



With a Little Help from My Friends

Lessons on Researcher-Policymaker Collaboration from the PEERSS Partnership

Background

The urgency to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has led to an increased effort by policymakers, decision-makers, and program planners to explore how to adopt comprehensive, multisector policies and interventions to improve broader social systems and transform people’s lives. Within these efforts is a heightened recognition of the need to use evidence to inform and strengthen policy and program development and implementation; improve monitoring and evaluation; and promote learning. This has created an opportunity for researchers to support policymakers by providing evidence and supporting its use throughout the policymaking cycle.

In 2018, the Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems (PEERSS) was created to strengthen the use of appropriate mechanisms and build conducive environments to advance evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) in social systems. PEERSS engaged selected partner organizations working in 13 countries to collaborate with policymakers, primarily at the national level, to strengthen the policymakers’ capacity to routinely use evidence in policymaking. Both the researchers and the policymakers found the collaborations valuable and reported that they strengthened the policymakers’ understanding and practice of EIP.

Purpose and Approach

This brief, prepared by the coordinating organization, Results for Development, captures the main factors that facilitated successful collaboration between PEERSS researchers and the policymakers they engaged with. It is targeted at researchers and policymakers who are seeking to understand and promote EIP. We reviewed each partner organization’s biannual progress report from 2021–2022 and conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with 10 researchers from eight of the partner organizations and seven policymakers. The policymakers, representing six of the partner countries, were selected for the interviews by researchers who worked closely with them. In the interviews and the document review, we focused on two key questions:



1) How did PEERSS researchers collaborate with policymakers to help them address their priorities? and 2) What are the components of a successful collaboration between PEERSS researchers and policymakers? Three key factors emerged as strong enablers of successful collaboration, as described in the next section.

Findings

Enabling factor #1: Developing strong relationships between researchers and policymakers

Researchers and policymakers suggested that developing strong relationships was essential for collaboration. Researchers reported that engaging with policymakers by providing a range of evidence products – including systematic reviews, rapid syntheses of evidence, stakeholder dialogues, and citizen panels – and offering sensitization sessions on the value of EIP and EIP practices helped create working relationships with policymakers. These engagements led to a **mutual understanding of the roles** that researchers and policymakers can play in policymaking processes. For example, the Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES) in Uganda supported the Department of Policy Development and Capacity Building under the Cabinet Secretariat in the Office of the President by reviewing the department’s regulatory impact assessment (RIA) for a petroleum revenue investment reserve. (The RIA is a policy planning document that is required for all proposed policies.) ACRES researchers provided evidence to support recommendations to strengthen implementation, monitoring, and evaluation for policies on petroleum revenue investment reserve as well as recommendations to systematize evidence use in further developing the RIA. The department found the RIA review valuable and engaged the ACRES team for additional support to ensure systematic use of evidence in the RIA. The formal partnership allowed for this additional collaboration.

“Decision makers have to see a need for what you are doing. For example, because we have engaged with decision makers on the RIA for over a year, they are now able to send us reports from other agencies for review. This comes from a position of trust, which took us a while to get [to].”

—ACRES (Uganda)

While formal relationship building is important, policymakers emphasized the value of also building relationships through informal engagements, which can reinforce **mutual trust and respect**. While researchers sometimes assume that policymakers are influenced by other agendas and may not accept the evidence, policymakers sometimes think that researchers do not understand the policy process and have trouble translating evidence for a policy audience. Respondents suggested that building relationships outside of formal work opportunities – through day-to-day activities and conversations – can help overcome mutual skepticism and demonstrate researchers’ availability. For example, the African Institute for Health Policy & Health

“Some informal relationships help drive the agenda. I have some people I can discuss with informally; I feel researchers need to develop this relationship. We have time to discuss friendly things and then they blend into formal things. The informal relationships help us understand that there is an aligned agenda.”

—Policymaker

Systems in Nigeria built relationships with Nigerian parliament members in informal ways, such as by meeting with them in their offices and attending their activities. This allowed parliament members to gain trust in the institute and understand the opportunity to collaborate with the researchers in policymaking processes. It also led to their support for establishing a Rapid Evidence Synthesis Unit within parliament.

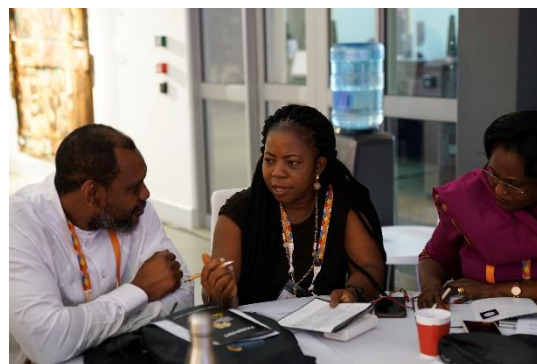
Enabling factor #2: Policymakers and researchers having basic EIP capabilities

Researchers and policymakers reported that having basic EIP capabilities facilitated successful collaboration. Policymakers reported that **researchers who were more effective at translating research** into products that policymakers could readily use and understand made collaboration more successful. This included using nontechnical language and presenting the findings in an aesthetically pleasing format, enhanced with elements such as a summary section and graphics.

“Our products are designed in such a way that it makes information accessible to different kinds of decision makers. Briefs are written in plain language—we try to limit jargon.”

—ACRES

Policymakers also said that they formed stronger collaborations with **researchers who were transparent about their methods** and produced evidence products that were relevant to the policy context. This helped them gain trust in both the evidence products and the researchers. For example, the Unit of Evidence and Deliberation for Decision Making team in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Antioquia in Colombia worked closely with policymakers using a terms-of-reference template to gather information about a policy problem, social, economic, and political context, stakeholders, and possible solutions to inform the development of an evidence product. The team helped the policymakers complete the form to ensure that the evidence produced would be relevant to the policy needs and context.



Researchers reported that collaboration was more successful when policymakers had a better understanding of and capacity for EIP. Specifically, they said that **policymakers who endorsed EIP processes and mechanisms** facilitated greater collaboration and acted as champions, which could help sustain the impact of EIP. For example, the Knowledge Management and Transfer Unit (KMTU) in Burkina Faso provided training on EIP tools and practices during the development of policy briefs to strengthen policymakers’ EIP capacity. The KMTU team observed that strengthening the capacity of one policymaker sparked interest from and

“[Policymakers] receive the training and start to implement the skills. [Other policymakers] see them using these tools and want to understand as well. We found that champions encouraged the use of evidence and served as a model for others.”

—KMTU (Burkina Faso)

engagement with other policymakers, who saw the value of using evidence in the policymaking processes.

Enabling factor #3: A strong enabling environment for EIP

A strong enabling environment with well-functioning systems, processes, and institutions supported collaboration and evidence use in policymaking. Both policymakers and researchers advocated for **increased funding** to help build that enabling environment, such as by acquiring data software, expanding staff training, or establishing memorandums of understanding with researchers.

PEERSS researchers and policymakers reported that barriers to collaboration included the length of the research processes as well as policymakers' competing activities. These were compounded by political factors such as government transitions, policymaker turnover, changing policy priorities, and bureaucratic processes. Respondents suggested that collaboration could be improved by **building in more time** for routine EIP training and events, **embedding evidence-use frameworks** as part of the policymaking process, and **ensuring continued engagement** after the creation of evidence products.

"There is still a problem of understanding the need/use of evidence in the policy process. The funding is not enough. In my department, there are barely any resources; it's a low priority."

—Policymaker

Conclusion

Although policymakers and researchers have different priorities and constraints, depending on the country context, the factors that facilitate their collaboration are similar. PEERSS researchers and policymakers all recognized the value of strengthening relationships, building researcher and policymaker EIP capacities, and improving policy ecosystems, regardless of the existing level of EIP in their context. Researchers and policymakers also suggested that these factors could help mitigate the kinds of risks and challenges they faced during their collaboration.

Strong collaboration between policymakers and researchers further reinforced the three facilitating factors. Respondents reported that successful collaboration **created opportunities to continue collaborating** and to engage additional policymakers. They also said that successful collaboration **increased researchers' and policymakers' EIP capacities** and improved their understanding of how they could support each other in their activities and goals. Finally, respondents reported that successful collaboration **led to more sustainable EIP practices** by embedding processes and systems (and sometimes knowledge translation teams) within the policy ecosystem.

"Time is a challenge and a barrier. There are other issues that took priority. Some policymakers asked their ministries to spend a full day at CCHSRD to gain adequate support and then not be distracted by their typical work environment."

—Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development (CCHSRD) (Trinidad and Tobago)