is not a perfect or comprehensive description (e.g., some organizations and especially individuals fall within more than one stakeholder category), but it helps identify—as *defined by actors themselves*—the most frequent and critical roles, incentives, and relationships that define the complex dynamics between “evidence” and “practice.” These stakeholder categories, and examples of organizational actors within them, are:

Researchers: research institutions, universities, research think-tanks, expert consultants, national statistical data aggregators, some international agencies.

Financiers: foundations, multilateral agencies, private sector social investors, development banks, high net worth individuals, bilateral government funders.

Intermediaries: knowledge translation platforms, some think-tanks, self-appointed “translators” in other stakeholder groups.

Policy Makers: national, regional, and local governments.

Implementers: practitioner NGOs, government implementing agencies.

Beneficiaries: households, recipient organizations, communities involved in projects.

Influencers: media, lobbyists, influential individuals, public intellectuals.

Each stakeholder group is described as mostly immutable, constrained by the formal organizations (and professions) that people belong to. These organizational structures and incentive systems, as described below, not only define each stakeholder group, but also create a number of structural barriers in the relationships across groups. In consequence, there are enormous perceived constraints to the integration of evidence into practice, which by definition occurs only through cross-stakeholder relationships.

Interactions between actors, who mostly self-identify as belonging to a given stakeholder category, are currently conceptualized as a linear model of *translating* evidence to practice. In this simplified model, actors described evidence as a form of abstract knowledge that is passed along from researchers to policymakers and implementers, through a series of distinct steps that translate it until it is amenable to practice. This flow, however, is impeded by a number of structural barriers. Each step in the sequential process is perceived as the purview of a particular stakeholder type, defined and regulated by that group’s norms and incentive systems. The sharp distinctions between stakeholders reinforce the perceived



need for a sequential approach to ‘translation.’ Academic evidence, for example, is often generated and published only for academic audiences, so it is abstracted from operational realities and unavailable or inaccessible for actors in other stakeholder groups. Formal translation is then required for policymakers and implementers to consider such evidence in the design of new interventions. This translation can only happen through organizations or individuals who act as

intermediaries between evidence producers and practitioners, and so on. Individual actors can (and do) work outside of the established paradigm, of course, but given formal and informal norms and incentive structures, such deviations entail significant personal risks and opportunity costs.

Transaction costs refer to the time, energy, and social/political capital required to establish, cultivate, and maintain relationships with other stakeholders in pursuit of certain goals. Generally speaking, actors are less willing to develop relationships outside of their established expectations, norms, and incentives because of the costs involved. An implementer, for example, generally would need to invest more time to develop trust and mutual understanding with a researcher than with a fellow implementer.

Opportunity costs describe the personally valuable activities that an actor must sacrifice in order to pursue a goal outside of the established paradigm. In the case of researchers, this might include spending time to package research for use by policymakers, for which researchers are not explicitly rewarded. In this case, the opportunity cost is time that could have been spent writing and publishing research in academic journals, which is explicitly rewarded by the tenure system. As in this example, opportunity costs are frequently quite high.

The Linear Model of Evidence in Practice

Researchers generate evidence

Intermediaries translate evidence

Policy makers apply evidence

Implementers apply evidence

All supported by funders who mirror and reinforce the features and constraints of each stakeholder group



Structural Barriers to Evidence Translation

Barriers within the existing, linear model of evidence translation can be grouped into two categories based on their effect on the behavior of stakeholder groups: those that make relationships *across* stakeholder groups more challenging and thus isolate each category, and those that regulate an actor's behavior *within* its stakeholder group. In addition, many of these barriers enhance a fear of failure and a lack of trust that permeate the entire system.¹¹

While these barriers heavily constrain the integration of evidence into practice, they do so unintentionally. That is, the formal structures that underpin these barriers were not built with the explicit goal of impeding the integration of evidence. Rather, the barriers are the unintended consequence of a set of norms, organizational processes, incentive structures, and patterns of behavior that evolved in the field of international development to solve specific (and important) problems at a time when the integration of evidence into practice was not a central concern. Consider, for example, grant reporting cycles and strict monitoring practices that donors have established with their grantees. There is an excellent reason why grantees create detailed budgets with proposed, programmatic uses of a donor's funds. As a secondary consequence, however, these reporting principles today get in the way of experimentation, flexible

partnerships between grantees and other stakeholders and, ultimately, evidence integration.

Within each stakeholder group, behavior is largely dictated by a set of distinct incentives and norms that have the unintended consequence of rendering each group more isolated rather than more collaborative—despite the broad mission to improve the lives of beneficiaries, which is shared across stakeholder groups.

We first turn to the barriers that isolate stakeholders from one another.

¹¹ Many of these barriers (alternative definitions of evidence, complexities of collaboration, variant decision timelines, different core audiences, and negative past experiences) are discussed in the literature as leading to a lack of trust: Julius Court,

Within each stakeholder group, behavior is largely dictated by a set of distinct incentives and norms that have the unintended consequence of rendering each group more isolated rather than more collaborative.

and John Young (2003), "Bridging research and policy: Insights from 50 case studies," [Article access](#); G Reid et al (2017), "Minding the gap: the barriers and facilitators of getting evidence into policy when using a knowledge-brokering approach" *Evidence & Policy: A Journal Of Research, Debate & Practice* 13 no. 1: 29-38; Craig Mitton et al. (2007), "Knowledge transfer and exchange: review and synthesis of the literature," *Milbank Quarterly* 85, no. 4: 729-768.



Barriers that Isolate Stakeholders From One Another

Incentive Misalignments

Formal and informal incentive structures are frequently not conducive to—and are often in contradiction with—the integration of evidence into practice.¹² Typically, organizational incentives are defined around an insular view of the organization (e.g., academics publish in academic journals, policymakers must exercise their budgets according to program and budgetary rules, NGOs must operationalize their programs as stated in their budgets and proposals to funders). Organizational incentives rarely encourage an explicit search for external evidence, much less the generation of internal evidence that could lead to continuous adaptation of programs and policies as new learning emerges. For example, politicians must win elections. Overall, even when individuals may have the motivation to integrate evidence into practice, structurally misaligned incentives may render such work highly costly, if not impossible.

¹² Incentive misalignments are also discussed in recent academic literature: Brian W. Head (2010), “Reconsidering evidence-based policy: Key issues and challenges,” *Policy and Society* 29 no. 2: 77-94. [Article access](#); Ashley Thomas Lenihan (2015), “Institutionalising evidence-based policy: international insights into knowledge brokerage,” *Contemporary Social Science* 10, no. 2:114-125. [Article access](#)

“Politicians say researchers are too picky or too slow or too complicated and researchers say politicians are... not really worried about doing the right things. So it’s very tricky. Incentives are very different in each of the sides as are the needs of what type of evidenced-based research and evidenced-based recommendations you are really trying to promote.”

POLICYMAKER



Programa Primer Empleo | Mexico

Mexico's Programa Primer Empleo (“First Job Program”), launched in 2007 during the first months of a new presidential administration, was intended to be a major national intervention to create new permanent jobs in the private sector. However, the new administration's incentive to get a signature program implemented as quickly, and with as much public fanfare, as possible led them to design the program with virtually no consultation of the business sector that the government sought to engage. The incentives offered by the government were seen by the business community as poorly framed and full of underlying risks, so the program failed to meet its goals.



“Practitioners have very little time and bandwidth to pick up new information. It’s a tremendous constraint. They have so many things to attend to. The rules and procedures grow ever more complicated because they are responsible to do all kinds of things to mitigate fiduciary risk, environmental and social risk, and to meet all the processing guidelines. It takes up their bandwidth for learning.”

FUNDER



Alternative Definitions of Evidence

Definitions of what constitutes “evidence” vary by stakeholder group: Academic researchers generally refer to findings derived from rigorously designed studies, ranging from randomized controlled trials to in-depth qualitative studies. In contrast, implementers often think that academic studies oversimplify or underestimate contextual factors and complexities; to them, evidence is what is learned on-the-ground, from experiences where positive impacts were observed.

Moreover, researchers tend to view evidence as a hierarchy, where some forms of evidence (e.g. an RCT) are categorically more legitimate than others, “a ladder of the quality of evidence as to how much we can believe in the results.” In contrast, implementers tend to view types of evidence as different but not hierarchical, existing along a spectrum or ‘menu’ of options. This directly follows researchers’ tendency to think of evidence as abstract, ‘universal’ knowledge, while implementers have learned that knowledge is always and necessarily *enacted and situated in practice*, where few universal principles seem to hold across multiple complex contexts. In consequence, even when actors agree that integrating evidence is important, they differ—sometimes in irreconcilable terms—on what actually constitutes valid evidence and one actor’s “evidence” may be misunderstood or discounted by another group.



Graduating the Ultra-Poor | Ghana

The Graduating the Ultra Poor (GUP) project was a randomized controlled trial and pilot program conducted in northern Ghana between 2010 and 2013. The GUP program, in conjunction with nine other programs around the world, sought to test the effectiveness of the “Graduation” approach originally developed by BRAC in Bangladesh. In Ghana, the program was designed by the research firm, Innovations for Poverty Action, which co-implemented the program with Presbyterian Agricultural Services, a local NGO.

GUP was based on, and contributed to, rigorous evidence about a novel economic development intervention. The program was immensely successful in terms of learning from and contributing to a global body of evidence on poverty alleviation among the ultra-poor, which was its intended purpose. But Ghanaian participants involved with the project noted that GUP left a vacuum in terms of developing capacity for scaling of the approach on the ground in Ghana. The focus on generating academically rigorous evidence (the stated goal of the program) did not accord comparable importance to other kinds of “evidence” (such as feedback from field operations on the organizational implications of the program) which could have nurtured local capacity building and eventual scaling of the program.



“[The Researcher] had to have a publication that would pass muster with peer review in the behavioral economics world, which is an entirely different concern, of course, than what the practitioners have. [Implementers] want to have a program design that is going to actually benefit their clients and because they’re trying to run a financially self-sustaining organization, actually retain their clients and attract new clients, and give them a competitive advantage over competitor organizations.”

IMPLEMENTER

Timing Misalignments

Researchers, policymakers, and implementers operate within discordant timeframes, hindering efforts to coordinate, let alone collaborate, on evidence-informed approaches. Electoral cycles and political windows differ from NGO funding and academic publishing cycles. Actors may recognize that timelines are misaligned, but are still constrained by the timeframes of their formal stakeholder groups.¹³

¹³ The effects of differing timelines are discussed in the literature in the following articles: Ashley Thomas Lenihan (2015), “Institutionalising evidence-based policy: international insights into knowledge brokerage,” *Contemporary Social Science* 10, no. 2: 114-125, [Article access](#); Craig Mitton et al. (2007), “Knowledge transfer and exchange: review and synthesis of the literature,” *Milbank Quarterly* 85, no. 4: 729-768. [Article access](#).



Programa Primer Empleo | Mexico

As noted above, Mexico's Programa Primer Empleo (“First Job Program”) was launched in the first months of a new presidential administration. Out of a desire to deliver quickly on campaign promises to generate new employment opportunities at a national scale, the program design and implementation were rushed, allowing for little consultation with the business community that was supposed to generate the new jobs, which came to view the program with suspicion and never participated at the anticipated levels. Once launched, however, the program became bound by government budgetary cycles and rules, which limited its flexibility to adjust to emerging evidence of its shortcomings.



Barriers that Regulate an Actor's Behavior Within Its Stakeholder Group

No Practice of Devoting Time and Resources to Integrating Evidence

Few organizations carve out explicit time for managers to explore emerging evidence in their field.¹⁴ Even fewer assign staff to find relevant evidence and translate it into accessible formats for the organization. As a result, the role of preparing and sharing evidence that is timely, useful, and relevant for practitioners is sometimes explicitly played by formal intermediaries (e.g., certain think-tanks). More frequently, an actor who holds a formal role within another stakeholder group informally takes on the (additional) responsibility of trying to integrate evidence, leaving no actor formally responsible for the process and creating no trace of institutional memory or learning.

Not Operationalizing Evidence

Even organizations with strong monitoring and evaluation departments often do not transform operational data into knowledge that can be widely used by the organization—or other stakeholders—to learn from past or existing programs. Data is thus used to evaluate retrospective operations, but not to improve the design of new initiatives.¹⁵ For example, monitoring and evaluation in government agencies tend to focus on the judicious use of resources, but rarely codify core programmatic lessons for the improvement of future policies. Failure to

¹⁴ The issue of organizations not providing space for managers to evaluate new evidence is highlighted in the literature as well: Jermey M. Grimshaw et al. (2012), "Knowledge translation of research findings," *Implementation Science* 7, no. 1: 50

¹⁵ This issue has been highlighted in recent academic literature: M S. Reed et al. (2014), "Five principles for the practice of knowledge exchange in environmental management," *Journal of Environmental Management* 146: 337-345.

“The entire field of evidence from whatever source is very poor on its interpretation and use. There’s a lot of evidence generated that is never ever used and that’s partly because I think we under-invest in but also don’t understand properly the best processes...that information can be absorbed and lead to change.”

IMPLEMENTER



operationalize evidence inhibits the transfer of experiential learning, which may be rigorous and convincing, to new contexts and prevents evidence from reaching key stakeholders after it is produced, as it remains linked internally only to a given initiative. “Accountability” is often limited to performing within agreed upon budgets and activity flows, and not extended to achievement of actual outcomes.

As a system, these barriers contribute to the propagation of two additional systemic inhibitors to the flow of evidence into policy and practice: an **intolerance of failure** and a **generalized lack of trust**.¹⁶ Incentive structures across stakeholder groups tend to heavily punish failure and reward conservative approaches. This dissuades experimentation with novel, evidence-based approaches that could yield invaluable learning—especially when such approaches originate from a different stakeholder group. Such risk aversion can further hinder the integration of novel evidence into practice, even when stakeholders recognize its value and applicability.

¹⁶ *Intolerance of failure is described in the literature: Michael Howlett (2009), “Policy analytical capacity and evidence-based policy-making: Lessons from Canada,” Canadian public administration 52, no. 2: 153-175.*

“...I’ve been unbelievably frustrated with the number of academics that have absolutely no conception whatsoever of the practical implications of the research they do, of the fact that they never look to see what their colleagues are doing at all when they do their own research, and how much of this is wasted.”

INTERMEDIARY

Aqua Plus | India

Aqua Plus is a water purification product developed by TARA (Technology and Action for Rural Advancement). While rigorous evaluation of the underlying technology was done by TARA’s sister organization, Development Alternatives, TARA was charged with developing the final product and marketing it to Base of the Pyramid customers. Due to several factors, including limited funding and capacity constraints, TARA did not devote a comparable level of attention to assessing market development as Development Alternatives had to assessing the underlying technology. Moreover, while TARA was proactive in collecting internal evidence in the form of reviews and feedback from the communities where they sold Aqua Plus, TARA lacked a rigorous, internal monitoring and evaluation process to analyze these data and operationalize them into new practices on the ground. This limited investment in understanding the behavioral aspects of potential customers’ motivations contributed significantly to Aqua Plus not achieving its projected level of scale.



Misaligned incentives, alternative definitions of evidence, complexities of collaboration, differing decision timelines, incompatible core constituencies/audiences, and often negative past experiences, make it difficult and costly to initiate and sustain cross-stakeholder relationships. Without a relational history, actors have a low baseline of trust to build on, further complicating potential collaborations.



Programa Primer Empleo | Mexico

Mexico's Programa Primer Empleo ("First Job Program") was significantly inhibited by mutual distrust between the government and the private sector. Policymakers, wary of employers' potential to bend the rules and distort benefits of the government employment program, intentionally made the program's rules complicated and difficult to circumvent. This only fostered the companies' mistrust of the government's actions; employers were suspicious of the rigid rules imposed on them and resented that they had not been included in the program's design process.

"I think between the government and the funders, again, in an ideal world it should be very collaborative, but we have seen instances where there is animosity because in some ways the government feels that the funders are 'trying to do what I failed at' and 'they want to showcase that they've done a better job than me.'"

FUNDER



Clusters of Encouraging Practices

Real and constraining as the barriers we described above may be, in our research, particularly the eight case studies, we identified an array of actors who experienced, understood, and sought to overcome these barriers in an attempt to integrate evidence into practice. These efforts by unusually committed individuals revealed a set of encouraging practices that can mitigate or overcome existing barriers. These observations illuminate a set of structural adjustments that could be made to the existing system to shift it in the direction of a new paradigm that more productively embraces an ethos of evidence-based practice.

We identified five clusters of encouraging practices, which address the current paradigm's key barriers, which are discussed below.

From Incentive Misalignment to Value Alignment

The incentive structures that currently confine actors to their stakeholder groups are not only deeply ingrained, but also exist for valid reasons, making them difficult to change or circumvent. We observed a cluster of encouraging practices that seek to mitigate misaligned incentives by: 1) convening various organizations to develop a shared understanding of a problem before launching program design, and 2) negotiating for a project structure that allows actors

from diverse organizations to provide their unique contributions to the integration of evidence into a project or program while also complying with their own, disparate incentives.

A common starting point for effective negotiations is a shared focus on solving a particular problem for which an intervention (program, policy, etc.) is appropriate. This is not because other entry points are not possible, but because, according to our observations, it is where actors across

A common starting point for effective negotiations is a shared focus on solving a particular problem for which an intervention (program, policy, etc.) is appropriate.



stakeholder groups are most likely to have a shared interest and language: at the core of a problem or issue that affects a population of interest. The overarching, joint question then becomes: what factors are important in the design and development of an intervention?

Identifying a set of shared values can create the trust and relational space for more complex negotiations on the process to design and develop an intervention, as well as where existing evidence can be incorporated and new evidence needs to be generated over the course of a project. Shared values also allow the various stakeholders to determine, from the beginning, what each party needs and hopes to get out of a particular project. This allows for a project structure that can meet the otherwise conflicting criteria of its key stakeholders.

An open negotiation among stakeholders can make explicit the contrasting (and converging) incentives and requirements across the various actors, as well as compromises and adaptations that may be required to ensure integration of evidence into practice. Such a *negotiated collaboration* can generate the relational, political, and social capital needed to sustain a project through its various and unavoidable ups and downs, with a foundation of understanding, trust, and



CALIE | South Africa

As explored in the case study on South Africa's "Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness" (CALIE), researchers and policymakers came together in an upfront process to design an intervention to grapple with the country's high unemployment rate. The research questions were explicitly linked to policymakers' concerns, so that piloting an evidence-informed intervention (the addition of a reference letter to an ongoing career counseling program) allowed the academics to engage in rigorous research while tackling a high-profile issue for the government. Both sides paid careful attention to aligning incentives at multiple levels. For example, the project would require no additional expenditures by the Department of Labour, and evaluation metrics aligned with field staff's existing goals as well as responding to their expressed desire for better measures of the outcomes of their work.

reciprocity among the parties. It can also cultivate an appreciation not only for the unique contributions that other actors can make, but also for the structural constraints they face, which helps uncover "currencies" to offset such constraints (e.g., policy makers have access to unique and valuable data, a valuable currency for academics; academics, for their part, can provide a seal of objectivity or legitimacy that can become a political asset for policymakers). The willingness of each group to compromise, where possible, on the project's design, governance, and assignment of "credit" for success, are important ways to increase the likelihood that relevant, timely, and useful evidence is generated and integrated in a program.

A new paradigm of "evidence in practice" would thus start from the identification of a compelling, shared problem as a convening place where common values and unique needs are specified upfront. It would create a collaboration structure where the participation of the necessary diversity of stakeholders is mandated, where their specific contributions and needs are recognized ex ante, providing clear incentives for participation, and where funding and project management mechanisms allow for transparent and efficient coordination without the need for heroic champions.



Pratham | India

Pratham's approach to implementation of remedial education programs is founded on a three-way collaborative process between itself, the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) as researcher, and the government of each state in which it seeks to operate. Pratham's commitment to scale requires a model that is cost-effective and simple enough to implement in extremely diverse contexts. As a result, even though RCTs have shown significant gains in learning outcomes, Pratham has insisted on adjusting and testing the model in order to identify the most impactful, cost-effective components. Understanding these essential features enabled Pratham to be flexible when adapting the program to a new context in partnership with government stakeholders. Pratham launched each new adaptation or expansion by convening the relevant stakeholders to jointly explore how best to improve learning outcomes for students. The partners overcame common design and implementation challenges due to an integrated, collaborative approach that leveraged stakeholders' complementary resources, networks, and insights to achieve their deeply shared goal of improving remedial education.

From Disparate Definitions of Evidence to Bodies of Evidence

To inform practice effectively, evidence for a particular concept requires both a certain level of robustness and contextual nuance. In our cases, this was most effective when actors across stakeholder categories focused on cultivating *bodies of evidence for a particular problem*, comprised of complementary types of evidence, including RCTs, qualitative studies, and practitioner experiences.¹⁷ Such bodies of evidence, which develop over time and encompass diverse settings, seek to identify, for a given intervention (a) the critical principles that must be present regardless of context, (b) the specific useful practices that can best support these principles across a variety of contexts, (c) the features that *may* be adapted to better fit different contexts, and (d) the features that *must* be adapted to respond to local contexts.

There is a second, distinct aspect to reconcile disparate definitions of evidence. As discussed above, a collaborative approach to program design allows for a process where not only different types of evidence are

¹⁷ The value of developing a rich body of evidence is discussed in: Lois Orton et al. (2016), "Putting context centre stage: evidence from a systems evaluation of an area based empowerment initiative in England, Critical public health 27, no. 4: 477-489.



brought to the table, but also where actors develop an appreciation for and agree to integrate types of evidence that matter most to each group. In our case studies, this translated into a deliberate effort to codify diverse types of evidence that would support key decisions throughout project implementation.

At the culmination of projects (or periodically during programs) actors in our most effective cases identified, collected, and shared lessons from across levels of decision making. This consolidated evidence and associated lessons contributed back to the bodies of evidence for particular concepts and clarified the challenges of integration with implementation. In the current paradigm, it is typical to find that only a certain type of evidence is captured and shared (e.g. the analysis of an RCT). But a more representative reporting of the various types of evidence generated during a project is also important for engaging stakeholders of various types, enriching the bodies of evidence pertaining to a particular problem.

This approach to integrate complementary types of evidence across levels and organizations within a project had the secondary, unintended consequence of building fluency in different types of evidence among participants, which persisted beyond the focal project and set the stage for more effective integration of evidence into practice in the future.

A new paradigm would explicitly create the mandate and the necessary structure for the incorporation of multiple sources and types of evidence as relevant and useful to multiple stakeholders in this collective understanding of a shared problem.

Progresa (Oportunidades) | Mexico

The Progresa case shows the roles that evidence played in a major national social protection policy, from analyzing available evidence in the design of the program to committing to generate, evaluate, and use evidence in the course of implementation. The decision to launch the program came before a randomized controlled trial had demonstrated the effectiveness of the model. But evidence clearly showed that generalized and in-kind subsidies—which had been the cornerstone of social policy in Mexico until then—were ineffective. The Progresa team thus made it a priority not only to research the best available evidence, but also to generate new data and evidence in order to confirm (or contradict) their underlying hypotheses and to inform the final design of the program.

Policymakers chose to pilot and evaluate initial results before launching a full-scale program in order to understand the impacts of the program and the components that needed to be improved. Also, precisely because of the rigor and transparency with which the evidence was generated, it provided critical political strength to carry on with the rollout and scale-up of the program against enormous political resistance.

The use of evidence did not stop at the design phase, but generation and use of evidence was built into the very structure of the ongoing program, so that quality and progress could be assessed and adjusted on an ongoing basis according to emerging evidence.



From Timing Misalignments and Lack of Trust to Long-term Collaborative Relationships

Each stakeholder category is bound by a different time cycle. For example, policymakers are profoundly affected by electoral cycles. An annual funding cycle dramatically shapes the actions of funders. These relatively fixed constraints create asynchronies across stakeholder groups that can get in the way of starting or maintaining trusting relationships. They can also be mitigated through the deliberate cultivation of long-term relationships that purposefully span the cycles of (and job tenures of actors within) various stakeholder groups.

Strong personal and institutional relationships are key to developing bodies of evidence and constructing effective evidence-informed projects and programs. Building relationships that last over multiple instances of evidence generation and integration can create a “scaffolding” that supports continued efforts to bring about broad-based, lasting change. Regular communication between actors outside the context of a particular program or project to develop a shared understanding of problems and questions that need to be answered was consistently highlighted as key to ensuring a successful relationship. The trust that emerges from these partnerships

Building relationships that span multiple instances of evidence generation and integration can be an important catalyst for lasting change.

allows multiple stakeholders to develop a deeper understanding of particular bodies of evidence and, more broadly, of effective processes to integrate evidence and practice.

We observed several mechanisms that facilitated longer-term commitments. One was framing partnerships, collaborations, or initiatives around a broader problem, rather than a specific program. This signaled a commitment to multiple iterations of projects involving the same stakeholders and provided incentives for actors to develop “relationship capital” over time. It helped when actors were able to access sources of funding

Pratham | India + TCAI | Ghana

Since its first collaboration in 2001, Pratham has built a strong partnership with the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), based on long-standing professional relationships between the principals of the two organizations. As one Pratham staff member described the partnership:

“I think we’ve been very lucky because nobody forced any of these [evaluations] on us, so it was a [voluntary] coming together of two sides ... We were very lucky to have them as partners because we have done some work with other people as well, but we see that they [J-PAL] really treat you as a partner and as an equal.”

Over the course of than 15 years, J-PAL and Pratham have collaborated on the design, implementation and evaluation of dozens of education programs in India. And the connection between J-PAL and Pratham led directly to the pilot and evaluation of the Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI) in Ghana.



that explicitly spanned multiple iterations of specific projects. Such cycle-spanning structures reduced the disruption of some timing misalignments and allowed actors to align on shared values rather than to compete on accessing resources.

In a new paradigm, formal structures would naturally convene (and demand the presence of) the necessary diversity of stakeholders around a compelling and shared problem. Such structures would allow for funding, project management, and governance mechanisms that explicitly establish long-term, collaborative, transparent, and fluid relationships matched to the time cycles and needs of the collective understanding of and progress in addressing the problem at hand.

From Fear of Failure to Learning in Process

As noted above, the most successful examples of evidence integration lessen the distinction between evidence generation and application, and focus on designing approaches that simultaneously generate (different types of) rigorous evidence and develop an iterative process for integrating evidence into practice. These projects turn the need to negotiate evidence generation and integration into an asset rather than a roadblock.

An explicit emphasis on learning shifts the conversation away from “success vs. failure” and focuses on the broader set of goals that each project aspires to accomplish, what questions it hopes to answer, and how those two aspects can enhance long-term results.

In that sense, the best examples of evidence integration resulted from programs with robust, explicit learning and evidence sharing agendas. This commitment to learning opens the door for different types of linkages and information flows across stakeholders to share experiences, perspectives, and insights with the explicit (and non-threatening) goal of learning. As a result, the most successful cases frame stakeholder collaboration around a specific program as a launch pad for both program-specific and broader learning.

This reframing around learning can have the double effect of lowering the perceived risk of failure (as it generates valuable learning) while

at the same time increasing the perceived value of the collaborative relationship. An explicit emphasis on learning shifts the conversation away from “success vs. failure” and focuses on the broader set of goals that each project aspires to accomplish, what questions it hopes to answer, and how those two aspects can enhance long-term results.

In a new paradigm, collective learning to better solve a shared problem would be the central mandate of a collaboration structure, paired with dedicated funding and resources to promote learning and the formal mechanisms to disseminate it.



Graduating the Ultra-Poor | Ghana

The Graduating the Ultra-Poor (GUP) project was effective in terms of learning from, and contributing to, a global body of evidence on poverty alleviation among the ultra-poor, which collectively has led to further adaptation and adoption of the underlying “Graduation approach” in about 100 countries worldwide. From the global Graduation pilot program’s inception, CGAP and the Ford Foundation defined knowledge sharing and outreach as key tenets. In addition to quantitative and qualitative research, CGAP and the Ford Foundation created a community of practice to bring together implementers and researchers across ten pilot sites to share experiences and lessons learned. The community of practice also offered exchange visits, ongoing technical assistance, and an annual convening of implementing organizations with international NGOs, funders, policymakers, and academic partners interested in the Graduation approach.

From ‘Champions’ to Structured Collaboration

In our case studies, successful integration of evidence into practice was possible because of the (often extraordinary) actions of individuals at both the informal and the institutional levels. At the informal level, successful integration of evidence was driven by self-motivated individuals who, acting alone or in collaboration with others, persisted in their efforts to identify, understand, and overcome the structural barriers that stood in the way of evidence integration. This usually started from a deep commitment to a problem or cause that sustained their drive throughout the complexity and struggles of the integration process. Their passionate focus on a problem allowed these champions to focus more on bringing evidence to bear on achieving impact than on the role, job, or career imperatives imposed by their stakeholder affiliations. It also led them—through prior experience or empirical discovery—to identify and cultivate relationships with critical stakeholder groups, and individuals within them, that would need to participate to achieve impact. These champions sought to understand the priorities and constraints of diverse stakeholders, which in turn led to a holistic view of the system they were working in. As a result, they were able to

better navigate the system, build a common ground across stakeholder groups, and make true collaboration possible. It helped that, often, champions developed this unusual identity through professional experiences that straddled several of the critical stakeholder roles (e.g., a policymaker who was trained and worked as an academic researcher, or an NGO manager who had worked in government) which gave them the ability to understand and translate between different “languages.”

At the institutional level, we often found more formal intermediaries, or organizations with the stated mandate to translate evidence for practice. These actors worked to enhance the flow of information between different stakeholder groups, particularly between researchers and practitioners, by positioning themselves as an “honest broker” who explicitly gathers, packages, and transfers evidence. While the presence of such organizations was often helpful, because of the structural barriers discussed previously, the presence of such intermediaries was not enough to make integration possible. Rather, intermediaries, when present, either were an effective platform for or an invaluable ally to champions who, as described above, worked beyond formal constraints on behalf of the integration of evidence to practice.



Regardless of their origin and institutional affiliation, we found a remarkably consistent set of competencies and behaviors that champions used to perform their work of evidence integration:

- **Be problem-oriented.** Champions were adept at using the problem or question at hand as a north star around which to facilitate relationships and interactions across stakeholders.
- **Identify and balance interests of stakeholders.** With an understanding of stakeholders' diverse incentives, champions could facilitate a collaboration in which each stakeholder could meet the non-negotiable demands of its core constituency.
- **Identify opportunities to use evidence.** With their broader framing of the problem, champions were able to identify critical areas of collaboration, in which an exchange of stakeholders' "currencies" would be most effective (e.g. academics providing legitimacy for a government initiative in exchange for policymakers providing support for the program), making the mutual value explicit.

In the current paradigm, champions' behavior—the particular maneuvers they employ, the effort they exert—is rarely acknowledged and even more rarely rewarded.¹⁸ In a new paradigm, the collaboration structure would formalize many of the tasks that champions must currently perform, which they often discover only through trial and error and taking substantial personal risks. The new paradigm would still benefit from such champions, of course, but it would provide both a structure to quickly identify them and formalize their work so it can be appropriately valued—a scaffolding to support their evidence integration efforts.

¹⁸ The role of intermediaries who effectively translate and communicate evidence is discussed in: Ashley Thomas Lenihan (2015), "Institutionalising evidence-based policy: international insights into knowledge brokerage," *Contemporary Social Science* 10, no. 2:114-125; Jermey M. Grimshaw et al. (2012), "Knowledge translation of research findings," *Implementation Science* 7, no. 1: 50; Fadi El-Jardali et al. (2014), "Capturing lessons learned from evidence-to-policy initiatives through structured reflection," *Health Research Policy and Systems* 12. [Access here.](#)



Developing a New Paradigm by Leveraging Encouraging Practices

Based on extensive conversations with diverse stakeholders, we have made an effort to extrapolate lessons from the encouraging practices we've observed to imagine what a holistic and systematic approach could look like. We believe that the path forward entails a combination of changes in both mindsets and structures for how international development evidence is generated, funded, and integrated. Our hope is that the new paradigm we lay out can provide a common language and a useful framework for organizations and individuals that are interested in increasing the integration of evidence into practice in international development.

Taken as a whole, the encouraging practices help develop a vision for a more productive ecosystem which integrates evidence effectively at a systemic level. Several themes can be drawn from practice that help elucidate a vision for the future: strong collaboration around a shared problem across all types of stakeholders, a broader understanding of the definition of evidence and stakeholder roles in its generation and use, and built-in systems of learning that are rooted in trust.¹⁹

We have endeavored to understand where the characteristics of the current ecosystem are most fixed and immutable, and where more mutable and potentially advantageous

opportunities exist for change. The new paradigm for integrating evidence and practice implied by the encouraging practices seeks to acknowledge the fundamental constraints and strengths of the various stakeholders, and we have highlighted lessons below that we hope can serve as guideposts for moving toward a new paradigm.

¹⁹ The importance of stakeholder collaboration is discussed in: Mark Evans and Nina Terrey (2016), "Co-design with citizens and stakeholders," in Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences: Methods that Matter (Bristol: Policy Press), 243-262; Emma Blomkamp (2017), "Co-Design for Government: Magic Bullet or Magical Thinking?". [Access here](#).

**Taken as a whole,
the encouraging
practices help
develop a vision for
a more productive
ecosystem which
integrates evidence
effectively at a
systemic level.**

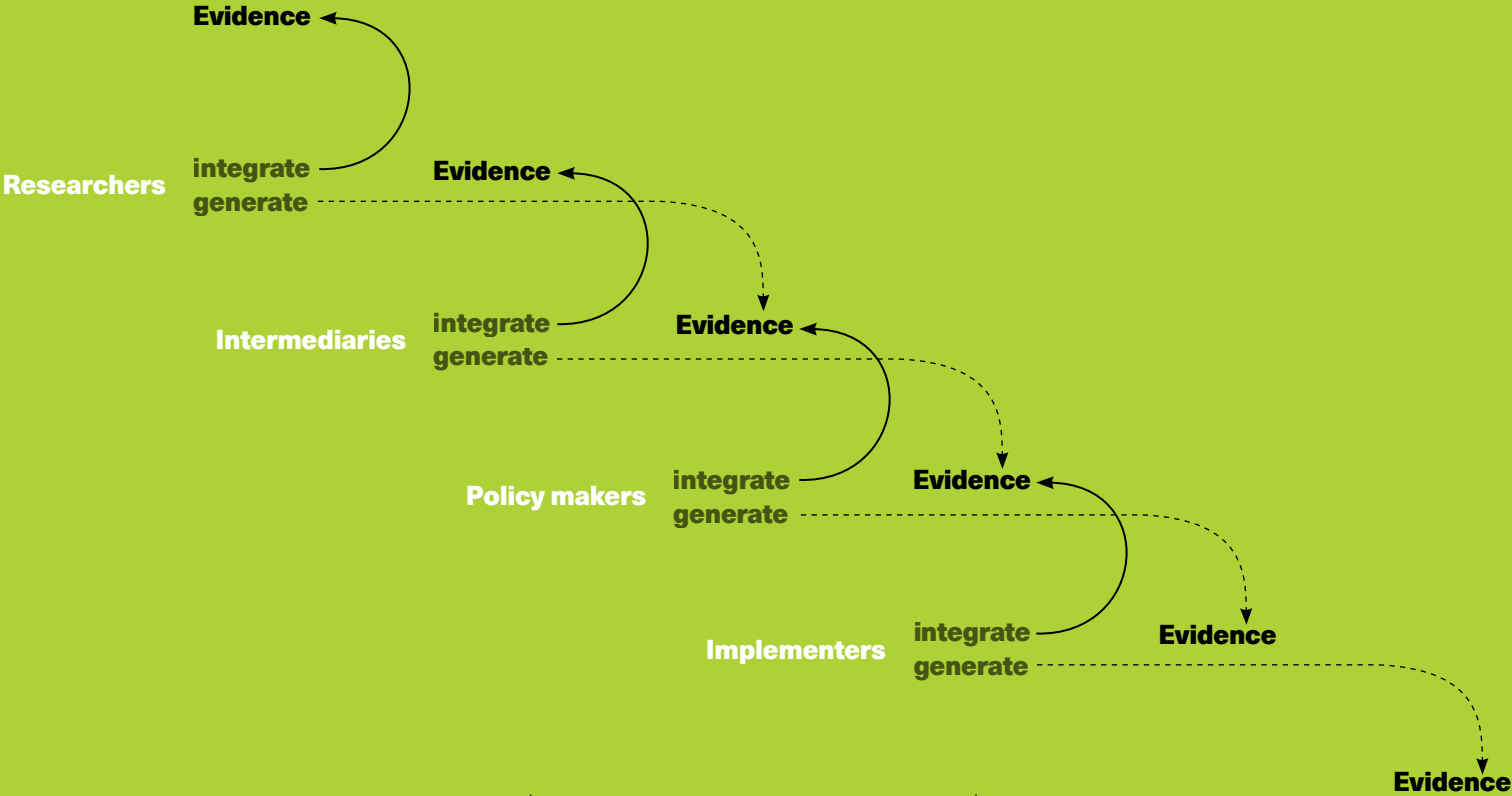
Integrating Evidence and Practice

Better integration of evidence into practice requires an interconnected set of changes in the mindsets, relationships, processes, and roles that connect evidence and practice. At the highest level, a new paradigm moves away from the predominant conceptualization of the flow of evidence to practice as a sequential process of generation, translation, and application, and towards an integrated model for development of evidence and practice. This shift will be driven by a mindset



An Integrated Model of Evidence in Practice

A model in which evidence is **generated** and **integrated** by all stakeholders, based on mutual trust and a shared purpose centered on addressing key problems.



A model in which **funders** support cultivating and sharing bodies of evidence amongst all stakeholders.



that focuses on compressing the gap between evidence generation and evidence-based practice, and requires a shift from a hierarchy of the types of evidence towards an approach that seeks to match the various types of evidence to the types of decisions where they are most pertinent, generating bodies of evidence for specific social challenges that multiple projects may be addressing.

Each stakeholder group will continue to have a unique role and contribution, but that contribution is made collaboratively, not sequentially or in isolation. An ex-ante, explicit recognition of each stakeholder's contributions and constraints could lower transaction costs, drive a shared understanding of the problem, and prioritize learning over time.

Collaboration as the Norm Rather Than the Exception

Our research suggests that the systematic generation and use of evidence grows out of an ongoing process of collaboration and negotiation among stakeholders. The mutual recognition of a shared problem plays a critical role as the 'glue' holding together the collaboration, providing critical motivation, common ground, a shared commitment to

Explicit acknowledgement and negotiation of potential common ground can help to establish and maintain relationships of mutual value.

using outcomes as the metrics for progress, and naturally emphasizing the need for collective learning.

The expectation of continued collaboration around shared problems helps spread the transaction costs (which are currently borne upfront by one or two groups) across the system as a whole as a long-term investment. This effectively creates economies of scale for evidence integration. In an improved system, stakeholders actively look for ways to support the integration of evidence into practice, viewing this as part of their mandate.

Identify the Currencies of Exchange

Because stakeholders possess different kinds of 'currencies,' an exchange of value can take place between stakeholder groups, providing the basis for meaningful negotiation. For example, researchers can offer the legitimacy of their work in exchange for access to government data that will enable their research; policymakers are willing to share their data with researchers in exchange for the legitimacy that comes with rigorously produced evidence. While in the current paradigm, such an exchange is desired but rarely openly discussed, our research suggests that explicit acknowledgement and negotiation of potential common ground can help to establish and maintain relationships of mutual value, which are essential for the integration of evidence to occur. This process also increases trust among stakeholder groups, as it requires open dialogue and deeper understanding of exactly what each group can offer the others.



Currencies of Exchange

Recognizing specific areas of compatibility is key to the identification of “currencies” that can be exchanged between stakeholders as a basis for negotiated collaboration. Often such currencies are readily available to one stakeholder (such as a rigorous evaluation conducted by researchers from a prestigious university) and can prove of great value to another stakeholder (such as granting external legitimacy to a policymaker’s intervention). Our research pointed to several key areas that underpin currencies of exchange, such as unique resources, needs, and priorities. This table, a distillation of our findings, is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather an attempt to provide examples of entry points for a negotiated collaboration.

STAKEHOLDER	TIME CYCLES	KEY AUDIENCES	TYPICAL INCENTIVES	RESOURCES
Funders	Typically annual funding cycles.	Board of directors, government regulators, the public (e.g. taxpayers, media, implementing partners, beneficiaries).	Ability to deploy money effectively. Alignment with organization’s long-term strategy. Their own issue area expertise/credibility.	Access to funds. Access to diverse sources of situated knowledge (through their grantees).
Researchers	Peer-reviewed article publishing timelines. Tenure timelines. Grant timelines.	Senior researchers making decisions on journal publications and academic tenure.	Publishing in peer reviewed journals. Tenure. Awards. Fundraising.	Recognized fluency/mastery in separating complex problems into their constituent questions, framing hypotheses, identifying causality, and assessing other kinds of evidence.
Intermediaries	Windows of opportunity for evidence translation, in which the timelines of other stakeholders align.	Policy makers. Implementers. Researchers.	Recognition and funding for being evidence-based.	Speaking multiple “languages”, ability to translate ideas across stakeholder categories, convening power, serving as bridges across timelines.
Policymakers	Typically annual budget cycles. Election cycles.	Elected officials (for bureaucrats). Political party, media, public opinion (for elected officials).	Promotion and avoiding mistakes (for bureaucrats). Positive press and public opinion (for elected officials).	Ability to scale programs. Access to data. Convening power.
Implementers	Grant timelines. Budget cycles. Needs of beneficiaries/clients..	Funders. Beneficiaries/clients.	On time and on budget delivery of agreed upon projects. Low overhead costs.	Access to beneficiaries/clients. Contextual sensitivity and intuition. Resourcefulness, resilience, agile problem solving. Lessons and data from programs.



STAKEHOLDER	NON-NEGOTIABLE NEEDS	EVIDENCE PRIORITIES	CURRENCY OF EXCHANGE
Funders	Compelling justification for use of funds. Avoidance of fraud or misuse of funds.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Their own experience2. Other funders (via word of mouth and observing capital allocation trends)3. Evidence generated by their programing4. Popular discussion (e.g. in media, public dialogue)5. Academic research papers	Willing to provide capital in exchange for results/recognition. Convening power. Support of cross-organizational exchanges.
Researchers	Need to be able to publish and otherwise advance their careers in academia.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Their own evidence or other academic evidence in their field published in peer-reviewed publications.2. Popular research in their field (e.g. in media or elsewhere).	Ability to confer legitimacy through affirmation of being “evidence-based” in exchange expanded opportunities for ongoing access to data/information that furthers their research.
Intermediaries	Willingness of involved parties to engage in some compromise and make time for negotiation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Evidence and themes popular among policymakers and funders2. Evidence with widespread implementation and replication potential3. Published academic research	Willing to tap into networks, make markets for ideas, and translate between different stakeholder languages in exchange for access to other stakeholders and influence in decision-making.
Policymakers	No negative optics/scandal. Abiding by legal mandate of institutions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Their own experience2. What other policy makers tell them3. Evidence from own country4. Evidence from other countries5. Peer-reviewed journal articles	Willing to support a program in exchange for affirmation of their policies. Convening and mediation power/ability.
Implementers	Enough resources to implement effectively.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Their own experience.2. Pragmatic evidence (e.g., best practices on how to integrate/implement an idea).3. Useful for fundraising (e.g., how can we design a project that is likely to be funded?).	Willing to provide access to beneficiaries/ clients and related data in exchange for funding and autonomy. Situated understanding of how to apply knowledge. Agile adaptation to emerging challenges of implementation.



CALIE | South Africa

The researchers involved in South Africa's "Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness" (CALIE) set out to build long-term relationships with policymakers at the Department of Labour (DoL). In order to do so, the "currencies" that each had to offer were explicitly identified and factored into the collaboration.

The researchers wanted to establish an ongoing relationship because they saw great value both in having access to the DoL's extensive database on labor statistics—a rich resource for ongoing research—and in the opportunity to generate new data in partnership with the DoL.

The DoL was interested in the collaboration in order to bring better evidence to bear on grappling with the issue of unemployment, which it was mandated to address, and to be seen by citizens as proactive in addressing a pressing social issue. In coming together around the shared problem, the DoL opened its data to the researchers, and the researchers always described CALIE as a DoL initiative.

Field staff were open to the collaboration because results of the research were shared with them in periodic workshops, giving them timely and useful information data on the impact and quality (rather than only the quantity) of their services, which they would not otherwise be able to collect. The project design also aligned with field staff's existing goals and evaluation metrics, bringing a sense of greater transparency to their ongoing operations.

Ongoing Collaborations Increase Synergy and Understanding

One of the clearest lessons from our research was the value of repeated opportunities for collaboration and engagement. Long-term relationships with repeated interactions create incentives for all parties to invest in relationship building and to be willing to make compromises when developing and managing projects or programs.²⁰ This process also transforms the identities of the stakeholders involved in the interactions, making participants into evidence integrators themselves as time goes on.

Flexibility in Design and Implementation

Developing this type of evidence integration process requires flexibility and foresight in both design and implementation of a program. Evidence, as illustrated above, is most useful when it provides the parameters for adaptation, rather than prescribing a single path forward. Flexibility during a project's design can help identify and accommodate the needs of various stakeholders, which encourages authentic integration into specific contexts. Projects that are also flexible in successive iterations of

²⁰ The value of long-term collaboration and trustbuilding is discussed in: M. S. Reed et al. (2014), "Five principles for the practice of knowledge exchange in environmental management," *Journal of Environmental Management* 146: 337-345.



implementation create space for the real-time, nimble maneuvering required to effectively integrate evidence into practice on the ground.²¹ A new paradigm would be structured to create this level of flexibility through collaboration- and learning-oriented funding and governance, founded on an explicit acknowledgment of the contributions and needs of each stakeholder group.

Negotiated collaboration, rooted in mutual understanding of the needs and drivers of each stakeholder, is pivotal both at the outset and throughout this iterative process. Learning from various, evidence-based practices feeds directly back into subsequent problem identification.

Integrating evidence into practice is a complex process, but holds the promise of policies and programs in international development becoming both more effective and more efficient. Our research has shown that there is much we can do to make the process of evidence integration more systematic and productive. These changes will not happen easily or quickly. But with concerted effort from all stakeholders, we see a future where the new paradigm can increasingly become the norm.

Deliberately involving individuals from various contexts (within and across organizations and geographies) increases the probability that evidence-informed approaches can be successfully adapted to new contexts.



²¹ The importance of designing projects that can be flexible over time is discussed in: "Lois Orton et al. (2016), "Putting context centre stage: evidence from a systems evaluation of an area based empowerment initiative in England," *Critical Public Health* 27, no. 4: 477-489; M. S. Reed et al. (2014), "Five principles for the practice of knowledge exchange in environmental management," *Journal of Environmental Management* 146: 337-345.



The Pathways of Integration—Revisited

As discussed earlier, the incorporation of evidence happens mainly through three pathways (scale, spread, and structure), which are mutually reinforcing but have varying timelines and scopes. When programs explicitly consider the three paths of integration, they can create “economies of scope” that increase the likelihood of success. Evidence can be woven into practice in both direct and indirect ways, considering both the needs of multiple stakeholder groups and the stage in a given problem’s life cycle. That is, *scale*, *spread*, and *structure* happen on different timescales and are most critical at different times in the learning process. As we have learned, full integration can sometimes take a decade or more after the initial generation of rigorous evidence supporting the approach to the problem.

Scale

While there are numerous factors that contribute to scale, our research has highlighted two aspects of particular importance: the ability (1) to identify where you are in the life cycle of a problem, and then (2) to identify the most relevant and useful scale to seek at that stage. For an untested intervention, a modest pilot with limited reach and a rigorous, multi-faceted evaluation is likely the most appropriate scale. While plans for scaling will be dependent on whether evidence indicates the project is achieving its intended outcomes, it is nonetheless important to consider what kind of partner would be desirable should results prove to be positive, and engage them early on with an eye toward potential future scaling. Building relationships with these partners early in the process can create genuine ownership and management capacity among the potential partners, so that the evidence generated will have a higher probability of actually scaling.

Spread

The spread of evidence-based practice depends on the ability to evaluate whether evidence for a certain intervention is timely, relevant, and useful for adaptation to different contexts. If we start from a shared problem, we can then also identify, globally, where we stand on the collective understanding of that problem. Spread also depends on an understanding of different types of evidence and their value. Deliberately involving individuals from various contexts (within and across organizations and geographies) increases the probability that evidence-informed approaches can be successfully adapted to new contexts. Spread can be supported by deliberate efforts to disseminate information on new evidence and evidence-informed practices.

Structure

Structure describes the enhanced understanding and capacity of implementing parties to integrate evidence generation and learning into the design of their interventions, practices, and overall performance evaluation. This type of integration includes both evidence-based interventions (the ability of an organization to implement programs based on evidence) and evidence-oriented practices (using evidence as part of the ongoing culture, routine and structure of an organization).



Pratham | India + TCAI | Ghana

As noted earlier, Ghana's Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI) grew out of the professional and personal connections between the J-PAL researchers—working on Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in India—and the global leadership of Innovations for Poverty Action, a sister research organization to J-PAL and the initiator of TCAI. Research in India (and subsequently in Kenya) had demonstrated that the basic TaRL methodology delivered reliable and substantial benefits. At the time, Pratham, despite being one of the largest education NGOs in India, could not operate at the scale of a national government, leaving unanswered the question of whether the TaRL methodology could generate substantive impact at a national scale if implemented in partnership with government. The impetus to take the TaRL methodology to Ghana was the opportunity to work with a partner in government who could further test the compelling TaRL research and ideally bring implementation to a national scale.



Progres a | Mexico

The new approach pioneered in Mexico by Progres a to integrating evidence into policymaking was so influential that it not only informed the evolution of the program itself but also led to the creation of the National Council of Evaluation (CONEVAL), which now brings rigorous methodologies to the evaluation of all social programs in Mexico. This fundamental change in how the federal government evaluates its portfolio of social programs illustrates how the effective integration of evidence into practice can translate to new structures for routinely integrating evidence into practice in other areas.

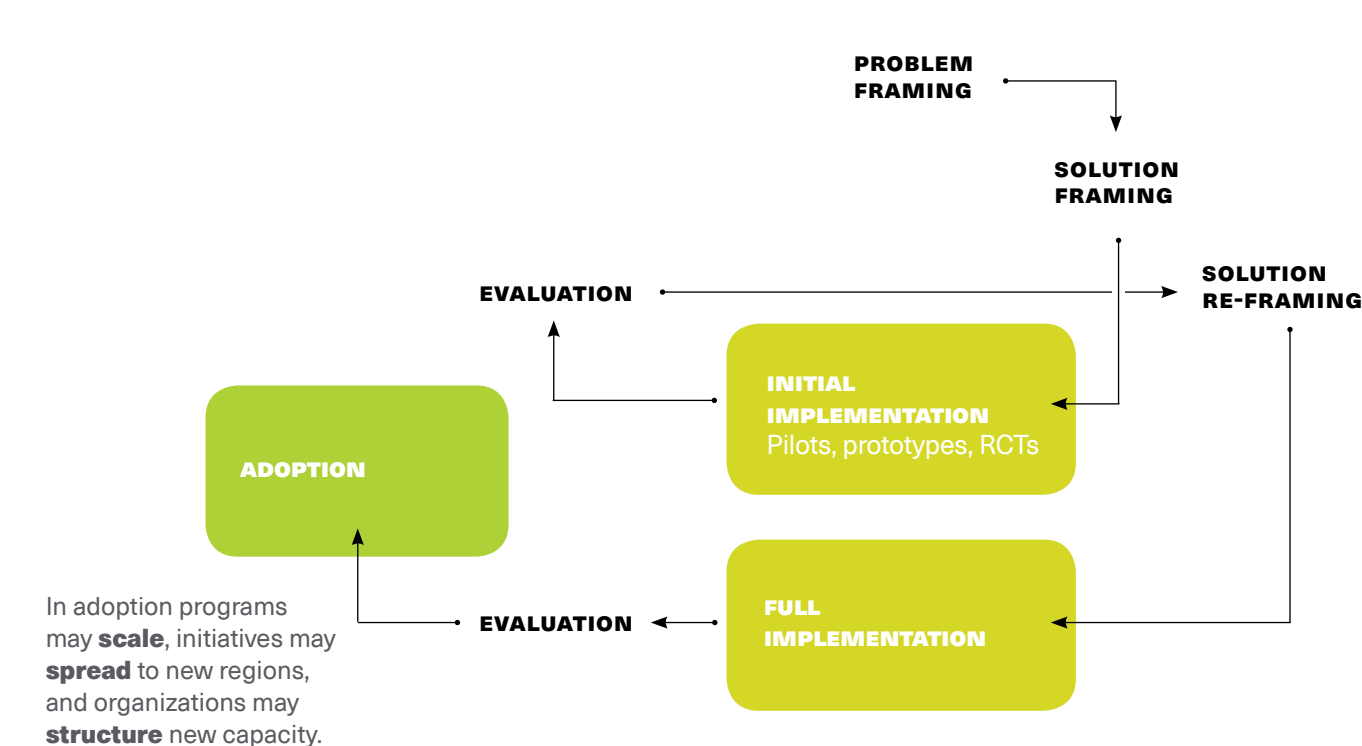


Principles Into Practice: Focus on Process

Our research, rooted in conversations with stakeholders around the world—in the U.S., Mexico, Ghana, South Africa, India, and elsewhere—has helped to clarify a path forward from the current paradigm to a new one. Steps toward this new paradigm will be based on: 1) a commitment by all stakeholders to frame their work together as a negotiated collaboration centered on addressing a shared problem; 2) an appreciation by all stakeholders of each stakeholder's incentives, constraints, and “currencies” of exchange; and 3) an understanding of how to strategically leverage shared values to form long-term relationships.

Another critical element of an “evidence in practice” approach involves leveraging those relationships and exchanges to build a robust and rigorous process through which evidence is generated and integrated into practice.

In the new paradigm, the iterative process of integrating evidence into practice leading to broader Adoption is comprised of five key elements: Problem Framing, Solution Framing, Initial Implementation, Evaluation, and Full Implementation.



Rather than being prescriptive, this diagram is intended to be emblematic of the improved process of evidence integration that our research suggests. As such, we invite its adaption for real-world use as well as further questioning.



Appendix: Data + Methods

The research design for the Evidence in Practice project consisted of three broad components. First, we conducted expert interviews (31) with individuals who had spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice.²² This included academics, government officials, foundation program officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank directors. To identify these experts, we first contacted individuals who had either published extensively and prominently on the topic or who had actively funded research or programs with the explicit goal of integrating evidence into practice. From this first set of experts we conducted snowball sampling until we reached a saturation point.²³ This initial set of interviews informed and directed the next two components, as they resulted in an initial map of the relevant stakeholders in the “evidence-to-practice ecosystem” and the hypothesized and actual paths that seemed to link them together.

Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. These cases were matched on structural, geographic, and programmatic characteristics—as well as on the extent to which evidence had informed practices—to better identify the critical factors that allowed actors in certain cases, and not others, to integrate rigorous evidence into practice.²⁴ This matching process led us to identify pairs of cases across four different countries, leveraging temporal and cross-sectional variation between them as seen in table A2.

²² By development practice, we mean the work of government actors, NGOs, and others who are responsible for designing and executing development projects and programs.

²³ Data saturation is difficult to define and is dependent on the field of study. In this case, we defined saturation as the moment when, in a sequence of several expert interviews, no interviewee gave us information that we had not encountered before.

²⁴ George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. Chapter 5.



Table A1. Expert Interviews

	Researchers	Funders	Intermediaries	Policymakers	Implementers	Total
Phase 1: February 2015 – May 2016	10	8	6	2	5	31
Phase 2: September 2016 – June 2017	10	7	6	3	8	34

For each case, we first identified, through existing literature and interviews with subject experts, a series of key informants who had detailed knowledge of the case's history and protagonists. These initial interviews with case experts led to the creation of a detailed actor/stakeholder map for each case, where we identified the key stakeholder groups that either participated in or were affected by the program, as well as the specific individuals who played an active role in the program's evolution.²⁵ These stakeholder maps were validated with several informants for each of the cases. We then conducted interviews with each of the key individuals across stakeholder groups. Interviewees were asked to relate chronologies of objective events, behaviors, choices at critical junctures, and facts of the processes described.²⁶ In every instance, the goal was to identify the individuals responsible for the particular evolution of a case, as well as the specific

tactics they employed throughout the process, to better understand the rationale behind their decisions as well as the factors that led them to succeed or fail. In total, we conducted 161 interviews across the eight cases. Interviews were complemented with a wealth of archival information including media articles, private documents (donor reports, internal presentations and communications, etc.), and public documents (announcements, academic articles, editorial pieces). These data were used to trace the chronological list of events for the overall development of each case. Each storyline was developed in an extensive document that established the causal links described by the subjects and ensuring a balanced consideration of different stakeholders.²⁷

The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of

the stakeholder groups, or individuals who would clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role. Using the stakeholder map and initial hypotheses as starting points, this stage focused on the dynamics that shape the interactions between stakeholder categories. The work consisted of 34 in-depth interviews with representative actors from each stakeholder group. The interviews focused on each individual's needs, assumptions, operational constraints, main concerns, professional and ideological backgrounds, timelines, and aspirations—especially concerning the development, dissemination, and use of novel evidence in development practice. This in-depth analysis resulted in a more nuanced and detailed stakeholder and system map that more clearly identified both breakdown points and paths of connection that hinder and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information across stakeholder groups, as well as a refined

²⁵ See Canales, R. (2016). *From ideals to institutions: Institutional entrepreneurship and the growth of Mexican small business finance*. *Organization Science*, 27(6), 1548-1573.

²⁶ Davis, J. P., & Eisenhardt, K. M. (2011). *Rotating leadership and collaborative innovation: Recombination processes in symbiotic relationships*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(2), 159-201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



Table A2: Case Studies

Country/Program	Description	Dates of Intervention	Number of Interviews	Primary Stakeholders
South Africa				
Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness	Employment program introducing new elements to vocational training	2011 – 2016	42	Government, Researchers
FUEL: Feed, Uplift, Educate, Love	School nutrition program	2007 – present		NGO
Ghana				
Teacher Community Assistant Initiative	Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math through teaching assistants from local communities	2010 – 2013	30	Researchers, Government
Graduating the Ultra Poor	Poverty alleviation program integrating elements of social protection, livelihoods development, and financial services	2010 – 2013		Researchers, NGO
India				
Teaching at the Right Level	Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math	2001 – present	51	NGO, Researchers, Government
AQUA+	Water purification drops for retail sale	2010 – present		NGO
Mexico				
Progresa Oportunidades	Poverty alleviation program using conditional cash transfers	1997 – present	38	Government
Programa Primer Empleo	Employment program using government incentives for the private sector	2007 – 2012		Government



set of hypotheses about the breakdown of communication and about possible interventions to solve it.

Across the three components, we conducted a total of 226 interviews. All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with an average length of around 90 minutes (minimum of 60, maximum of over 120). Around two-thirds of them were done in person and the rest were conducted remotely. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Each of the 226 interview transcripts was coded extensively to identify first-order concepts related to the integration of evidence into development practice. First-order concepts include “concerns about reputation” or “short-term decision-making”. This required multiple readings of interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data to associate nearly every passage of text with one or more codes. These codes were then grouped into second-order themes,²⁸ always contrasting them with current research on the integration of evidence into practice. Second order themes included “incentive structures” or “timing misalignments”, each of which was developed extensively in a memo that explored the characteristics, tensions, and contradictions of each theme. In stage

three, we mapped the codes to each of our case narratives to detect patterns of activities, constraints, and decisions that defined the evolution of each case at critical junctures. This allowed us to identify similarities and discrepancies across cases, as well as to create comparable counterfactuals that could account for differing outcomes.²⁹

In stage four, we created process maps, concept maps, data tables, and detailed case synopses that linked key challenges, events, and decisions to the specific alternative tactics employed by actors and then to their subsequent consequences for the development program or intervention in question. This final set of analyses revealed a somewhat consistent set of factors faced at comparable stages by actors across our different settings. Throughout our analysis, we iterated between emerging insights, existing theory, and matched comparisons across cases to identify the mechanisms that operated at critical junctures.

It is worth mentioning that, at two moments of the project (the first after our first set of expert interviews was over and the second after the completion of our initial case narratives) we hosted a workshop with two different groups of highly experienced representatives from each of the stakeholder groups. During these

workshops, we discussed our emerging findings and we gathered additional, essential insights from participants. The workshops served to validate and deepen our understanding of emerging insights.

28 Glaser BG, Strauss AL (1980) The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Aldine Publishers, Hawthorne, NY).

29 We ensured consistency in coding across the different cases and authors through several mechanisms, including: a) a selection of interviews was coded by two or more coders, after which they reviewed discrepancies and agreed on their resolution, b) a common project book where all the codes were collectively kept, aggregated, and analyzed, c) a weekly meeting to review coding process and to develop a joint coding standard, d) memos were developed jointly, with contribution from and verification by the different team members, among others. [Access here.](#)