



SCOPING STUDY: Evidence Translators' Role in Evidence-Informed Policymaking

A Brief on Evidence Translation and Translators

Results for Development's study on evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) focuses on *translation* — an active process through which actors identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence for the purposes of policymaking. The objective of our research, which involved three stages, was to explore factors that enable and constrain evidence translators' ability to effectively support EIP. In a first stage, we developed a framework that defines key terms and identifies factors to investigate. In our second phase, we conducted primary research around two unfolding translation cases to test our framework in those cases. Finally, we performed a limited validation exercise of findings by reviewing five existing case studies.

This brief summarizes the framework and findings from the three phases of our research.

Translation and Translators: A Definitional and Theoretical Framework

As part of the first phase of our research, we developed a definitional and theoretical framework based on a review of the literature and consultations with experts.

Defining translation

Evidence translation is an active process in which agency is essential at every step; people, organizations and networks drive the translation process. Rather than relying on the passive transfer of information, translators identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence for the purposes of policymaking, in a number of different contexts and operating under various types of constraints. Translators can be evidence producers, decision makers and intermediaries; they can operate alone or collectively to achieve specific goals.

About translation

- **Translation involves choice.** Translators make conscious changes to the knowledge they are using: they choose between alternatives and they determine what the right information is, and for whom it is right. It is therefore a political, rather than a solely technocratic, process.¹
- **Translation involves policymakers seeing the relevance of certain knowledge to their agenda.** As an outcome of the translation process, policymakers understand how evidence relates to their agenda, what the evidence says and how it should inform policymaking.²
- **Translation can involve policy transfer and adaptation.** We can define it as “The process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and ideas in another political system.”³
- **Translation can be iterative.** Rather than a linear process, translation often involves repeated interactions among researchers, decision-makers, evidence and translators.⁴
- **Translators can have a variety of formal roles.** These include think tank analysts, trusted advisors, bureaucrats, journalists and policymakers and researchers themselves, among others.
- **Credibility is more important than formal title.** Wherever translators come from, their success depends on their degree of credibility with policymakers.⁵

- **Translation is not always an intermediary function.** Though translation is often conceived of as a function performed by intermediaries, it can take place through direct interaction between researchers (or research) and decision-makers without the aid of an intermediary.⁶

Defining translators

Evidence translators are individuals and organizations who identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence so that it informs policy. Translators can be evidence producers: those individuals and organizations whose primary role in the evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) ecosystem is to carry out research, evaluation and other forms of investigation to produce evidence. Translators can be policymakers themselves. Finally, translators may be intermediaries; they may formally be journalists, staff at non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocates, independent consultants, or researchers based in academic institutions, think tanks, or government units.

The evidence producer, policymaker and intermediary role types are stylized and far from mutually exclusive. While in rare cases evidence translation involves three distinct actors — (1) a researcher who produces evidence that is translated by (2) an intermediary to inform (3) a policymaker — more often than not, the lines are blurred. A research organization may perform translator duties, such as repackaging evidence and sharing it with a policymaker audience through briefs and meetings. Similarly, policymakers and their staff may access, filter and translate existing evidence to directly inform policy. In practice, translation is an iterative process carried out by many actors along the way — these translators are evidence producers,

¹ R. Freeman, “What is translation?”, *Evidence and Policy*, 5, 4, (2009): <http://bit.ly/2usmUUw>

² G. Bennett and N. Jessani (Eds.), *The Knowledge Translation Toolkit*, IDRC: 2011.

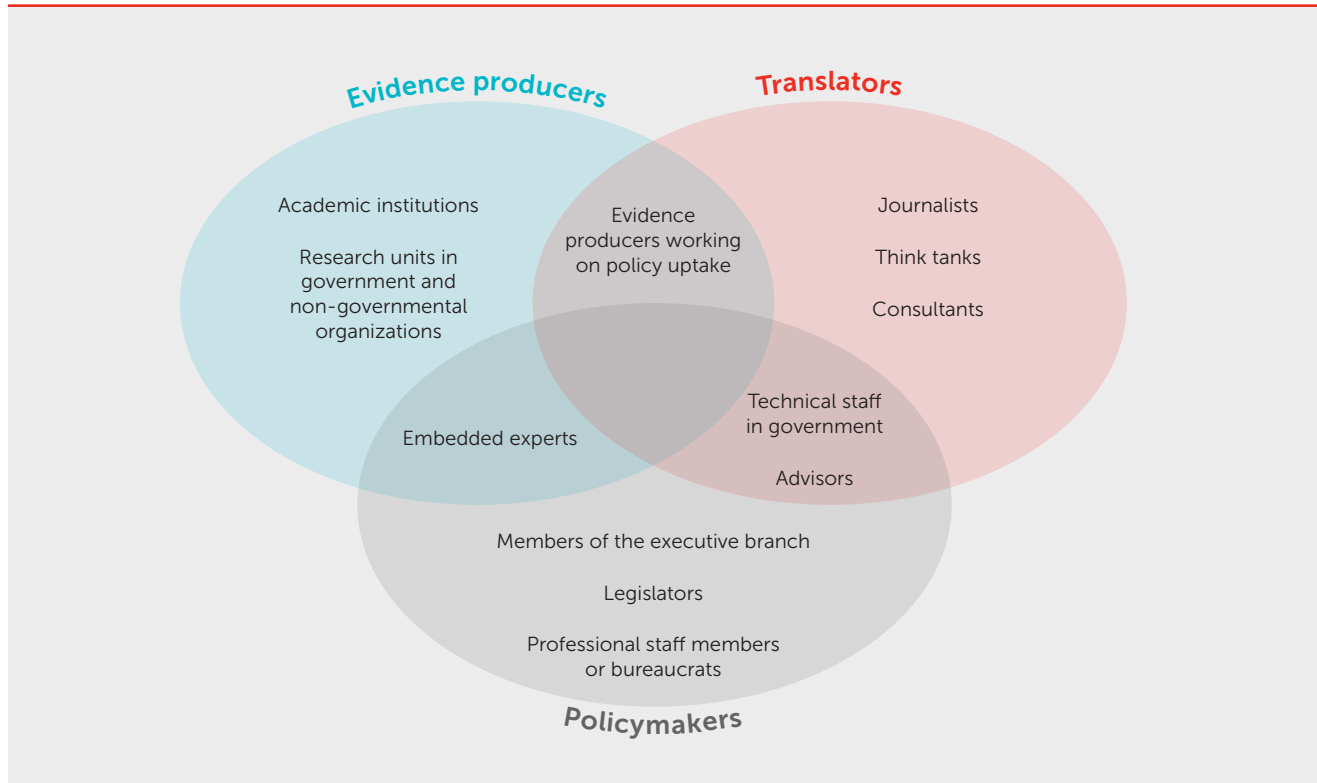
³ T. Legrand, “Overseas and over here: policy transfer and evidence-based policy-making”, *Policy Studies*, 33, 4, (July 2012).

⁴ DfID, “Impact of research on international development”; Lavis, et al., “Research Organizations...Research Knowledge”.

⁵ J. Shonkoff, “Science, Policy, and Practice: Three Cultures in Search of a Shared Mission”, *Child Development*, 71, 1, (January/February 2000): <http://bit.ly/2tygJBP>

⁶ C. Cvitanovic, et al., “Improving knowledge exchange among scientists and decision-makers to facilitate the adaptive governance of marine resources: A review of knowledge and research needs”, *Ocean and Coastal Management*, 112, (August 2015): <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569115001167>

FIGURE 1: Key Stakeholders in a Stylized Evidence-Informed Policy Ecosystem. Authors, 2017.



policymakers and intermediaries. The figure above provides a visual representation of how these different roles might intersect and overlap.

This is just one stylized example; the translator role may be taken on by different stakeholders in different contexts. Legislators might be translators in certain contexts, some research units in NGOs also serve as translators and in practice, technical staff in government do not always have influence on policymaking. For the purposes of our study, we considered any individual fulfilling a translation role to be a translator, regardless of his or her official title.

Research Questions

Our research questions were organized around two typologies: agency and constraints. Agency refers to translator characteristics such as their relationship to policymakers, their credibility and their skills, which we theorized impact translators' ability to perform their role effectively. Constraints are the exogenous factors beyond translator characteristics – including the nature and functioning of the policymaking system,

policymakers' background and position, issue politics and other political factors, and the nature of the evidence – that facilitate or obstruct evidence translation and uptake. Our primary and secondary research was designed to answer these research questions to identify key characteristic and constraint factors that facilitate or prevent the use of research in the policymaking process, with the hopes of shedding light on how to increase the effectiveness of the translation process.

Translation and Translators: Key Findings from our Primary and Secondary Research

In the second and third stages of our project, we conducted primary research around two unfolding translation cases and secondary research by reviewing five case studies developed by Yale's School of Management and the Transfer Project. The findings from these research phases are presented below.

Translation Function and Translator Roles

- Our research confirmed that **translation is an essential function** and that, absent individuals or organizations taking up the translator role, evidence translation and evidence-informed policymaking do not take place. Our research

Translation as an essential function

In the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) case in Ghana, the authors make clear that impact evidence itself was not sufficient to promote EIP; the *translation* of the evidence is what helped shift the narrative around the program and increase support for LEAP:

“The focus of donors and external commentators on LEAP, and the production of evidence on its impact would not, alone, have changed the national perception of the programme. Rather, we conclude, *the accompanying strategy to actually use the evidence, communicate it, translate it into advocacy, and integrate it directly into national dialogue has been instrumental.*”

Similarly, the Graduating the Ultra Poor (GUP) case highlights how, in the absence of translation activities including stakeholder engagement and co-creation, compelling evidence will not inform policymaking:

“The most critical way in which IPA, CGAP, and [the] Ford Foundation did not design GUP for greater translation and integration of evidence into practice was by not engaging policymakers as official partners and co-creators early on in the program’s design and throughout implementation. This would have allowed policymakers greater understanding of the program’s design and cost structure, its ambitious goals, and most importantly, could have incorporated elements that would have rendered the program more tailored to scale-up in Ghana.”

validates our definition of *translation* as an active process in which agency is essential at every step. Rather than relying on the passive transfer of information, **translators identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence for the purposes of policymaking.**

- As we hypothesized, **translators can hold a range of formal roles**; they can be research or policy staff at research and evaluation organizations, academic researchers, technical staff within ministries and government agencies, ministers and other government officials and independent experts.

The Diversity of Translators' Formal Roles in Practice

The cases we researched and reviewed demonstrate the diversity of formal roles held by those who carry out the translation function. Translators in these cases were **government officials** working at the municipal level (for example, the sub-secretary of Political Reform and Legislative Affairs for the City of Buenos Aires) and at the national level (including Ghana’s minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection and her technical team and Mexico’s deputy minister of Finance). Translators were also **academic researchers** and **staff at research and intermediary organizations** such as The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). Finally, translators were **experts at governmental agencies** (such as Ghana’s National Health Insurance Authority) as well as **independent experts** (including the executive director of the African Health Economics and Policy Association). **See Table 1 for further information.**

TABLE 1: Translator types

Case	Translator type	Translators
RTI regime review, Buenos Aires	Government official, appointed by Buenos Aires' head of government	Sub-Secretary of Political Reform and Legislative Affairs for the City of Buenos Aires Hernán Charosky
NHIS review, Ghana	Government-appointed experts from within and outside of government	NHIS Independent Technical Review Committee, led by Chris Atim, executive director of the African Health Economics and Policy Association and senior program director at Results for Development
Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness (CALIE), South Africa	Research and intermediary organization (The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)) and academic researchers	J-PAL's research team and study principal investigators
Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP), Ghana	Policymaker and ministerial staff	The Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection Nana Oye Lithur and her technical team
Progres-Oportunidades (Progres), Mexico	Government technical staff and trusted advisors	Deputy Minister of Finance Dr. Santiago Levy; Dr. José Gómez de León, chair of the National Council of Population (CONAPO), then National Coordination of Progres
Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI), Ghana	Evidence producer and implementing organizations	Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and Pratham
Graduation of the Ultra-Poor (GUP), Ghana	No one took on the role of translator; it could have been a research and intermediary organization	No one took on the role of translator; it could have been Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Key Translator Skills and Characteristics

- **Translator credibility** was consistently depicted as crucial to translators' ability to gain access to policymakers and to promote the uptake of evidence. Policymakers' **prior interactions** with translators, translators' **relevant training and expertise**, demonstrated **ability to co-create productively** and an **alignment between policymakers' and translators' objectives** were most important in building translators' credibility.

Translator Credibility in Practice

One interviewee highlighted the credibility of members of Ghana's national health insurance scheme review committee as follows:

"These technical committee members [had] years of experience. They had worked in and around the NHIS for a lot of time. They are respected people. They have high integrity in society. They are people who everybody looks up to."

- The translator skills described as most important were **political savvy** and **stakeholder engagement**, two skills that are closely connected. We define *political savvy* as the ability to identify obstacles to translation and evidence uptake and to develop strategies to overcome them. *Stakeholder engagement* is a key strategy and skill to overcome some of the most common obstacles to evidence uptake, including political contestation and lack of buy-in.

Political Savvy in Practice

In the Buenos Aires case, interviewees defined *political savvy* as a mental “map” of the particular policy process, understanding the different actors, their motivations to support or inhibit the process and where and how translators should intervene. Translators in this case demonstrated their political savvy by consulting with people who might not agree with what they wanted to do, in order to understand — and to some extent address — the concerns of all parties and to obtain their buy-in into the process.

Politically savvy is a key translator characteristic in the Progresá case as well:

“Both Levy and Gómez de León were technocrats but showed sensitivity towards political and operational constraints.”

“Mr. Levy [...] is regarded as an agile leader who oversaw the necessary political negotiations.”

Stakeholder Engagement in Practice

The GUP case highlights the cost of not engaging with key stakeholders, including policymakers:

“It could be argued that GUP’s results and its positive benefit-cost ratio alone should have motivated key stakeholders in Ghana to scale up the program. Yet, failure to engage these stakeholders from the beginning [...] affected their ultimate reactions to the program’s results, and unnecessarily constrained GUP’s impact to its contribution of evidence to the broader Graduation Program.”

- The validation exercise did not identify **analytical skills** and the **ability to adapt, transform and communicate evidence** as key stand-alone translator skills. Our interpretation is not that analytical skills are unimportant, but rather, that being a credible translator implies a certain level of analytical competency and technical expertise, particularly when the translator is a research organization or unit within the government. *Translation*, which was at the core of all but one of our cases, can best be defined by the terms *adaptation*, *transformation* and *communication*. The lack of consistent mention of these essential translator skills can best be explained by the fact that the secondary research cases were not written with a focus on translators, the intricacies of translation and the skills it requires.

Constraining Factors

- While conducive **policymaking systems** undoubtedly facilitate evidence generation and translation, our research found that effective translators with the right skills can operate successfully in less-than-ideal systems by managing and mitigating systemic challenges.
- **Issue politics and other political factors matter.** Translators are more likely to be effective in cases where **the focus issue is politically salient** but there is no consensus around how

to address it. Elections may have an effect on translation, but we were unable to detect a consistent effect. Finally, **translation is most effective when initiated by those in power or when translators place those in power at the center of their efforts.**

- While not insurmountable, **resource constraints** should be considered and managed carefully by translators and their supporters, as they can jeopardize otherwise promising cases of evidence translation and uptake.

Resource Constraints in Practice

The Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI) case highlights the importance of having resources for scaling promising models:

“The last important consideration [...] is the role that resource availability played in the failure of the project to scale following evaluation. While a variety of factors, especially the reconfiguration of the [National Youth Employment Program] NYEP, affected the opportunity to scale the evidence from TCAI, the lack of new, dedicated resources to support adoption was also a key barrier.”

In the CALIE case, the authors highlight the value of flexible or unrestricted funding for evidence translators:

“Because J-PAL has received stable, unrestricted funding from core donors (on top of its more variable, project-related funding), it has been able to spend some of its resources in a flexible manner that can be responsive to the policymaking environment. J-PAL has used this funding to form strong relationships with the government of South Africa through workshops and other networking/knowledge sharing events, which facilitated the creation and development of the labor policy project described in this case study.”

Political Salience in Practice

In the Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness (CALIE) case, J-PAL's decision to focus on unemployment, an “extremely pressing political issue” was instrumental in garnering the South African government's interest, collaboration and buy-in:

“J-PAL Africa strategically chose to work on this labor-related project because the government would be more responsive, since unemployment was a politically critical issue in South Africa. As a result, the government was keen to work with the researchers in a timely way.”

Nature of the Evidence

- While policymakers tend to be most receptive to **impact evidence** – the gold standard of evidence – **other types of rigorous evidence, as well as less rigorous evidence, including direct experience and observation** (or experiential evidence) often play an important complementary role by contextualizing the evidence, providing insight into potential issues that need further investigation and convincing individuals to whom quantitative evidence does not speak.

The Value of Different Types of Evidence in Practice

Impact or other rigorous evidence was at the center of most of the cases we reviewed and, in many instances, the rigor of the evidence was key to convincing policymakers to consider and take up the evidence. More surprising, however, was the fact that less rigorous, and in some cases anecdotal, evidence and direct observation played an important role in four of our seven cases. This non-impact evidence was varied and included:

- **Reports by beneficiaries or users** of their experience with the focus policy or program.
 - Those leading the review processes in Ghana and Buenos Aires created opportunities for beneficiaries of the national health insurance scheme and users of the right to information regime to share their experiences and concerns with the policies in both oral and written formats.
- **Observation** of a policy or program in action.
 - In the TCAI case, Ghanaian policymakers observed Pratham's successful Teaching at the Right Level program (TaRL) in India and later at pilot sites in Ghana.
- **Peer sharing and learning** between policymakers and practitioners considering a new program and those who have successfully implemented it.
 - Senior representatives from several Ghanaian ministries visited Brazil and Colombia to learn from their peers about successful conditional cash transfers there in the context of LEAP.
 - Pratham met with the Ghanaian government to convince them of the value of TaRL and impact evaluation.

Our research finds that direct observation and qualitative and anecdotal evidence can be a powerful complement to rigorous evidence in EIP, providing context and convincing individuals at a more visceral level than quantitative evaluation results.

From the TCAI case:

"Also important were visits to Accra by Pratham, the NGO that pioneered [Teaching at the Right Level] TaRL in India, to help IPA convince the Ghanaian government of the value of both TaRL and randomized evaluations. Pratham visited several times while IPA was working to build support within the Ghanaian government and find a project funder, and later IPA organized trips to India for [Ghana Education Service] GES staff to observe Pratham's implementation first-hand."

"[W]e heard from senior [Ghana Education Service] GES staff about the strong impression made by their monitoring visits to TCAI schools, and how those visits were key to their own belief in the potential of the program."



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