

Unpacking How Education Learning Networks Can Best Support Evidence Use in Global Education

SALEX Learning Report

September 2024



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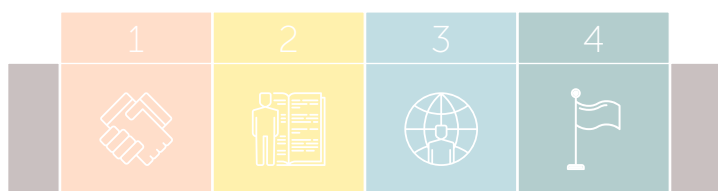
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Executive Summary

The School Action Learning Exchange (SALEX) brings together education networks and organizations to collaboratively generate and use evidence to drive better learning outcomes.

As part of this mission, SALEX conducted a learning activity to better understand how education learning networks (ELNs) can effectively support evidence use in education.

We generated learning through a desk review, interviews with external experts, and focus group discussions with a subset of SALEX members.

KEY LEARNINGS



ELN performance: ELNs support evidence use by engaging throughout the evidence lifecycle, from evidence generation, to translation, to use. ELNs use diverse and complementary activities to fulfill multiple functions in support of evidence use, including—

- » Capacity strengthening
- » Participatory evidence generation
- » Curating and synthesizing evidence
- » Advocacy and dissemination
- » Peer learning and exchange
- » Fostering and strengthening relationships



ELN outcomes and practice and policy change: While more evidence is needed, ELNs can contribute to intermediate practice and policy changes in the medium-term among ELN members (e.g., improving trust, strengthening capacity, co-producing demand-driven evidence) and beyond members (e.g., scaling school innovations, policy reform).



Influencing factors: Several factors can influence the success of an ELN's work to promote greater evidence use within education systems.

- » **Internal factors**
 - » Being a well-functioning ELN, and having key characteristics like being demand-driven, inclusive, and collaborative, were prerequisites to supporting evidence use.
- » **External factors**
 - » Drivers of evidence use included availability of context-specific, accessible, and demand-driven evidence; strong stakeholder demand and engagement around evidence use; and a culture of evidence use.
 - » Constraints included limited capacity and time and resource constraints among evidence users and politics and power inequities in the education system.

KEY IMPLICATIONS



ELN members should identify specific goals or objectives for their ELN engagement and invest time in building trusting, strong relationships with other members to set a foundation for success.



ELN facilitators should develop a theory of change for how they will support evidence use and consider using a combination of complementary activities to support evidence use along the evidence lifecycle.



ELN funders should allow ELN facilitators to respond and adapt to member demand and education system needs.

1.

Introduction

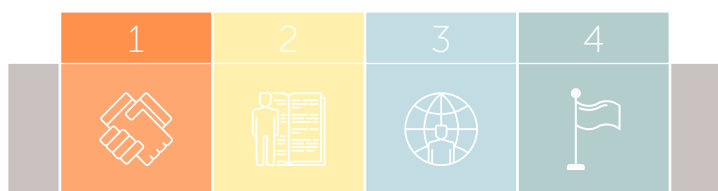
This report presents findings from a learning activity conducted by the School Action Learning Exchange (SALEX) to inform members' work to support evidence use in education. We focus on how learning networks in the education sector, or education learning networks (ELNs), support evidence use in education as SALEX itself and many of its members are networks.

In education, learning networks are referred to using different terms, including communities of practice, peer-to-peer learning networks, or participatory learning networks, or may take the form of professional learning networks¹ or networked improvement communities.² We define ELNs as learning networks that connect education system actors (e.g., networks, organizations, schools, school leaders, teachers, government officials) to produce and exchange knowledge using adult learning theory and social learning principles.

In this report, we present activities ELNs use to support evidence use and key factors that influence the success of these activities, along with concrete examples that illustrate how these strategies are implemented in practice. The annexes contain practical tools to facilitate application of the findings by SALEX members and network managers, members, and funders of ELNs.

1 Professional learning networks connect educators to strengthen their professional development by facilitating learning and resource sharing and fostering discussions (Poth, 2023).

2 Networked improvement communities are scientific learning communities of researchers and practitioners that use the principles of improvement science to design, implement, test, and refine solutions to common problems and share learning across organizations and contexts (Proger et al., 2017).



1.1 SALEX Background

SALEX, formally launched in 2022, is a global network that brings together 22 organizations and networks supporting schools, school leaders, and teachers. Its diverse founding members³, spanning six continents and including national NGOs, multilateral institutions, and global organizations, collaborate to share knowledge, build capacity, and implement effective practices in education. Supported by the Jacobs Foundation and facilitated by Results for Development (R4D), SALEX focuses on four key areas: integrating

evidence and data into decision-making, amplifying teacher and school leader voices, promoting foundational skills and wellbeing, and scaling teacher and school-driven innovations. Through challenge groups focused on the four key thematic areas and catalytic funding grants, SALEX fosters knowledge exchange, collaborative research, and impactful projects aligned with its learning agenda, benefiting both local contexts and the broader global education community.⁴

1.2 Rationale and Aim of Learning Activity

Across various sectors, including education, there is currently a strong focus on enhancing evidence use. This has been driven by initiatives like the Global Commission on Evidence and networks such as the Africa Evidence Network and the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel. These networks aim to improve evidence-based decision-making and practice, especially in low- or middle-income countries. Within the education sector, the OECD invests significantly in improving the quality, production, and utilization of research in policy and practice through projects like Strengthening the Impact of Education Research. In the United States, the Center for Research Use in Education addresses barriers to research use, particularly in schools, and offers innovative solutions for promoting evidence-informed improvement. Further, donor collaborations like the Building Evidence in Education (BE2) group are vital in strengthening knowledge systems and promoting

evidence-based policymaking. Likewise, SALEX aims to support evidence use among its members and affiliated networks.

Despite this increased focus on enhancing evidence use, there are few resources for practitioners on how to effectively enhance evidence use in the education sector. To enhance SALEX's capacity to effectively support evidence use, R4D completed this learning activity to address two key questions—

- » What are successful strategies that education learning networks (ELNs) can use to **identify and collect evidence** across the education system to best promote evidence uptake by its members?
- » How can ELNs at different levels effectively **support evidence use** by their members?

³ While we use the term member in this report, SALEX uses 'member' and 'aggregator' interchangeably.

⁴ To read more about SALEX, visit: <https://r4d.org/projects/school-action-learning-exchange-salex/>

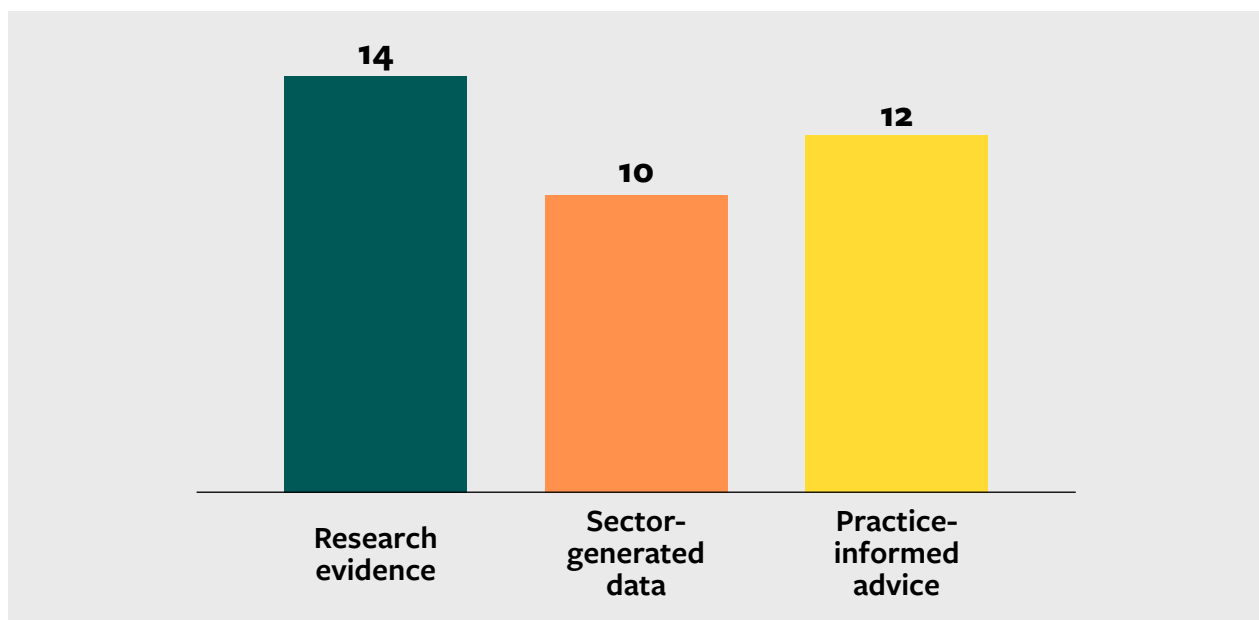
1.3 Understanding Evidence: Types, Processes, and Applications

For both the purposes of this activity and within the SALEX network, we take a broad understanding of evidence⁵ to include **research evidence** (e.g., studies, evaluations, literature reviews), **sector-generated evidence** (e.g., student assessment data), and **tacit or practice-informed advice** from individuals and organizations

(e.g., educators, policymakers, professional associations, and non-profit organizations) (Hayter & Morales, 2023). SALEX members use these three evidence types, with about a third of SALEX members reporting that their organization uses at least one of the evidence types (Figure 1).

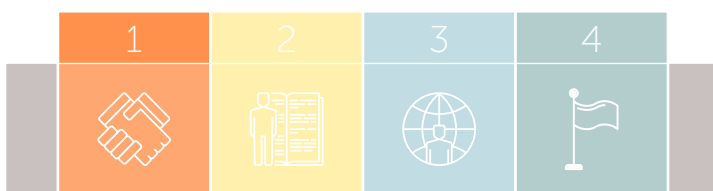


Figure 1. Types of Evidence that SALEX Members Utilize



Source: Live Menti poll during SALEX-wide learning event in March 2024 (n=36)




⁵ We use this definition because it is in how respondents defined evidence. This is a broader definition of evidence than the definition used by the Jacobs Foundation in their [ENJOY framework](#) which encompasses research and sector-based evidence, but not tacit knowledge. The Jacobs Foundation defines evidence generation and uptake among education organizations according to four key dimensions: culture of evidence (is there a strong commitment to evidence in decision-making), effectiveness (has the approach been proven to be effective based on rigorous evidence), implementability (can the approach be integrated into the system and implemented effectively), and transferability (is the approach relevant and transferable to a broader setting) (Jacobs Foundation, 2023).



Throughout this report, we use the terms evidence generation, translation, and use to describe the process of evidence uptake.

While there are several other terms to describe the uptake of evidence, including research engagement, knowledge transfer, and dissemination, we opted for the term evidence use to broadly describe the process.

Our definition of evidence use is in line with the widely referenced Quality Use of Research Evidence framework which defines quality use of research evidence in education as “the thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organizational enabling components within a complex system” (Rickinson et al., 2022).

EVIDENCE GENERATION 	We define evidence generation as any activities that support the creation of new data, research, or other evidence, including the design of research studies, data collection and analysis, and gathering of new data or evidence (qualitative or quantitative).
EVIDENCE TRANSLATION 	We use an adaptation of the definition of translation introduced in the Results for Development study (Poirrier, 2018) on evidence translation – translation is an active process through which actors identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence for the purposes of policymaking or other intended change.
EVIDENCE USE 	We define evidence use as the application of information, data, and tacit knowledge in policy or practice. This can include directly informing policy and practice (instrumental), informing how we approach a problem (conceptual), or legitimizing an already determined position/approach (symbolic).

2.

Learning Methods

For this learning activity, we employed qualitative methods to understand how education networks can contribute to evidence uptake (Figure 2). To begin, we conducted a narrative literature review to identify key studies and frameworks relevant to evidence uptake in the education sector and how networks can support evidence uptake. We included peer reviewed and grey literature written in English that was published between 2013-2024 that discussed evidence identification, collection, and use by ELNs. We identified literature through Google Scholar, Google, staff knowledge, and key informant recommendations. We also included findings from a learning activity conducted by Mathematica on how SALEX supports evidence use at the school level as part of Mathematica’s role as a monitoring, evaluation, and learning partner for the Jacobs Foundation. We used findings from the literature review to inform a key informant interview guide and answer the learning questions.



SALEX members and partners at “Evidence in Practice” convening in Barranquilla, Colombia, March 2024

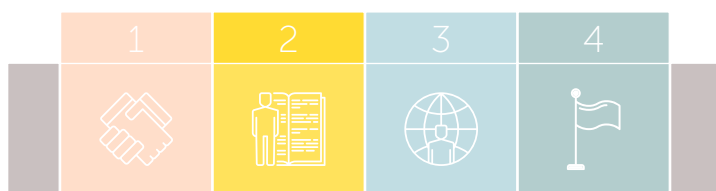




Figure 2. Data Sources

Desk review

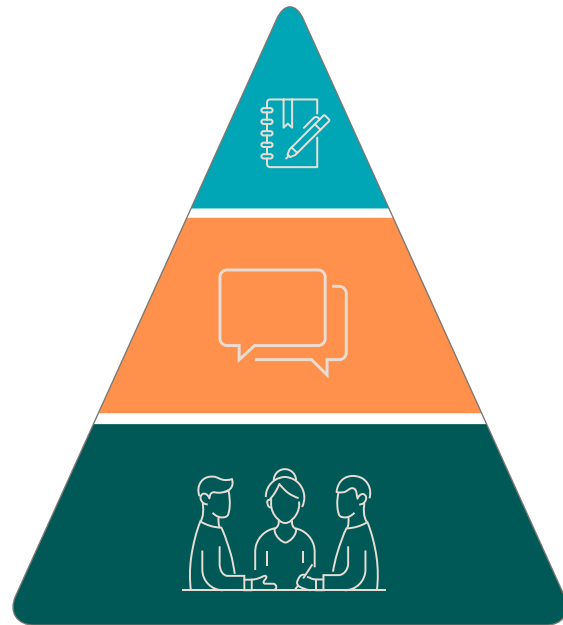
Peer reviewed and grey literature

External experts

Individual and group interviews with 7 experts

SALEX contributions

3 focus groups with 6 SALEX organizations; collected stories and outputs from the annual SALEX-wide event



We conducted individual and group interviews with a purposive sample of seven key informants who lead other ELNs or specialize in evidence use. These interviews provided valuable insights into best practices, challenges, and innovations related to evidence uptake within network contexts.

Finally, we conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with individuals from six SALEX member organizations—Council of International Schools, Education International, Global Schools Forum, International Baccalaureate, Schools2030, and UNICEF Innocenti. We invited two groups of SALEX members to participate in the FGDs: (1) members of a SALEX Challenge Group—Building evidence and data into school and policy decisions, and (2) SALEX members identified as strong examples of members supporting evidence use in schools through the Mathematica

learning activity. This allowed us to gather perspectives directly from practitioners involved in evidence-based practices within the SALEX network. The FGDs included semi-structured questions on evidence use and a participatory activity called forcefield analysis to brainstorm driving and restraining forces to evidence uptake and actions that can leverage and address these forces. This approach provided a thorough understanding of the dynamics and strategies involved in promoting effective evidence uptake within education learning networks like SALEX.

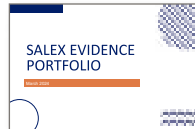
We documented the interviews and FGDs through notes, recordings (with consent), and transcripts produced by Microsoft Teams. For analysis, we summarized the responses by theme for the interviews and FGDs.

We presented preliminary findings at a SALEX-wide learning event in March 2024 to vet the findings and solicit feedback on their relevance for members. We also used the learning event as an opportunity to gather additional information about how SALEX members support evidence use through live poll questions (using Mentimeter), reviewing materials shared by members at the learning event, and documenting learning and exchanges during sessions.

Further Learning from SALEX on Evidence Uptake



[Three lessons for increasing evidence uptake in global education](#)



[School Action Learning Exchange \(SALEX\) Evidence Portfolio](#)

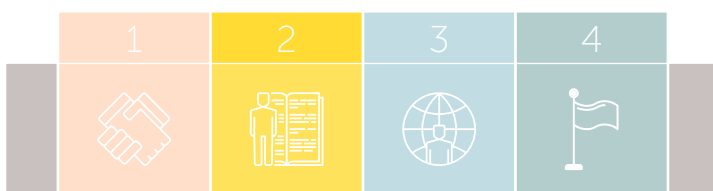
2.1 Limitations

One, we found that the published evidence base on ELNs and how they support evidence use to be relatively limited and primarily about work in high-income countries. The resources we found varied in how much detail they provided on strategies, facilitators, and challenges. In addition, few assessed the outcomes from ELNs' work.

Second, as is typical with primary data collection, the interviews and focus groups are subject to response bias as respondents may see or want to share their

experiences in a positive light. We tried to mitigate this bias by explaining the goals of the learning activity and ensuring confidentiality of individual respondents.

Third, the interview and focus group samples were limited by time and R4D's networks. We had a relatively short period of time to complete data collection, which limited participation by some SALEX and key informants. The key informant interview sample was influenced by R4D's networks, as existing connections facilitated interview recruitment.



3.

Education Learning Networks in the Evidence Use Process

In this section, we first present a theory of change for evidence use by ELNs, which synthesizes our key findings. In the remainder of the section, we explore each of the main components of the theory of change. We describe the activities that ELNs use to support the evidence use process and illustrate these with concrete examples. Then we outline the types of outcomes that ELNs can produce that contribute to policy and practice changes and impacts. Finally, we discuss the influencing factors with ELNs and within education systems that affect the potential for success.

3.1 Theory of Change

With evidence sharing and production at their core, education learning networks (ELNs) often have goals related to supporting evidence use in the education system. Building on R4D’s theory of change for collaborative learning networks (Results for Development and Collaborative Impact, 2024), we synthesized learning across data sources to outline a theory of change for how ELNs contribute to evidence use in education (Figure 3).

The theory of change has the following five components:

1. ELN performance (activities and outputs).

As shown in the theory of change, there are two main categories of ELN activities—(1) implementation and management and (2) activities to support evidence creation, sharing, and use. The implementation and management activities are common to ELNs regardless of their specific goals, so we do not discuss those activities in this report. ELNs with goals related to evidence use employ a range of activities across the full evidence lifecycle with the aim of improving evidence use. These activities produce outputs within the ELN and among ELN members that contribute to practice and policy change (Section 3.2).

2. Outcomes contributing to practice and policy change.

When ELNs are effective in supporting evidence use, they can contribute to intermediate practice and policy changes. ELNs most directly influence evidence use by individuals, organizations, or networks who are members of the ELN. These changes among members may subsequently support uptake beyond members (Section 3.3).

We define **education learning networks** as networks connecting education system actors (e.g., networks, organizations, schools, school leaders, teachers, government officials) to produce and exchange knowledge using adult learning theory and social learning principles.

3. Outcomes contributing to impact.

The policy and practice changes ultimately aim to contribute to final impacts in the education system, including making quality education accessible to all and improving student outcomes. The contribution of ELNs to these long-term impacts is not well studied or assessed however, so we do not further explore these in this report.

4. Influencing factors within ELNs.

Various factors influence the quality and success of ELN activities, and thus ELN performance. These factors relate to the quality of member relationships, having demand driven activities, including the right mix of members, and having sufficient resources (Section 3.4).

5. Influencing factors within education systems.

Factors within the broader education system influence the effectiveness of ELN contributions to changes and impacts in education policy and practices. These factors range from networks and relationships among system actors, to policies and politics, to resources and capacity (Section 3.5).

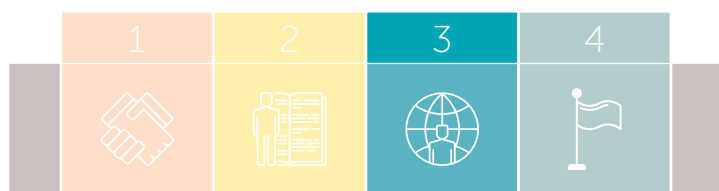
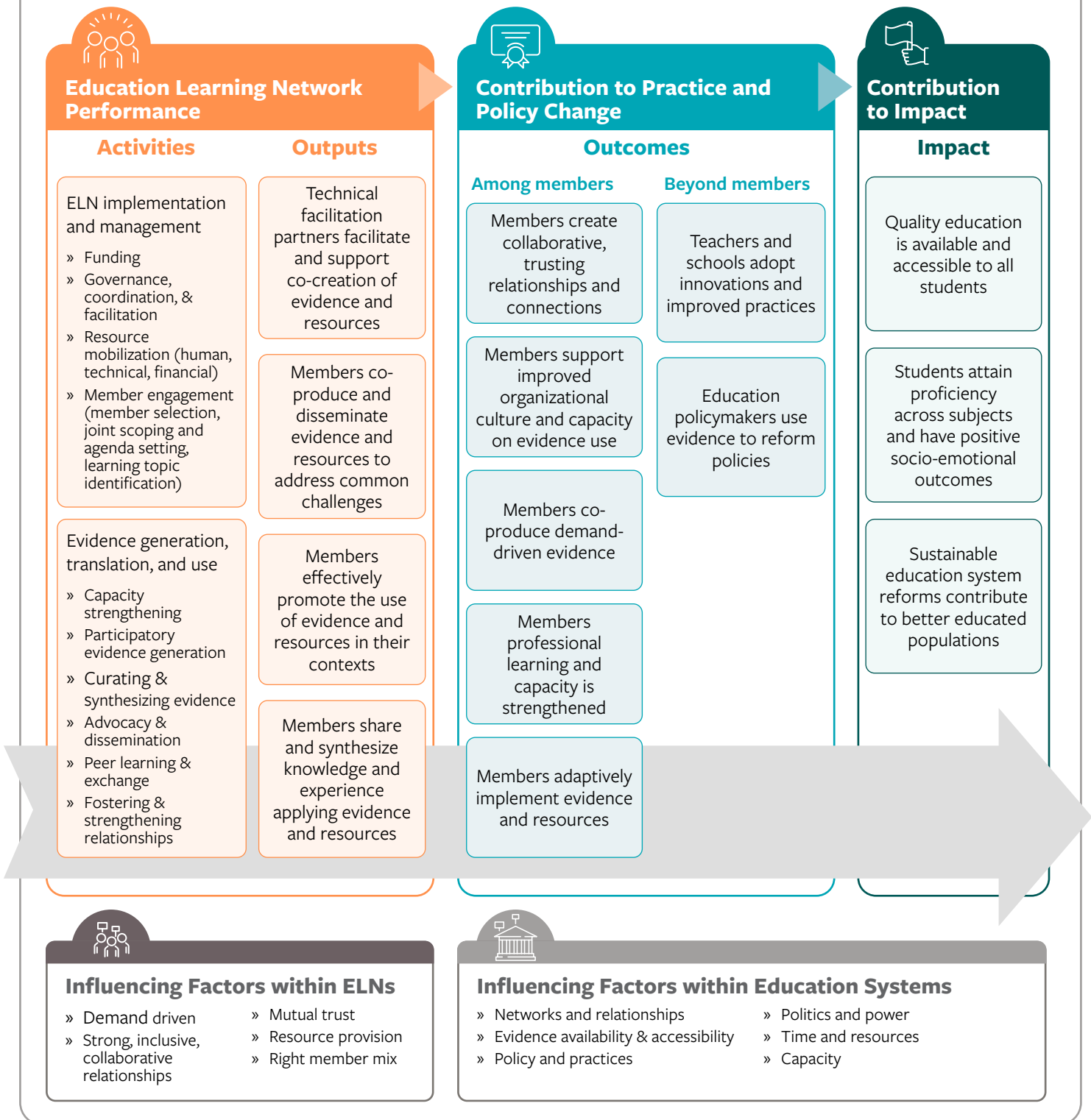




Figure 3. Theory of Change for ELN Contribution to Evidence Use



3.2 ELN Performance - Activities to Support Evidence Generation, Translation, and Use



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **ELNs support evidence use by engaging throughout the evidence lifecycle, from evidence generation, to translation, to use.**
- **ELNs use diverse activities to fulfill multiple functions in support of evidence use, including—**
 - » Capacity strengthening
 - » Participatory evidence generation
 - » Curating and synthesizing evidence
 - » Advocacy and dissemination
 - » Peer learning and exchange
 - » Fostering and strengthening relationships
- **There has been little work to assess the effectiveness of these activities, but using a combination of complementary activities is likely effective.**

Across SALEX members, key informants, and examples in the literature, we found that education learning networks can play a role to support evidence use throughout the evidence lifecycle (Figure 2). It was common for SALEX members to use several activities across two or more components of the evidence lifecycle. While published literature discussed how ELNs support across the evidence lifecycle, much of the published literature focused on how networks support evidence generation.

We grouped the main activities that ELNs used into six categories (Figure 4; Annex 1) which are discussed below. However, the specific practices in these categories are not standardized in name or form. Some activities, such as peer learning and exchange, were used at multiple stages of the evidence lifecycle as shown in Figure 3.

See Annex 1 for a menu of activities!

There is evidence for success for these activities based on respondent perceptions or documentation, but evidence is insufficient to determine when each activity is most effective. It is likely that a combination of approaches is best, and that effectiveness will vary based on the context and ELN goals and characteristics. Using a combination of approaches, particularly fostering and strengthening relationships and peer learning and exchange, is how ELNs employed a network or relational approach to knowledge processes rather than linear approaches such as the use of evidence generation or dissemination in isolation (Révai, 2020).

1



2



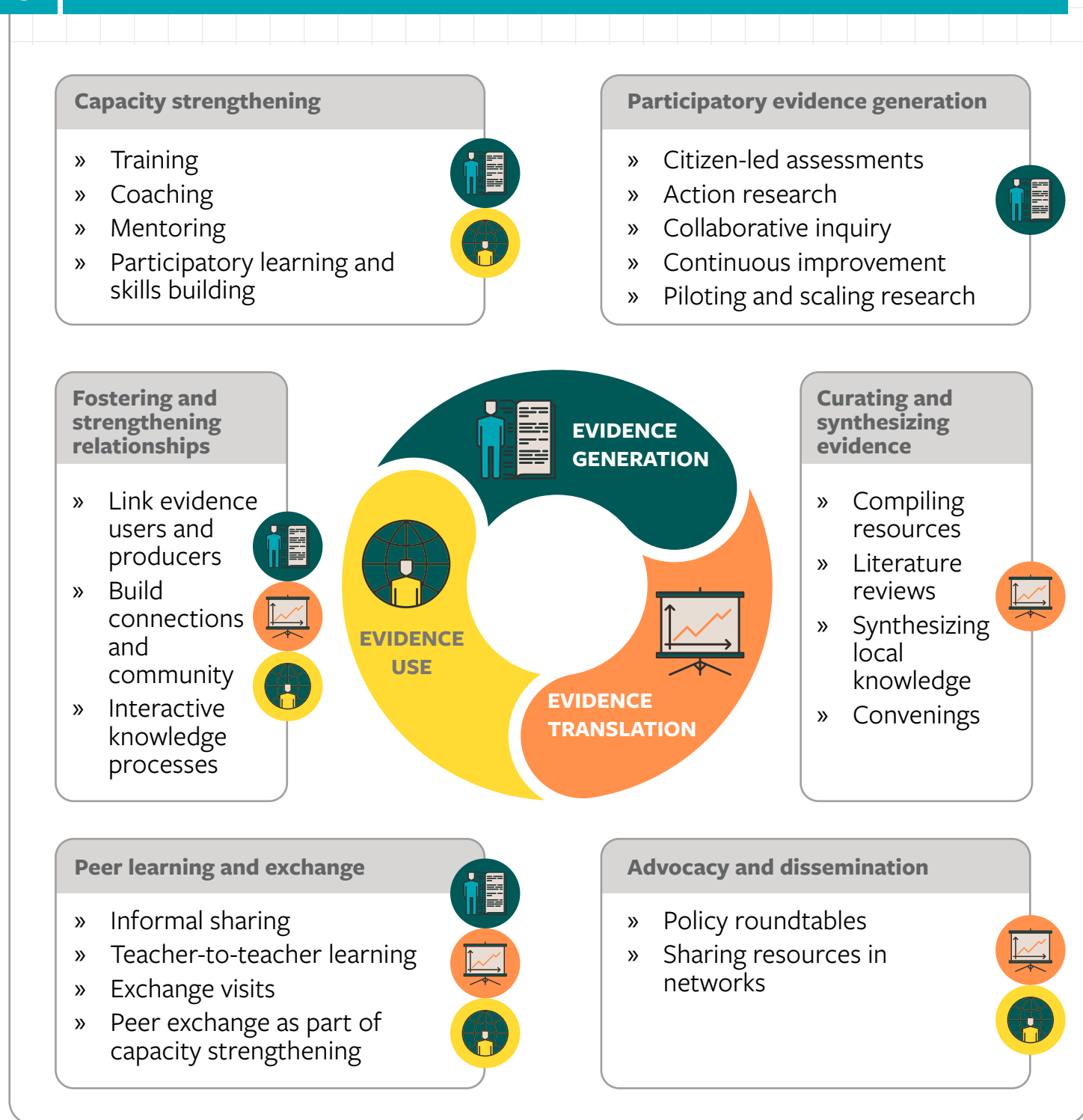
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Figure 4. Activities Education Learning Networks Use Across the Evidence Lifecycle



Capacity strengthening

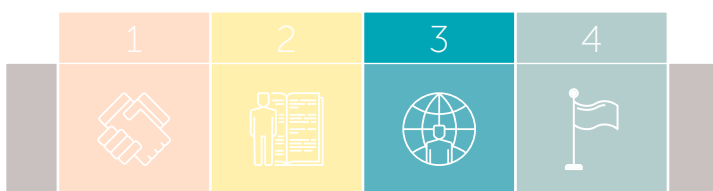
ELNs provide capacity strengthening support to members to support evidence generation and use.

Evidence generation

Capacity strengthening for evidence use can range from formal training to coaching, mentoring, and professional learning and skills building through collaboration and engagement with others. Capacity strengthening on evidence generation often takes place as part of networks that engage researchers, such as networked improvement communities that embed capacity strengthening (Proger et al., 2017; Révai, 2020). A key informant discussed how participating in research activities in and of itself is very valuable and strengthens research skills.

Evidence use

ELNs directly or indirectly strengthen capacity on evidence use. ELNs primarily made up of schools or teachers often use direct capacity strengthening approaches and may have capacity strengthening as an explicit goal of the network. These approaches include coaching and peer mentoring to build leadership and professional learning opportunities among teachers to strengthen capacity and promote change (Révai, 2020; Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018; Miller, Hancell, & Jones, 2022; Campbell et al., 2017). Some ELNs also target specific actors in member schools to strengthen their capacity to act as change agents in their school (Révai, 2020). Providing training and cascaded training are other approaches ELNs use to strengthen capacity among members to help them adopt standards and improve their ability to learn and work together (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). ELNs also indirectly build member skills on evidence use through activities that facilitate data-driven decision-making like joint data review meetings (Miller, Hancell, & Jones, 2022).





ELN EXAMPLE
The International Baccalaureate



Professional development and peer support in a global network

The International Baccalaureate (IB), offering programs in nearly 6,000 schools in over 160 countries, has initiated several schemes over the years to support participatory and continuous evidence uptake at the school level. The organization launched the [IB Exchange](#) in 2021, which serves as an **interactive platform for professional learning**, that aims to address the challenges of supporting a large network across different contexts and the lack of a centralized platform to access research. IB Exchange offers IB educators access to evidence and resources for program and subject support. It facilitates connections for **peer-to-peer learning and collaboration** while enabling educators to enhance their expertise by sharing teaching and learning insights within a worldwide network of educators.

“Recently we’ve launched IB Exchange, which is again curated resources about evidence uplifts. There’s a lot of different artifacts or curated resources and samples [for teachers to utilize], and it’s a space for teachers to go and be able to collaborate globally in all kinds of different areas, whether that be for upper years, for secondary programs or primary years programs... I think that’s been well received and it was needed not only for the resources but the space for collaboration and strengthening the community.”

In addition to developing digital spaces for learning and collaboration, the IB supports the formation of local [Associations of IB World Schools](#). For example, the [IB Association of Japan](#) often hosts events for IB schools in the region in a co-constructive fashion.

“One way we see schools strengthen their capacity is when they join either a network or an IB association and there’s that peer-to-peer support.”

The IB strives to increase the uptake of research through capacity strengthening by supporting strong partnerships among both global and local school networks, contextualizing and curating content, and making the evidence accessible to educators.

FOR MORE

- » Learn more about IB: [International education - International Baccalaureate® \(ibo.org\)](https://ibo.org)
- » Read another case study from IB in our [Learning Brief on Evidence Uptake](#).

Photo credit: International education - International Baccalaureate® (ibo.org)

Capacity strengthening, curating and synthesizing evidence, peer learning and exchange



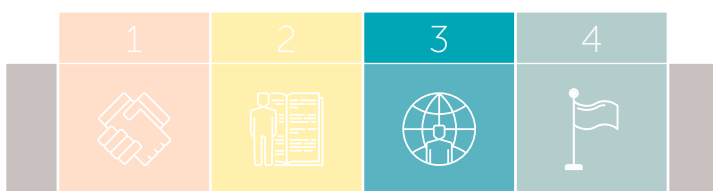
Participatory evidence generation

ELNs facilitate participatory evidence generation among members. This is a core activity and goal for some types of ELNs (Feygin et al., 2020; OECD, 2022).

Evidence generation

ELNs that focus on evidence production, like networked improvement communities, often use research-action or continuous inquiry or improvement cycles to test, adapt, or scale promising practices or innovations that address common challenges (Feygin et al., 2020; Education.org, 2021; Didriksen et al., 2022; Proger et al., 2017). Some SALEX members and ELNs use collaborative, participatory approaches to generate evidence including citizen-led assessments, school-led action research, and collaborative inquiry (Alcott et al., n.d.; Education.org, 2021; Révai, 2020). Research use may be more likely if the research

is designed and implemented collaboratively with the intended users. For example, a key informant found that evidence uptake is most likely when the government collaborates in applied research during design and data collection, rather than just collaborating at the end of research. Some ELNs also use participatory processes to inform data analysis and interpretation that value practitioner knowledge, like convenings, learning conversations, or data deep dive meetings, to solicit practitioner feedback and insights on the data (Gutierrez et al., 2019; Gutierrez & Bartolino Krachman, 2018; Révai, 2020).





ELN EXAMPLE LEARNigeria



Co-ownership and co-creation of citizen-led assessment in Nigeria

LEARNigeria, part of the PAL Network, which is a SALEX member, is a network of mission-aligned organizations and individuals dedicated to introducing Nigeria's citizen-led assessment, advocacy, and action program. A key informant shared an example of **participatory evidence generation** from their work with LEARNigeria, highlighting its goal to create a mechanism for accountability within the education ecosystem. The project involved a year-long effort to assess interest in collaboration and identify key stakeholders, including the Federal Ministry of Education, State Ministries of Education, and the National Bureau of Statistics. These stakeholders supported a large-scale survey of 49,000 children in over 21,000 households.

“Pretty much every stage of the way was participatory... the design of the tools, the design of the survey, the actual implementation; the empirical work - going into the field to collect the data. It was participatory and then a few things happened at the end of this process.”

By the end of the project, there was a **strong sense of ownership** by all stakeholders because of their involvement at the community level. Seeing the challenges families face first-hand, including lack of school enrollment, was eye-opening for many policymakers. They became determined to implement results at the family, community, and national level, and work together with community members to find solutions.

“So in systematic scaling, there's the notion of adopting someone else's child. And sometimes that's the approach that's taken to the uptake of evidence. A lot of effort is spent, a lot of rigor goes into designing interventions or conducting research. And then we get to the end of the journey, and we say to stakeholders that were not involved in that process, ‘You need to implement this because this is best evidence.’ ... and they say, ‘no, we have other priorities.’”

The key informant observed that, as a result of this study in Nigeria, the government began to adopt a more systematic approach to eliciting data from communities and started using the research results to guide resource allocation. Additionally, other organizations scaled the use of the developed tools, utilizing them for baseline learning assessments and multiple indicator cluster surveys. Communities organically began to set up reading clubs and volunteer teacher groups - which were not facilitated by the LEARNigeria network - but simply because they were participants in the process. By fostering participatory design, all parties involved became more willing and enthusiastic about using the results.

FOR MORE

» Learn more about the network: [LEARNigeria - PAL Network](#)

Photo credit: [LEARNIGERIA - TEP Centre](#)



Participatory evidence generation,
fostering and strengthening relationships





Participatory evidence generation and peer learning in a global network

During its inception phase, Schools2030 collaborated with various partners to design and develop holistic learning assessment tools to suit the contextual needs of each of the participating program countries. Data from these learning outcome assessment tools, as well as data on the quality of the learning environment, is then used to inform the **human-centered design process**. This process is led at the school level by teachers working in collaboration with others. In each country, national learning partners document the process, acting as implementation researchers who systematize learning and give feedback to the design teams. For example, in East Africa, learning partner ThinkPlace helped systematize recommendations that led to changing Schools2030’s model to be demand driven, so that those teachers most interested in the program get to participate. As a result, teachers in East Africa are actively signing up to be part of Schools2030, becoming advocates of the model and working in design teams, highlighting the effectiveness of partnering with learning partners.

“The model of Schools2030 in East Africa has shifted to a demand-driven model. Rather than us saying ‘these schools are signing up for human-centered design’ - it is demand driven... teachers will volunteer to be part of Schools2030, and they become human centered design champions as they work in design teams.”

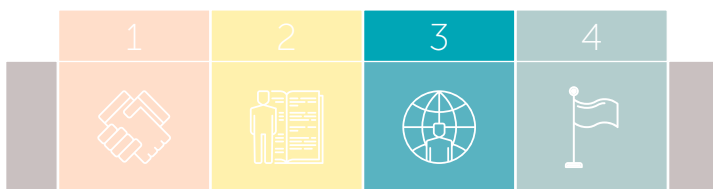
Schools2030 also promotes **peer learning and exchange** through school-to-school collaboration and joint learning events like the annual Schools2030 Global Forum, which brings together donors, researchers, policymakers, and teachers. Another example, shared by the key informant, involves teachers sharing their school-level innovations and developing new partnerships, even outside of the network. This recently happened with a school in Portugal, which is now starting a partnership with a school in Spain, despite not being a Schools2030 program country. Schools2030 is witnessing school-to-school level uptake both within and outside of the network due to the network’s adaptive management strategy and strong partnerships with NGOs, universities, and schools.

FOR MORE

» Learn more about Schools2030: [Catalysing School-Driven Holistic Learning Innovations to Achieve SDG4 by 2030](#)

Photo: Schools2030 partner and SALEX member HundrED, lead a challenge session about how learning and sharing with others can support the teaching of climate resilience at the Schools2030 Global Forum 2023. Photo credit: [The Schools2030 Global Forum 2023 - in pictures - Schools2030](#)

Participatory evidence generation,
peer learning and exchange





ELN EXAMPLE UNICEF's Data Must Speak



Leveraging policy windows for educational impact

UNICEF's Data Must Speak (DMS) Positive Deviance research collaborates with ministries of education (MOEs), local organizations, and academics to help countries use existing data to enhance educational outcomes. Through **co-created implementation research, joint workshops, and tailored research outputs** (e.g., reports, policy briefs), DMS generates evidence via a 'learning by doing' approach. DMS faces challenges like time needed for meaningful co-creation and contextualization, leadership changes within MOEs, and working mainly at the national level. However, by better understanding their stakeholders and **strategically identifying policy windows**, they achieve more effective results. Such policy windows can be a country's Education Sector Analysis or Plan, the development of the GPE Compact, the submission of proposals for multi-million-dollar grants, etc.

"When you co-create research from the outset with your colleagues from the Ministry of Education, both technical but also high-level folks, even though some of them will move on, you are still going to engage with stakeholders that will have ownership in the long term. So, I think it's about a strategy on how to engage, when to engage, considering the political cycle.

A lot of this co-creation process is about timing and understanding your stakeholders - doing that stakeholders mapping and trying to keep updated with what's happening in the country."

Through their research, DMS has identified best practices in education such as the crucial role of head teachers and their communication strategies. Effective head teachers demonstrate empathy, proactive engagement, and an open-door policy with their teachers and the community. However, research in one country revealed a significant gap: many head teachers ascend to their roles without formal training, relying solely on a few years of teaching experience. To address this, UNICEF, in partnership with development partners, is developing an online course for teachers and head teachers. This initiative aims to provide essential training and includes an online certification program for new head teachers. This effort is one example of how DMS is activating levers for evidence uptake to improve educational outcomes.

FOR MORE

- » Learn more about UNICEF's Data Must Speak Initiative (DMS): [Data Must Speak: Country Initiatives | UNICEF](#)

Participatory evidence generation, capacity strengthening, advocacy and dissemination



Curating and synthesizing evidence

Curating and synthesizing evidence is an activity that ELNs use to support evidence translation. They curate and synthesize evidence for network members exclusively or for a public audience.

Evidence translation

ELNs involving policy and research institutes, universities, or think tanks typically curate and synthesize evidence to support evidence use. ELNs may synthesize existing evidence and knowledge as part of thematic activities or work groups (Révai, 2020). Some ELNs convene experts or experts and practitioners in-person or virtually to discuss evidence and implications for practice (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). ELNs also develop and share curated lists of

resources within their network or externally through listservs, newsletters, or websites, such as online resources for teachers (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011; Gerdeman, Garrett & Monahan, 2018). Several key informants discussed the importance of synthesizing local knowledge from members and for members. However, questions remain about how ELNs can systematically synthesize locally produced knowledge (Révai, 2020).

Advocacy and dissemination

ELNs use advocacy and dissemination activities to motivate evidence translation and use (Education.org, 2021). Advocating for the use of evidence in education and disseminating that evidence to education system actors can take a range of forms.

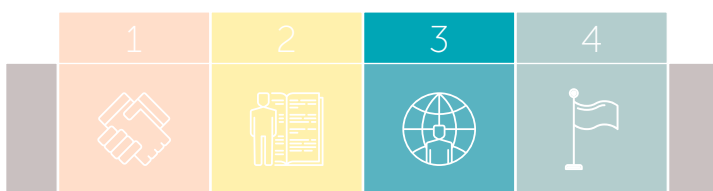
Evidence translation

Convening policy roundtables is one activity ELNs made up of international organizations use to convene high-level actors to discuss policy issues and relevant evidence (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). A key informant shared two examples of ELNs supporting evidence translation by facilitating conversations between researchers and policymakers, which helped policymakers to understand research findings. When disseminating research findings, the PAL Network use a comprehensive outreach strategy to disseminate data from citizen-led assessments to advocate for the importance of improving education quality. At the community level, they develop simplified messages on findings that everyday citizens can understand

and use village and district report cards to facilitate discussions on local actions to improve learning. At the national and global level, they host national launches of their research reports and participate in international research conferences to disseminate findings.

Evidence translation

ELNs involving international organizations, policy institutes, and large non-government organizations often engage in advocacy and evidence dissemination to promote evidence use (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). A key informant shared how advocacy by ELNs can raise the visibility of education challenges to help motivate change and also support that change process. ELNs can support dissemination by providing access to evidence,



sharing evidence-based tools and resources, and acting as evidence brokers or intermediaries to help translate, synthesize, and mobilize evidence (Torres & Steponavičius, 2022; Hayter & Morales, 2023; OECD, 2022; Révai, 2020). An ELN may target their advocacy and dissemination efforts to influential actors within the education system, as described by a key informant. Some ELNs disseminate evidence and resources developed by members with other members in the ELN and with external audiences (Education.org, 2021).

“I think networks can shine the light on what should be a priority. So for example, with the [NAME] network, what we’re trying to do is to shine the light on how important it is to have a transformative lens. Through their shared knowledge, shared learning, and shared commitment, networks can shine light on what education systems should be demanding and what duty bearers in that education system should be demanding. But at the same time, they can also supply the demand as well, so they can meet the demand.” -ELN Facilitator



Evidence generation and advocacy: Working at the national and classroom levels in Brazil

Education International (EI) is a network of 383 member organizations that represent more than 32 million teachers and education support personnel worldwide. EI **advocates** at a national level for a shift and improvement in PDL policy. They also **generate evidence** using surveys and peer network learning to

collect and use promising practices and pedagogical approaches in different contexts. Their work includes Learning Circles and facilitation focused on formative assessment and teacher leadership, supported by a research framework to address specific student needs.

In Brazil, EI works at both the national and classroom levels to find approaches to improve inclusion. This has enabled teachers to support each other in developing learning approaches beyond standardized assessment that tailor the learning to the classroom and the reality of where students are. For example, one teacher in Paraná, a state in the South of Brazil, dressed up as the Viscount of Sabugoa, a character from Brazilian children’s literature, to stimulate students’ creativity and enthusiasm in the learning process. Creating this dynamic helped improve students’ commitment, participation, and engagement, positively impacting all in their classroom.

As our informant shared, *“working within a cultural frame is critical.”* Contextualizing both the process and outputs can ensure better dissemination. This is not exclusive to one classroom in Brazil. Teachers across the country, including those in indigenous and quilombo schools, have reported that the work has led to improved engagement, improved learning and improved attendance. However, EI and their partners face challenges due to Brazil’s federal system, which complicates supporting the most effective approaches to PLD that encourage teacher professional autonomy and in doing so support inclusivity such as teacher-led learning circles. Some states support standardized assessment over teacher policy and oppose teacher autonomy, making approaches tailored to every child more difficult.

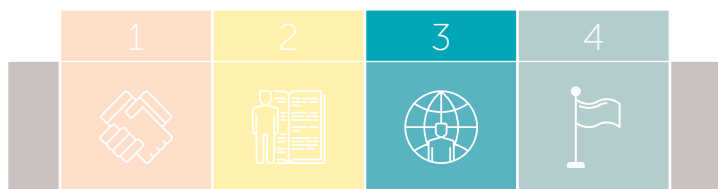


FOR MORE

- » Read more about EI’s teacher-led learning circles: [Teacher-led learning circles for formative assessment \(ei-ie.org\)](https://ei-ie.org)
- » Listen to EI’s Podcast “Pedagogies of Possibility” here: [Stream Education International music | Listen to songs, albums, playlists for free on SoundCloud](#)

Photo Credit: [Teacher-led Learning Circles for Formative Assessment | Brazil | Flickr](#)

Participatory evidence generation, peer learning and exchange, advocacy and dissemination





ELN EXAMPLE Global Schools Forum



Peer learning and exchange: Examples from a global network

Global Schools Forum (GSF) also uses a mix of methods to enhance evidence use among its network. GSF supports **cohort sharing** and **trust building** through Communities of Practice. They host ‘Spotlight Sessions’ to facilitate **peer learning** where an organization or a group of organizations working in a specific thematic area will present to the community on a particular piece of evidence or research.

Our informant reported that, following a Spotlight Session, GSF member organizations NABU and the SEED (Sustainable Education & Enterprise Development) Foundation connected and eventually developed a formal partnership. NABU harnesses technology to deliver mother tongue books to children in low-resource environments worldwide, while SEED works to deliver access to quality education by providing advocacy, evidence, and a learning network in Nigeria. In April and May of 2024, NABU and SEED co-facilitated their first in-person Read Aloud Training in Nigeria. The training explored innovative strategies to promote literacy and foster a love for reading among students, ultimately leading to the development of comprehensive lesson plans tailored to the educators’ classrooms.

“Being in a network that is very tied together in terms of mission and vision - it’s really helpful... Members are very keen to collaborate and share and learn from each other and I think that helps as well that it’s a fairly safe space of practitioners. But we ask the question ‘How can we improve the outputs to enable user uptake from their practitioner perspective?’”

Alongside the Spotlight Sessions, GSF produces **accessible resources**, like written blogs and toolkits that are digestible for practitioners. They are also exploring the use of visual and audio content to improve accessibility and outreach to the global education community.

FOR MORE

- » Read more about GSF’s Communities of Practice [here](#) and in their [2022-2023 Annual Report](#).

Peer learning and exchange, fostering and strengthening relationships, curating and synthesizing evidence



Peer learning and exchange

Facilitating peer learning and exchange, including peer-to-peer learning and collaborative learning approaches, is a distinguishing feature of learning networks to support evidence translation and use in education (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018). Peer-to-peer and collaborative learning uses adult learning theory and social learning principles to support learning (Results for Development, n.d.)

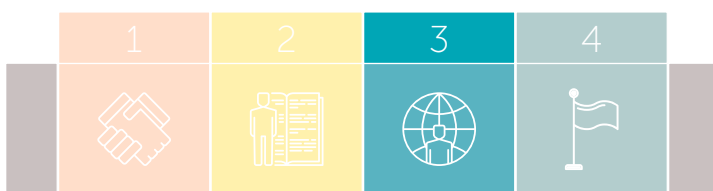
Evidence translation

Supporting knowledge and evidence translation and mobilization is a key goal of peer learning among some ELNs, including one run by a key informant. Teachers, school leaders, researchers, and other types of members act as knowledge brokers when they share evidence and resources (Révai, 2020). While a key informant reported that they have seen peer exchange work as an effective individual knowledge mobilization strategy, they noted that the outcomes of peer learning on evidence translation and mobilization has not been sufficiently evaluated.

Evidence use

Peer learning and exchange can facilitate sharing of experiences and expertise among education system actors working in similar contexts or across contexts

(OECD, 2022). One key informant described peer learning as an effective relational activity that ELNs use. Another key informant discussed how regional and international ELNs create connections and linkages across countries, which creates a mechanism for members to see that solutions are not as far away or complex as they may think. Through peer learning, teachers become a resource in their schools and communities (Gerdeman, Garrett, & Monahan, 2018). Other peer learning approaches ELNs use include exchange visits with experts or school leaders (Campbell et al., 2017; OECD, 2022; Thompson et al., 2019; Révai, 2020). There are also examples of ELNs incorporating member insights and sharing into professional learning opportunities to effectively promote deep learning and facilitate change processes (Campbell et al., 2017).





ELN EXAMPLE

Raising Learning Outcomes



Research and practitioner exchange in the UK

In the UK, a collaboration funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) brought together researchers and practitioners through regular **conversations and joint learning events**. This ongoing engagement created space for meaningful exchanges of ideas and revealed how differently academic researchers, practitioners, and policymakers understand the term ‘research impact’. For instance, when asked to describe their ‘pathway to impact’, one research team said they had not yet achieved any impact (because their research had not yet been published, citations had not been counted, academic discourse had not been changed, etc.). But, while setting up their research, this same team had offered free assistance to the Ministry of Women and Child Development to revise their early childhood development textbooks. While these researchers might not label this as having a massive impact directly related to their research, their contributions indirectly influenced significant changes. Tracing evidence uptake is a challenging endeavor; however, by fostering regular conversations between researchers and policymakers, examples like this can emerge. According to our informant, when tracking evidence impact, we should maintain a broad perspective on the definition of the term.

“I think one of the roles of a network is to enable participants to step back and see the bigger picture. Everyone will come to a network with a different incentive, a different perspective, a different set of knowledge, and we try to curate evidence that comes from the outside in as well as within.”

FOR MORE

- » Learn more about the ESRC-FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes research programme: [ESRC-FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems – UKRI](#)

Peer learning and exchange



Fostering and strengthening relationships

Fostering and strengthening relationships is a central activity that ELNs use across the evidence lifecycle and is part of taking a systems approach to evidence use (Campbell et al., 2017; Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018). The types of actors they connect vary, but ELNs connect individuals and groups from outside of their everyday work or community (Brown, 2019). Strengthening relationships and linkages between evidence users (organizations and actor types) and between evidence users and producers is a foundational building block for networks as it sets the groundwork that enables approaches like learning and exchange (OECD, 2022; Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018; Torres & Steponavičius, 2022; Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). ELNs often actively identify and articulate shared values between members, foster trust, and identify and reinforce commitment to common goals (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011).

Evidence generation

By fostering and strengthening relationships during evidence generation, ELNs can learn what decision-makers' evidence needs are and use that information to inform future evidence generation efforts (Farrell et al., 2021). A key informant explained that ELNs can shine a light on demand and what local priorities are. ELNs may also explicitly generate ideas for research within the network or ideas for research may be shared informally between network members (OECD, 2022). This is an important way that ELNs improve the evidence that is generated according to a key informant. Networks that generate evidence often foster relationships and connections between researchers and practitioners throughout the research process, from research design to data collection and analysis, to enable and strengthen collaboration (Farrell et al., 2021).

Evidence translation

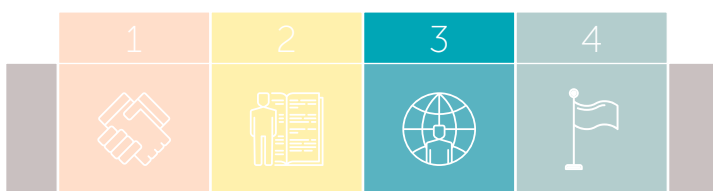
Fostering connections and interactions is vital for evidence translation. Key informants and literature (Campbell et al., 2017) emphasized that effective evidence translation required interactive processes rather than only disseminating evidence, even when evidence products are high-quality, accessible, and digestible. ELNs support knowledge and evidence mobilization by creating linkages between evidence producers and users (Torres & Steponavičius, 2022).

The relationships fostered during evidence generation can also support translation and mobilization of that evidence and ultimately its use, particularly among practitioners who were involved in the research (Farrell et al., 2021).

Evidence use

Several key informants discussed how sharing evidence through strong, trusting relationships is an effective way to legitimize that evidence, which in turn facilitates its use. Professional learning networks help teachers build community. Through these communities, teachers share new ideas and resources and can provide motivation to each other to adopt new practices (Poth, 2023).

“Sometimes there is an assumption that if you book a room and you pull people into it and they get to know each other or they do a virtual call, you created that trust, but it takes deep relationships... it takes building friendships, genuine professional friendships and then time, and at the same time you’ve got to be producing the research and evidence to fall into it and at the same time you’ve got to be recognizing that there are various others trying to achieve normative shifts in different directions. So, you have to have different eggs in different baskets. You’ve got to have patience, and you’ve got to believe in the power of coalitions without thinking that you can then control those coalitions.” –ELN Facilitator





ELN EXAMPLE The RISE Programme



Building trust through an education research network

The Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme was a global research endeavor that, in effect, became a network of 100 individuals, including researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, who collected, curated, consolidated, and communicated research on foundational learning. They invested significant time in **building trust and relationships** among members, gaining an understanding of each participant's progress at that particular point in their journey, and empowering them to take action by providing freedom and flexibility within the network.

“Those individuals came together because they had a shared love and passion for evidence and a belief that it was a lack of (the use of the right) evidence that was leading to inefficient and ineffective education programming.”

The RISE research network emphasized the reality of the learning crisis, resulting in tangible effects. This emphasis was more about **fostering personal connections** among individuals rather than just presenting evidence. It highlighted the importance of developing a collective understanding or “shared sense of evidence.” However, several challenges were encountered. It took five or six years for the message to become deeply ingrained, which was frustrating for members and donors. Additionally, tracing back evidence to the network proved challenging. There was a significant amount of research and evidence generated by the program that went unrecognized, unattributed, or uncounted as part of the impact, despite contributing to broader initiatives like the World Development Report (WDR) and other related efforts.

“I think one of the roles of a network is to enable participants to step back and see the bigger picture that everyone will come to a network with a different incentive, a different perspective, a different set of knowledge, and we try to curate evidence that comes from the outside in as well as within.”

FOR MORE

- » The RISE Programme concluded in 2023, but you can read more about their work here: [Home | RISE Programme](#)

Fostering and strengthening relationships,
curating and synthesizing evidence



3.3 ELN Outcomes Contributing to Practice and Policy Change



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Documentation and practitioner experience suggests that ELNs can contribute to intermediate practice and policy changes in the medium-term among and beyond members.**
 - » Among members, these intermediate outcomes are creating collaborative, trusting relationships; improved organizational culture and capacity related to evidence use; co-production of demand-driven evidence; strengthened professional learning and capacity; and adaptively implementing evidence and resources.
 - » Beyond members, these intermediate outcomes are teachers and schools adopting innovations and improved practices and education policymakers using evidence to reform policies.
- **Outcomes from ELN evidence work needs rigorous evaluation.**

Based on the desk review, FGDs, and interviews, ELNs can contribute to intermediate practice and policy changes by supporting evidence use (Figure 5). These intermediate outcomes may ultimately contribute to long-term impacts within education systems (Révai, 2020; OECD, 2021). However, the outcomes resulting from ELN's evidence related work have not been rigorously evaluated.

We identified several **outcomes that ELNs can influence among members**. These outcomes are direct results from successful ELN activities, such as capacity strengthening or participatory evidence generation activities (Section 3.2 and Annex 1).

- » **Members create collaborative, trusting relationships and connections** (Miller, Hancell & Jones, 2022; Révai, 2020; Campbell et al., 2017). For instance, in one ELN, the strong connections in ELNs in the UK, Kenya, and Rwanda developed through cluster meetings enhanced their resilience, which was demonstrated in their ability to adapt and address challenges in the face of Covid-19 (Miller, Hancell & Jones 2022). A key success identified from the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research in Canada was improved connection and networking between individuals and groups who would likely not have been connected without participation in the ELN, which enabled continued knowledge brokering (Campbell et al., 2017).

"It's not about what works but also for whom does it work? Why does it work? ...I think this is part of the tension that is challenging our ways of knowing. How do we know that what we know is right? And the more we expand the networks to alternative views and perspectives, the more we're going to get this question." – ELN Facilitator

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- » **Members support improved organizational culture and capacity on evidence use**, such as having an open organizational culture, an organizational climate that supports teacher learning, and leadership that support knowledge sharing (Révai, 2020; Brown, 2019). For example, teachers have given positive feedback to International Baccalaureate, a SALEX member, about capacity improvements from a micro-credential course designed to address barriers that members face using evidence, including how to review evidence and integrate evidence in the classroom. Teach For All, another SALEX member, has effectively used their networked learning approach to create a supportive environment, foster an evidence-based learning culture, and develop collective leadership to change education systems holistically.
- » **Members co-produce demand-driven evidence, often through collaboration between schools and researchers** (Révai, 2020; OECD, 2022). Several SALEX members and key informants shared successful examples of this. For example, SALEX member UNICEF's Data Must Speak initiative, has successfully worked together with ministries of education, local partners, and local academics to co-create research from the outset and collaboratively implement research.
- » **Members' professional learning and capacity is strengthened** (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011; Révai, 2020; Brown, 2019). Professional learning networks have been shown to positively impact teacher learning and the culture and capacity required to create and spread new knowledge and practice in schools in a cost-effective manner because only a small number of teachers need to participate to innovate (Brown, 2019).
- » **Members adaptively implement evidence and resources**, including using common standards and tools and regularly using data (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011; Révai, 2020). A key informant provided an example from the Research Schools Network

WELL Initiative in the UK. Schools that participated in the network began making evidence-informed changes, which were driven by increased access to sources of evidence, training on evidence use, internal reviews to identify a problem to address and an associated evidence-based intervention, and grants. SALEX members have seen use of evidence among members, including among participating schools and affiliated ministries of education.

As shown in the theory of change (Figure 3), ELN activities can also contribute to **outcomes beyond their members**. ELNs may influence changes in the education system as a result of changes among their members and may contribute to changes within their affiliated networks. These outcomes are also influenced by external factors in the education system (Section 3.5). The outcomes that ELNs can contribute to beyond members include—

- » **Teachers and schools adopt innovations and improved practices** (Doan et al. 2022; (Gerdeman, Garrett & Monahan, 2018; Brown, 2019). ELNs can help achieve educational improvements in an efficient manner, as teachers can have a positive effect in their wider networks (Brown, 2019). For example, participation in the High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network in the US, which included professional learning and funding for states to incentivize adoption, was associated with use of standard-aligned materials and support for their use from principals (Doan et al., 2022).
- » **Education policymakers use evidence to reform policies** (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011; Campbell et al., 2017). This was demonstrated in the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, which achieved several successes from advocacy and engagement with policymakers, including the development of standards for integrating education into humanitarian responses (Mendizabal & Hearn,

2011). The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) shared an example of influencing policy. GPE KIX facilitated learning events with national experts and the Ministry of Education in the Maldives. National experts who participated in the events developed a strategic plan that the Ministry of Education subsequently acted on and the Ministry called for a comprehensive curricula review aimed at integrating modern skills at all levels (Global Partnership for Education, 2024).

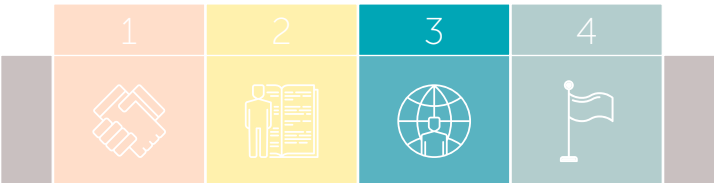
ELNs can contribute to these intermediate outcomes both among members and beyond, as the intermediate outcomes among members can contribute to

achieving the outcomes beyond members within affiliated networks. SALEX members largely reported contributing to outcomes among and beyond members. During the SALEX-wide event in March, we used live polling to ask members to rate on a scale of one to ten, which intermediate outcomes their organizations influence. SALEX members gave relatively high scores across intermediate outcomes, particularly building culture and capacity around evidence use and adaptation, improving and adapting school and teacher practices, scaling promising innovations, and informing policy (Figure 5).

 **Figure 5. Intermediate Outcomes Perceived by SALEX Members**



Source: Live poll, SALEX-wide event in March 2024 (n=36)



3.4 Influencing Factors within ELNs



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Factors influencing the success of SALEX members' work largely align with those of other ELNs.**
- **Being a well-functioning ELN, and having key characteristics like being demand-driven, inclusive, and collaborative, were prerequisites to supporting evidence use.**

The outcomes from ELN support are influenced by performance of the network itself. Through the desk review, interviews, and FGDs, we identified both facilitators and constraints within ELNs that influence their contribution to evidence use. SALEX members shared similar facilitators and constraints, and these also aligned with those of other ELNs.

There were several, mutually reinforcing characteristics of ELNs that were **facilitators** for overall ELN functioning—

- » **Demand-driven focus.** ELNs must work on topics and challenges that are of common concern among members and that align with members' own work and mandates for transformative learning processes to have an effect (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018; Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011).
- » **Inclusive, strong, and collaborative relationships** among ELN members can build commitment to change, increase accountability, and provide motivation and incentives to tackle

challenges (Miller, Hancell, & Jones 2022; Brown, 2019; Révai, 2020). Cultivating strong relationships and a sense of community provides a strong foundation for engagement and evidence adoption (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). Indeed, a key informant emphasized that normative shifts or drives require connected nodes to drive that change. Within these strong relationships and networks, members can use their social capital to support change (Brown, 2019).

- » **Mutual trust** among ELN members is key. The uptake of evidence is often based on trust and personal relationships, so building mutual trust within ELNs is key (Hayter & Morales, 2023; OECD, 2022). A key informant reinforced the importance of trust, sharing that trust enables debate, inclusion of diverse voices, and the formation of strong relationships.
- » **Resource provision** by ELNs was supportive of evidence use, including providing access to evidence and tools and providing monetary support. Key informants discussed the importance of providing incentives for evidence use, and monetary incentives for schools adopting evidence-based practices is one-way ELNs have provided incentives (Doan et al., 2022).
- » **Right mix of ELN members** can be important, as the structure, position, and attributes of members influence how they interact and affect each other (Révai, 2020) and ELNs can more directly influence change among member organizations (Mathematica, 2024a). Influential individuals or organizations can leverage their clout and political capital to motivate change (Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). In addition, some organizations can also be catalysts to change, such as teachers' federations, given their intermediary role in education systems (Campbell et al., 2017).

ELNs in diverse contexts faced similar **challenges**—

- » **Limited capacity on evidence use**, including thinking about how to apply evidence, can be a challenge among ELN members (Campbell et al., 2017). Ministries of education commonly reported limited capacity as a constraint to evidence use in a multi-country survey conducted by a key informant's organization.
- » **Insufficient time and funding** were common challenges identified in interviews, FGDs, and the desk review. It takes time for ELNs to build

trusting, collaborative relationships (Brown, 2019; Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011; Campbell et al., 2017). There are examples of ELNs needing two to three years to lay this foundation (Brown, 2019; Mendizabal & Hearn, 2011). It may take longer to build trust and strong relationships in ELNs that are heterogenous and span geographies (Brown, 2019). Adopting promising practices and reforms requires members to have sufficient time and change occurs over the long-term (Didriksen et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2019).

3.5 Influencing Factors within Education Systems



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Factors in the broader education system influenced the success of ELNs' efforts to support evidence use. Again, SALEX members' experiences aligned with that of other ELNs.**
- **Drivers of evidence use included availability of context-specific, accessible, and demand-driven evidence; strong stakeholder demand and engagement; and a culture of evidence use. Constraints included limited capacity, time and resource constraints, and politics and power inequities.**

Even if an ELN is well-functioning, the broader education system has a strong influence on success. We found that similar factors influence ELN success as those outlined in the frameworks on evidence use in education. The constraining factors identified through the desk review, interviews, and FGDs align with frameworks on evidence use in education. ELNs, by the nature of their organization and activities, can help address or mitigate the constraints within their sphere of influence. Other constraints in the education system are largely outside of ELNs' sphere of influence and thus more challenging for ELNs to address.

ELNs can prioritize ([Annex 2](#)) and design activities ([Annex 1](#) and [Annex 3](#)) to mitigate some categories of constraints in education systems. These are constraints that ELNs can work to address among members and those they engage using common ELN activities ([Section 3.2](#)). For example, ELNs can prioritize activities to address a lack of context-specific or synthesized evidence if those are significant constraints within the education system they are trying influence.

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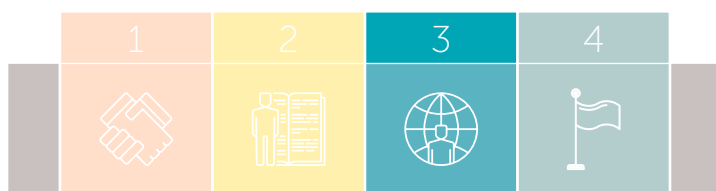
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- » **Weak networks and relationships** constrain the social and technical support that can encourage evidence use and change among stakeholders (Díaz-Gibson et al., 2023; Basuel et al., 2024).
 - » **Limited capacity on evidence use** among education system actors is a constraint identified by multiple key informants. In particular, government officials and policymakers often do not have sufficient capacity on how to digest and apply available evidence.
 - » **Lack of synthesized, accessible evidence.** Key informants reported that there is lack of evidence that is synthesized and in formats that are practical, short, and accessible, which limits policymakers' ability to use evidence.
 - » **Lack of interactive knowledge mobilization.** Beyond packaging evidence in an accessible way, interactive processes and brokerage are often needed to facilitate evidence use among education actors (Campbell et al., 2017; OECD, 2022). A key informant shared that in their experience, written products often are not enough for policymakers to adopt the evidence, no matter how short or accessibly written a brief is. Instead, policymakers need to have conversations with researchers directly to be able to digest and apply evidence.
 - » **A lack of context-specific, trusted, demand-driven evidence** is also a constraint as education actors first judge whether evidence is relevant to their context and addresses key challenges they face. Government officials need to trust the evidence that they use (Basuel et al., 2024). Key informants emphasized that government officials are more likely to use evidence that addresses a local need, is generated locally, or comes from a similar context rather than evidence from a global institution.
- Other constraints we identified are ones that ELNs are likely unable to influence. ELNs should carefully consider these constraints (Annex 2) and design activities that take these constraints into account (Annex 1 and Annex 3). For example, ELNs can engage in evidence work that aligns with political priorities and policies or that requires limited time and resources from education system actors.
- » **Politics and power inequities.** Across contexts, the effects of politics and power are strong, including leadership changes, government priority shifts, and dominance of individual actors. A key informant particularly highlighted that dominant actors in education systems can constrain evidence work. Another key informant described how long-term engagement by ELNs can outlive political lifecycles, counteracting the short-term political incentives and power shifts. The political will and buy-in of local leaders and government officials is needed to apply evidence (Sherer et al., 2020; Moriarty, 2020). Evidence and data can also be politically sensitive, which may constrain its use (Basuel et al., 2024).
 - » **Incompatible with policies and practices.** The intended reforms must be compatible with existing education policies and practices (Sherer et al., 2020; Gerdeman, Garrett, & Monahan, 2018) or policymakers must make decisions to adopt new materials or standards to enable teacher- and school-level change (Doan et al., 2022).
 - » **Limited time,** particularly among policymakers and teachers, is a significant constraint across contexts. Government officials, particularly high-level ones, often have limited time to engage with evidence (Basuel et al., 2024). OECD conducted a survey of ministries of education that found that found that a lack of time was a barrier to engaging with research. A key informant emphasized the need to identify where to save time for teachers and reduce their load to allow them to apply new practices.
 - » **Limited resources,** including poor infrastructure and insufficient school funding, can limit adoption of evidence-based practices that require physical resources (Mathematica, 2024a).

These factors align with what we identify as key ingredients needed for evidence use in the education sector more broadly, demonstrating that ELNs face similar challenges to facilitating evidence use as other types of actors and initiatives. Frameworks on evidence use in education highlight three ingredients that influence success—capacity, contextual considerations, and trust and relationships. Capacity, including both hard and soft skills, is required to translate, apply, and sustainably implement evidence-informed decisions; this includes the ability to access research, evaluate the quality of research, and comprehend research methodologies and approaches (Gough et al., 2011; Révai & Mouthaan, 2023; Rickinson et al., 2022). Contextual considerations, both related

to the enabling environment and the characteristics of system actors, play a crucial role in shaping evidence uptake. These considerations include the policy environment and whether there are windows of opportunity to influence decision-making, the relationships between knowledge producers and users, and individual characteristics of policymakers (Georgalakis & Rose, 2019; Hayter & Morales, 2023). Finally, we found that fostering trust and relationships are foundational ingredients in effective evidence uptake in the education sector. Interpersonal connections form the basis of trust and are built upon mutual respect, transparency, shared values, norms, and open communication channels (Clinton et al., 2018; Finnigan & Daly, 2014; Rickinson et al., 2022).



The Salex Member – School Evidence Pathway: Insights From Mathematica’s Learning Activity

Mathematica supports the Jacobs Foundation to monitor and evaluate SALEX and learn about the members themselves. In 2024, Mathematica conducted a learning activity to better understand SALEX members’ relationships with schools—particularly the pathways that members use to influence schools’ use of evidence to improve their teaching and learning practices. Mathematica conducted qualitative interviews with staff from six SALEX members and nineteen school leaders who work with five of those SALEX members.

SALEX Member-School Evidence Pathways

Of the SALEX members interviewed, four directly worked with schools. In characterizing their relationships with these schools, members described relatively low improvement mechanisms (e.g., having minimal power to implement policies or directly impact school operations and practices), relatively high access to school-level data, and various levels of relationship strength. Mathematica found that members generally supported schools to engage in evidence generation, translation, and use, but not all members and schools did all activities.



Evidence generation

Schools reported that SALEX members helped them generate data by providing student assessment materials and providing training and direct support to conduct student assessments.



Evidence translation

Members provided evidence to schools on a regular basis using varied approaches, including by providing schools with student learning statistics, sharing evidence from human-centered design, and developing literature reviews and learning briefs. Some members also responded to ad hoc requests for evidence from schools.



Evidence use

Schools and members analyzed student learning data to support differentiated instruction, to reflect on schools’ progress toward goals and adjust instruction, and to create reports on teacher strengths. Members provided classroom and school-level coaching on data use as requested. They also supported schools to adjust instruction based on assessments, including through coaching and support on ability grouping.

Members shared that SALEX activities helped them connect with other organizations working at the school level and access funding, both of which supported their work to improve school evidence practices.

Members reported encountering various challenges in helping schools with evidence, including obstacles at the member, school, and teacher or school leader levels. Members shared that processing school-level data can be time consuming and some members rely on other entities who directly interface with schools. Some schools are inactive for much of the year due to standardized exams and external issues (e.g., climate change effects, political unrest), and some have poor infrastructure both of which limit their ability to implement some evidence-based practices. Challenges related to teachers include high turnover and the concern that classroom data is used to assess them rather than their students. Additionally, teachers lack collaborative time, and large class sizes make it difficult for them to provide differentiated support to students.

School Evidence Practices

Mathematica interviewed schools that work with SALEX members to learn more about their evidence practices. Schools typically reported generating and using data.



Evidence generation

Schools generated data on student attendance and performance through methods like student assessments, but a few gathered more complex data (e.g., socio-emotional skills).



Evidence use

Schools analyzed data to identify subjects and students needing support and adjust instruction accordingly.

SALEX schools identified several types of support that would help them generate and use evidence. Some schools in low-resource settings expressed a need for devices to help automate assessments and analysis, as well as more training and support for teachers on assessments. In middle- and high-income settings, schools wanted timely access to data, to be able to connect assessment data to other data sources, more classroom observation data, and support on data analysis and access to analysis software. Schools, particularly those in low-resource settings, desired support to strengthen their capacity to adjust instruction in response to assessment data.

Schools also identified constraints in the enabling environment that may limit the effectiveness of SALEX support. This included having very large class sizes, which prolongs assessments, intensifies data analysis, and makes differentiated instruction challenging. Poor infrastructure, such as inadequate classrooms and electricity, makes instruction more challenging and limits the space available to provide differentiated instruction. Having volunteer or poorly trained teachers was a challenge, requiring frequent hands-on support for data analysis and use. Additionally, high turnover among students and school staff contributes to poor student attainment, requiring more frequent student assessments and staff training.

Source: Mathematica, 2024a; 2024b

1



2



3



4



4.

Conclusion and Implications

We explored two learning questions through a desk review, interviews with education experts and ELN facilitators, and FGDs with SALEX members. Our learning suggests that ELNs are well-placed to support key ingredients in evidence translation and use, including to foster trust and relationships, enhancing capacity for evidence use, and improving the evidence ecosystem. However, more research and evaluation are needed to delve deeper into the effectiveness of different activities and their applicability across diverse educational contexts and to determine what is most effective at the teacher, school, subnational, and national level.

4.1 Learning question 1

What are successful strategies that education networks can use to identify and collect evidence across the education system to best promote evidence uptake by its members?

Engaging along the full evidence lifecycle, starting with evidence generation and translation, can allow ELNs to take a systems approach to enable reforms. To support evidence generation, ELNs used participatory and collaborative approaches to generate evidence with members and other education system actors. By fostering strong relationships through evidence generation, ELNs can improve the relevance of evidence for decision-makers and establish the trust and connections needed to support evidence adoption. To support evidence translation, ELNs

curate and synthesize evidence to identify evidence and resources that address member needs and to make them accessible to members. ELNs also use consultative and participatory approaches to disseminate and discuss the implications of evidence at community and national levels. ELN members also engage in evidence translation through peer learning and exchange. Finally, fostering strong relationships between evidence producers and users facilitates evidence translation through interactive processes.

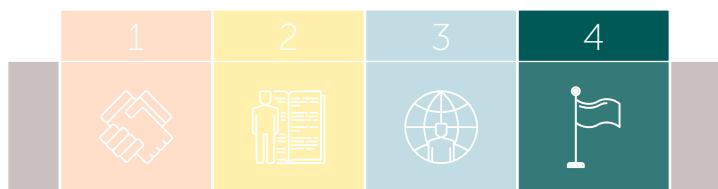
4.2 Learning question 2

How can education networks at different levels effectively support evidence use by their members?

ELNs used a combination of complementary strategies or activities to support evidence use and evidence-informed decision-making within education. We found similarities in activities, facilitators, and constraints across ELNs working at different levels of the education system. Our findings suggest that the implementation of different activities needs to be tailored to the actors involved in the ELN, but beyond case examples, we did not find enough evidence to determine what these specific implementation differences should be. To support evidence use, ELNs act as evidence brokers or intermediaries to advocate for addressing key issues and to disseminate relevant evidence. They also use peer learning and exchange to promote and share

evidence and experiences implementing evidence-based practices among ELN members. This learning and exchange is effective when ELN members have strong, trusting, and respectful relationships.

We also found that constraints cutting across levels of the education system can inhibit evidence use. These constraints include weak networks and relationships, limited capacity on evidence use, politics and power inequities, evidence-based reforms are not compatible with policies and practices, limited time and resources, a lack of synthesized and accessible evidence, a lack of interactive knowledge mobilization, and a lack of trusted evidence that is context-specific and demand-driven.



4.3 Implications and Considerations

Based on our learning, we identified several implications and considerations for ELN facilitators, members, and funders to increase the likelihood of success for their work to increase evidence use (Table 1). These are not essential or applicable to all

ELNs but are useful to consider when they align with the goals and structure of the ELN. We present the implications and considerations by the actor type and indicate how they relate to the theory of change (Figure 3).

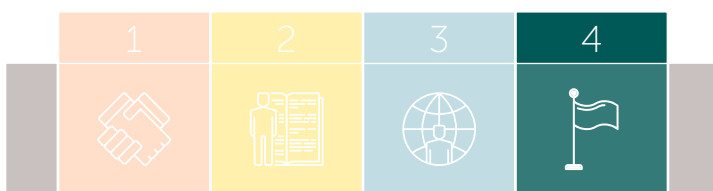
Table 1. **Implications and Considerations by Actor and Theory of Change Component**

Actor	ELN members	Theory of Change Component	ELN performance
	ELN facilitators		Influencing Factors within ELNs
	ELN funders		Influencing Factors within education systems
Actor	TOC	<p>ELN members should identify specific goals or objectives for their ELN engagement to ensure strong commitment and increase the benefits of participation. These goals should be set at both the organizational level and potentially the individual level. For example, an organizational goal could be to apply findings from an ELN’s evidence generation activity during curriculum revisions or policy development. Individuals who participate in an ELN on their organization’s behalf may also want to set personal goals, such as to strengthen their knowledge and skills on specific evidence generation approaches for the classroom.</p>	
		<p>ELN members should identify feasible actions or small nudges where they can influence the education system to generate or use evidence. This may include identifying opportunities to pilot an innovation, creating an incentive for their schools to adopt new curriculum or tools, or providing capacity strengthening opportunities for educators with whom they work.</p>	
		<p>ELN facilitators and members need to be knowledgeable about the education system and context in which they work, including awareness of policy windows that may present opportunities to apply evidence. Opportune policy windows can include advocating for evidence use during development or revisions of government education plans or strategies and curriculum reviews. Or they may present smaller opportunities like leveraging an education policy roundtable or convening.</p>	
		<p>ELN facilitators and members should invest time and resources in developing trusting, strong relationships between members in the ELN’s early years to set a foundation for collaboration and mutual support for evidence use. Regular, in-person meetings and events, with ample time for informal networking, and facilitating meaningful conversations are particularly effective for relationship building.</p>	
		<p>ELN facilitators can make use of existing resources on how to build strong collaborative learning networks as a well-functioning ELN is a prerequisite to successful evidence uptake work. For example, ELN facilitators should build a foundation of shared goals and trust, ensure ELN activities are demand-driven by members, and facilitate opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange. Results for Development’s collaborative learning toolkit and e-learning course provide resources and concrete, how-to strategies on each of these topics, among others.</p>	

Actor	ELN members
	ELN facilitators
	ELN funders

Theory of Change Component	ELN performance
	Influencing Factors within ELNs
	Influencing Factors within education systems

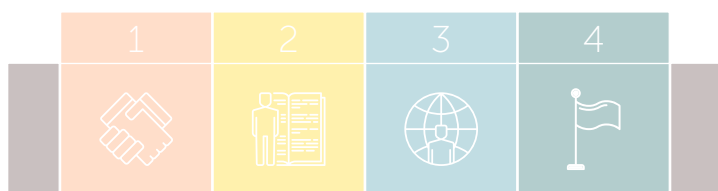
Actor	TOC	
		<p>Developing, monitoring, and evaluating a theory of change for ELNs can help ELN facilitators to better assess and adapt activities to meet the ELN’s goals, including to improve evidence use. Annex 3 provides an ELN theory of change that facilitators can adapt for their ELN along with steps to tailor and monitor the theory of change.</p>
		<p>ELN facilitators should consider how to engage members along the whole evidence lifecycle to support demand-driven evidence generation, effective evidence mobilization, and buy-in to support evidence use and evidence-based decision-making. ELN facilitators can use a combination of complementary activities to engage along this evidence lifecycle. Annex 1 provides a menu of activities that ELN facilitators can use along the evidence lifecycle and Section 3.2 gives examples of these activities in practice. Annex 3 provides a resource to help ELNs review their theory of change and consider how to better support evidence use.</p>
		<p>ELNs should carefully consider the unique capacities, incentives, and policies of the education systems they want to influence (e.g., education strategies or plans, curriculum standards). For example, in areas where financial incentives exist for teacher development, ELNs can focus on scaling evidence-based training programs to align with and enhance these incentives. This will help the ELN focus its work on areas and innovations where there is a sufficient enabling environment for reforms. Factors in the enabling environment can constrain ELNs’ work to support evidence use, so considering these constraints at the outset and designing ELN activities to mitigate against them can help set ELNs up for success. Annex 2 provides a drivers and constraints analysis checklist that ELN facilitators can use to help analyze the enabling environment.</p>
		<p>ELN funders should prioritize sufficient funding opportunities for members to build trust and relationships (e.g. via in-person convenings), and to directly collaborate with each other (e.g, grants for joint projects). Trust and strong, collaborative relationships are central to ELN functioning and thus a prerequisite to effectively supporting evidence use.</p>
		<p>ELN funders should allow for ELN work on evidence generation, translation, and use to be driven by the goals and shared interests of members, informed by the demand of the intended users of evidence, and adapted to education system constraints. This requires flexibility on the part of funders during the ELN design and inception phase as well as throughout the life of the ELN at key milestones or decision points.</p>
		<p>ELN funders should be transparent about funding plans and shifts with ELN facilitators and members and should plan to support ELNs over at least a five-to-six-year period. This timeline allows for necessary ELN establishment and relationship building in the first two to three years and for in-depth evidence work and scaling in the remaining years. Our learning suggests that these timeframes tend to work well for ELNs.</p>
		<p>In addition to financial resources, ELN funders often have power and influence with policymakers, which they can leverage to support an enabling environment for evidence use to complement ELN activities. For example, funders can directly advocate in support of evidence use with policymakers or help ELNs identify policy windows.</p>



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Annex 1.

Menu of Activities for Education Learning Networks

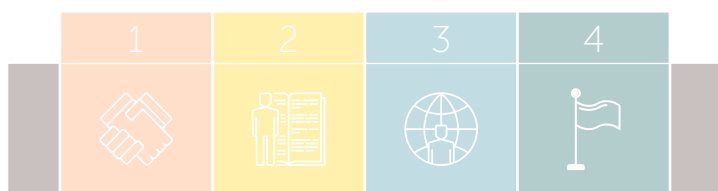
The table below shows different activities that ELNs can use to support evidence generation, translation, and use. We also provide links to useful resources for each activity.⁶










When considering which activities to use, ELNs can consider in consultation with their membership:

- » What is our evidence related goal?
- » What types of support do our members need to achieve this goal?
- » What activities do we have the time, resources, and capacity to implement?

Activity	Specific Activities	Evidence Lifecycle Stage			Resources
		Evidence generation	Evidence translation	Evidence use	
Capacity strengthening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Training » Coaching » Mentoring » Professional learning and skills building 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Results for Development's Facilitating Collaborative Learning: An open-access, e-learning orientation series (2023) » InHive's Social Change Networks Playbook for Practitioners and Funders (2022) » Champions for 'Life': How to identify, support, and evaluate advocates for social change (Coe et al., 2021) » Working for solutions: a problem-based and relationship-centred approach to building capacity to use research evidence in Africa (Stewart et al., 2017)
Participatory evidence generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Citizen-led assessments » Action research » Collaborative inquiry » Continuous improvement » Piloting and scaling research 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Fito Network's Collaborative Impact Methods Kit (n.d.) » Evidence for Improvement: An Integrated Analytic Approach for Supporting Networks (Sherer et al., 2020)

⁶ Note: Many of the resources, such as Global School Forum's Action Toolkit, span multiple themes and activities. While they don't fit neatly into a single category, we hope the resources provided are useful for strengthening your network's evidence generation, translation, and use.



Activity	Specific Activities	Evidence Lifecycle Stage			Resources
		Evidence generation	Evidence translation	Evidence use	
Curating and synthesizing evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Compiling resources » Literature reviews » Synthesizing local knowledge » Convenings 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Curating Research Data Volume Two: A Handbook of Current Practice (Johnston, 2017) » Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (2023) » USAID's Integrating Local Knowledge in Development Programming (2022) » CARE International's Integrating Local Knowledge in Humanitarian and Development Programming: Perspectives of Global Women Leaders (2023)
Advocacy and dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Policy roundtables » Sharing resources in networks 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Designing A Dissemination Strategy: Turning Evidence Into Action (Chernitskiy, 2023) » UNESCO's A primer for engaging education stakeholders in policy reviews (2020) » Advocacy Accelerator's Library of Resources (n.d.) » Pollicy's Digital Advocacy Toolkit (2020) » Global School Leader's How to Scale with Government Toolkit (2024)
Peer learning and exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Informal sharing » Teacher-to-teacher learning » Exchange visits » Peer exchange as part of capacity strengthening 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » World Bank Group's The Art of Knowledge Exchange: A Results-Focused Planning Guide for Development Practitioners (2012)
Fostering and strengthening relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Link evidence users and producers » Build connections and community » Interactive knowledge processes 				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » INASP's Evidence-Informed Policy Making (EIPM) Toolkit (2016) » Global School Forum's All Hands on Deck for SDG 4 Action Toolkit (2024) » The Engagement Toolkit (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005) » The Community Toolbox

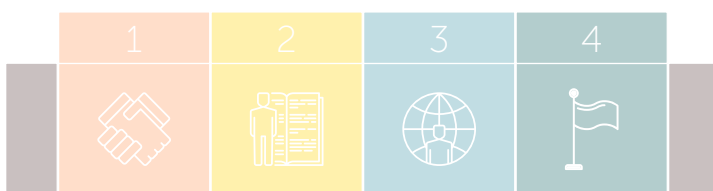
Annex 2.

Drivers and Constraints Analysis Checklist

ELNs can use the following checklist to prioritize drivers and constraints to evidence use and identify supporting actions and actors to either leverage the drivers or mitigate the constraints.

ELNs can facilitate use of the checklist during a participatory workshop or meeting:

1. Determine or reiterate the evidence use goal that you will focus on.
2. Brainstorm drivers that are or are likely to be supportive of your goal in the relevant context and indicate the relative importance of the driver. Use empty rows to add drivers that are not listed.
3. Brainstorm constraints that are or are likely to be supportive of your goal in the relevant context and indicate the relative importance of the constraint. Use empty rows to add constraints that are not listed.
4. For the medium and/or high importance drivers, brainstorm actions the ELN can undertake that can leverage or support the driver. For each action, also brainstorm actors that can support these actions.
5. For the medium and/or high importance constraints, brainstorm actions the ELN can undertake that can mitigate or address the constraint. For each action, also brainstorm actors that can support these actions.



Evidence use goal		[List evidence use goal]		
Drivers	Importance (low/medium/high) (consider presence, ease of leveraging)	Supporting Actions (for medium/high importance)	Supporting Actors (for medium/high importance)	Notes
Strong networks and relationships				
Strong, accessible evidence				
Strong political support or incentives				
Alignment with policies and practices				
Strong capacity				
Sufficient time				
Sufficient resources				
Constraint	Importance (low/medium/high) (consider presence, ease of leveraging)	Supporting Actions (for medium/high importance)	Supporting Actors (for medium/high importance)	Notes
Weak networks and relationships				
Weaknesses in available evidence				
Limited political support or incentives				
Incompatible policies and practices				
Limited capacity				
Limited time				
Limited resources				

Source: Adapted from <https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/change/articles/force-field>

Annex 3.

Reviewing Your ELN Theory of Change

A theory of change is one framework for understanding the potential impact of an activity, based on expected pathways or causal chains linking interventions to outcomes and assumptions. We drafted a theory of change showing how ELNs can contribute to evidence use.

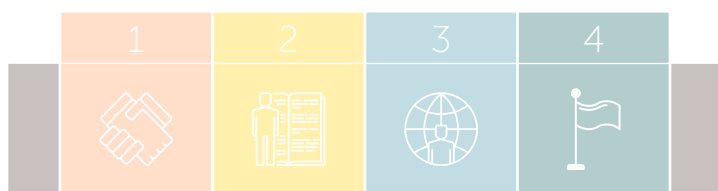
ELNs can use the theory of change, tailor it to their own work, and then use it as a tool to guide reflection on progress and challenges.

» **Step 1:** Tailor the theory of change. Typically, it is useful to work backwards when developing or tailoring a theory of change. First, develop a vision statement, providing a summary of your ELN's high level goals and a summary of how ELN activities will lead to those goals. Then determine the expected/anticipated contribution to impact and outcomes among and/or beyond members that is relevant given your ELN goals. Your ELN may not aim to contribute to impacts or outcomes both among members and beyond members. When determining expected impacts and outcomes, consider:

- » What change needs to occur to achieve our goals?
- » Which changes can we influence (e.g., given ELN scope, resources, timeline, capacity)?
- » What changes do we hope will happen as a result of our activities?

Next, determine what activities you will implement to achieve the intended outcomes and the direct outputs that will result from those activities. Finally, consider what must be true about the context or ELN to allow these activities to lead to the desired outcomes. Annex 2 can be used to inform this.

» **Step 2:** Reflect on theory of change progress. It is useful to reflect on theory of change progress at key decision points, such as during annual planning or in response to emerging issues or unexpected opportunities. Internal monitoring data or performance indicators can be mapped to the elements of the theory of change to track progress. Practitioner knowledge from ELN facilitators and members is a valuable data source to reflect on the theory of change to complement monitoring and performance data or in lieu of such data. You can gather this practitioner knowledge through participatory reflection meetings. For each theory of change pathway, determine whether you are on track to achieving the outcomes or impacts given the stage of the work. If you are not on track, consider what challenges are inhibiting progress, whether related to implementation, factors within the ELN, or in the enabling environment. For those challenges, brainstorm the root causes of those challenges and options for addressing them. If you are on track, reflect on what is contributing to success in those areas and how you may be able to further that success or apply lessons to areas needing improvement. For challenges and successes, prioritize any adaptations you may want to make in the coming quarter or year. If you find that you do not have sufficient information to judge progress, think about ways to test documenting progress before the next theory of change reflection, such as through an issues and successes tracker, strengthening grant reporting, or developing monitoring indicators.



- » **Step 3:** Develop action plan. If the team identifies priority adaptations based on step 2, action planning is an important next step to develop a concrete plan to implement the adaptations in the near-term. Relevant teams or stakeholders can develop an action plan by answering the following questions:
 - » **Adaptation** — What is the adaptation we will make based on the findings?
 - » **Tasks** — What are the specific tasks needed to implement this adaptation?
 - » **Person responsible** — Who can take ownership for planning and implementation for the task?
 - » **Resources** — What resources, including budget or staff time, are needed?
 - » **Timeline** — When is the task feasible to implement? How long will it take?
 - » **Next steps** — What needs to happen next to complete planning for this? What support do you need? What questions do you still have?

