



STORIES OF CHANGE

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR CHANGE: MLW'S JOURNEY TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE INFORMED POLICY MAKING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) IN MALAWI

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Background

The Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Research Programme (MLW) embarked on a journey to enhance its capacity for evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) under the East African Regional Evidence Synthesis Initiative (EARES), which is part of the Africa LEEPS Partnership. This story showcases how MLW conducted an internal capacity-building workshop to strengthen its team in EIP to support the mapping of priority areas for SDG 3 and 7 in Malawi.

The MLW team first reviewed its readiness to provide rapid response service and gaps in evidence-informed policymaking using a modified version of the WHO Service Availability and Readiness Assessment (SARA) tool. The modifications included adapting sections and questions regarding evidence-informed decision-making and rapid response services. The review findings highlighted several areas for improvement, including a) the need to develop standard procedures for knowledge translation and b) limited organizational experience in designing and conducting a rapid response service. Additional gaps were identified in understanding the best practices and approaches for evidence generation and knowledge translation.

The Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme is part of the East African Regional Evidence Synthesis Initiative (EARES), 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

What happened

Using the insights of the assessment as a foundation for training, MLW organized an in-house capacity-strengthening workshop in February 2024 in Blantyre, Malawi led by Dr. Rhona Mijumbi who leads the Policy Unit at MLW. Five MLW team members (one male and four female) attended the training, including two senior research scientists, two research associates, and one intern. The workshop aimed to bridge identified knowledge gaps and equip the team with practical tools for evidence-based policymaking. Key topics covered during the workshop included:

- Understanding the role of evidence hubs in policy
- Conducting Delphi workshops for consensus-building
- Stakeholder analysis

During the workshop, the team gained awareness of the role of evidence hubs in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and more importantly what a hub is and its functions in supporting EIP. One of the first and key activities for Malawi was to map priority areas with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Energy using Delphi workshop techniques.

The team had never conducted a Delphi workshop before, which is a structured communication technique that relies on a panel of experts to achieve consensus on complex issues.

Dr. Rhona introduced the concept of a Delphi process. The team learned how to design the workshop to encourage iterative rounds of feedback and consensus, allowing for a more inclusive discussion on clean energy and climate-health research gaps. The engagement with the ministries also sharpened their skills in navigating policy expectations, ensuring the outcomes would be relevant for decision-making.

Olive Kalata, a policy fellow who attended the workshop said, ***"The workshop was highly beneficial, offering numerous valuable lessons and provided a strong foundation for understanding and applying key concepts in the Evidence-Informed Decision Making (EIDM) space."***



Outputs and outcomes

A core outcome of the internal capacity-building initiatives was the creation of a more confident and capable team to conduct engagements with key stakeholders such as policymakers.

The Delphi workshop was successfully conducted to identify priority areas for clean energy, climate, and health. The workshop involved stakeholders from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Energy, private sector, and NGOs. Engaging the different stakeholders during the workshop ensured that key priorities in the domains of climate and health, as well as clean energy, were identified.

The team continues to engage with these policymakers, ensuring that they are not only enhancing EID awareness, policy responsiveness, but that the evidence produced is timely, relevant, and impactful in advancing Malawi's SDG agenda. Currently, the team is conducting rapid evidence reviews to support the evidence base critical questions on priority areas: carbon emissions, hospital waste management as well as the effect of biomass on health and gender issues in clean energy decision making spaces.

What we learned

One key lesson of this engagement was the importance of internal capacity-building sessions for supporting the institutionalization of EIP. The internal workshop strengthened skills in key EIDM concepts and methods. We learnt that being clear about our objectives and what we wanted to gain from the workshop helped us to manage stakeholder expectations at the very beginning of the project implementation. Furthermore, stakeholder identification and analysis is very crucial in determining the potential success of project implementation as opportunities and new relationships can be built.

Second, involving key decision-makers from relevant sectors early in the process was vital. Their early participation ensures that evidence generated from the key questions will directly be aligned with policymaking needs, in the process fostering a strong partnership between researchers and policymakers, buy in and commitment.