



STORIES OF CHANGE

CERIHI'S JOURNEY TO STRENGTHEN CAPACITIES AND ADVANCE THE USE OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

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Background

The Centre for Reforms, Innovation, Health Policies and Implementation Research (CeRIHI) is privileged to participate in the East African Regional Evidence Synthesis Initiative (EARESI), which aims to build and strengthen CeRIHI's capacity in knowledge translation and evidence-informed policymaking (EIP). This brief tells the story of CeRIHI's journey in advancing evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) and begins with an assessment of CeRIHI's needs, using WHO's service availability and readiness assessment (SARA) tools, to provide an insight into the ideal environment for EIP activities.

With support from The Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES), the CeRIHI team was able to identify the EIP capacity gaps resulting from the analysis. These included a lack of standard operating procedure (SOPs) guidelines for a Rapid Response Service Unit (RRS) and insufficiently skilled researchers recruited to work at the RRS. Before the assessment, staff and stakeholders lacked clarity about the RRS and the ideal setting to support the RRS activities. The assessment enabled the CeRIHI team to clearly understand the ideal environment needed for the successful running of the RRS.

The Centre for Reforms, Innovation, Health Policies and Implementation Research (CeRIHI) is part of the East African Regional Evidence Synthesis Initiative (EARESI), established by the Centre for Rapid Evidence Synthesis (ACRES).

Working in Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda, the initiative aims to accomplish the following objectives:

- Develop an evidence base to support priority SDG and development sector policy questions in reproductive health and clean energy
- Cultivate the next generation of EIP leaders in the region
- Build new, and strengthen existing, evidence units in delivering responsive and timely evidence for priority development sector policy-making processes in reproductive health and clean energy, through innovative methods, including the rapid response service

Capacity Strengthening Activities

To address these issues, specific capacity strengthening programs were implemented. The CeRIHI team received an orientation and training on the value of EIP and windows of opportunity. 10 CeRIHI staff members, including 4 women and 6 men, were trained in EIP knowledge and skills. The ACRES team also strengthened their capacity to provide rapid, evidence-based responses to policy needs. ACRES support through training and ongoing engagement has been crucial in building CeRIHI's capacity in EIP.

The project led to significant changes within CeRIHI, including:

- Development of new policies and operating procedures
- Revitalization of the research portfolio
- Establishment of a RRS Unit dedicated to evidence-informed policymaking

First, CeRIHI created standardized procedures for synthesizing evidence, which defined a framework to ensure standard and quality in translating research work into policy. The SOPs laid the foundation for a more systematic and effective process, ensuring that evidence translation was no longer fragmented but aligned with best practices. Additionally, improved documentation practices were implemented, allowing for better tracking, sharing, and utilization of knowledge within the organization. This marked a significant improvement in the organization's approach to EIP.

Second, there is now a good understanding among CeRIHI members and government policymakers who participated in the workshop regarding the application and importance of using evidence to guide decision-making and policy development.

Last, following the recommendation from the SARA assessment, the project has recruited four scientists, set priorities, and determined what resources are necessary. An RRS Unit was established, which to start with, will be responding to policy questions from the Ministry of Health, President's Office, Regional Authority and Local Government, and the Ministry of Energy. The unit is staffed by two research scientists dedicated to its day-to-day operations. The rapid-response service is a timely provision of a summary of evidence based on a systematic search for information about problems, options, and implementation considerations related to specific challenges. The RRS unit is expected to respond to policymakers' needs for relevant and timely evidence in urgent situations or crises, whether real or perceived, usually within 28 days.



Mechanisms at Play

Six months into the project, CeRIHI has revitalized its research portfolio, established working relationships with policymakers and engaged relevant stakeholders, set priority areas for collaboration, and established communication pathways. These stakeholders include policymakers from the Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Health, and President's Office, Regional Authority and Local Government (PO-RALG). They have expressed the value of EARES in complementing government efforts as there is a focus on mutual understanding and agreement on roles.

CeRIHI is focused on increasing knowledge and favorable attitudes towards the application of evidence to policymaking and has worked to align its interests with those of the government and other stakeholders, establishing communication pathways to provide access to evidence.

Policymakers also demonstrated increased awareness and willingness to engage in EIP, evidenced by their positive responses. During our discussion in May 2024 with Dr. Pius Horumpembe, the Head of the Research Unit at the Ministry of Health, he expressed his delight with the EARES initiative. He said that *“the project will be very supportive to the Ministry of Health, particularly to my unit since we already have directives from the Minister for Health to come up with a strategy to utilize research and published scientific works to support various interventions, decisions and policies.”*

CeRIHI plans to continue strengthening its research portfolio and collaboration with policymakers and stakeholders to ensure successful EIP implementation.

