SCOPING STUDY:

Evidence Translators' Role In Evidence-Informed Policymaking

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Policymaking is a complex process, running from agenda setting to policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation. There is a growing consensus that policymaking should be informed by evidence, and efforts are multiplying to support evidence-informed policymaking around the world. Understanding the actors and processes that bridge the gap between evidence and policymaking is key to enhancing their effectiveness. While a universe of ill-defined terms exists to describe the process by which evidence and ideas move into policy, our study focuses on *translation* — an active process through which different actors identify, filter, interpret, adapt, contextualize and communicate evidence for the purposes of policymaking, rather than passively transferring evidence. *Translator*s can be evidence producers, policymakers, or intermediaries such as journalists, advocates and expert advisors. Those who support evidence-informed policymaking need a better understanding of who translators are and how different factors influence translators' ability to promote the use of evidence in policymaking.

Our study's objective was to explore factors that enable and constrain translators' ability to effectively support evidence-informed policymaking (EIP). We carried out our research in three main stages. We first developed a definitional and theoretical framework based on a review of the literature, which includes definitions of *policymaking, evidence* and *translation*, as well as a set of research questions about key enabling and constraining factors that might affect evidence translators' influence. In a second phase, we conducted primary research around two unfolding translation cases to test our framework in those cases. The first case focuses on Ghana's blue-ribbon commission formed by the country's president in 2015, which was tasked with reviewing Ghana's national health insurance scheme. The second case looks at Buenos Aires' 2016 government-led review of the city's right to information (RTI) regime. Finally, we performed a limited validation exercise of findings by reviewing five secondary case studies developed by Yale's School of Management and the Transfer Project.

Key Findings

- Our research confirmed our hypothesis 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 validated 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.

- **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.

- The translator skills described as most critical 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.

- The validation exercise did not identify **analytical skills** and the **ability to adapt, transform and communicate evidence** as important 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 a research unit within the government. *Translation*, which was at the core of all but one of our cases, can best be defined by the terms *adaption, 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.

- While conducive policymaking systems undoubtedly facilitate evidence generation and translation, our research found that **effective translators 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 unsurmountable, **resource constraints** should be considered and managed carefully by translators, as they can jeopardize otherwise promising cases of evidence translation and uptake.

- 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, contextualizing the evidence, providing insight into potential issues that need further investigation and convincing individuals to whom quantitative evidence does not speak.

Implications for Researchers and Intermediaries

Our research makes clear that evidence translation does not happen organically and that individuals or organizations need to take on the translator role for evidence to inform policymaking. Researchers and intermediary organizations are often well placed to take on this role. Our findings have implications for what researchers — inside and outside the government — can do to generate evidence that is more likely to be translated, as well as for how they can take on the translator role or work with intermediaries assuming that role.

- Researchers can enhance the likelihood that their research will inform policymaking by *focusing their research on politically salient issues and policy-relevant questions.*

- Researchers need to proactively plan for evidence translation by *taking on some or all aspects of the translator role or by working with intermediaries* well placed to play that role.

- Researchers and intermediaries planning to play a translation role must *develop key characteristics and skills including political savvy and credibility.*

- Researchers or the intermediaries they work with need to plan for and *dedicate significant time and effort to policymaker engagement, relationship building and co-creation* as these activities are crucial to laying the groundwork for research to inform policy.

- Throughout any project, researchers and their partners should *adapt and communicate existing and new research so that it is accessible and convincing to policymakers.*

- Researchers and their partners should be open to *generating or leveraging different types of evidence, including less rigorous evidence, to complement impact evidence.*

Implications for Policymakers

As the ultimate users of evidence in the evidence-informed policymaking ecosystem, policymakers have an important role to play in fostering evidence generation, translation and uptake. They can promote evidence-informed policymaking by championing EIP generally, as well as by championing individual evidence-informed policies.

- Policymakers can *initiate and support the development and institutionalization of evaluation and EIP systems within government.*

- Policymakers can also promote EIP by *empowering government officials and offices to conduct policy-relevant research and reviews.*

- Policymakers should *engage with researchers and intermediaries interested in co-designing politically salient, policy-relevant research*. Ideal partners are individuals and organizations that are credible across the political spectrum, politically savvy about policymaking constraints and committed to co-creating the research project. In such cases, policymakers and their staff should participate actively, providing input to ensure that the research project is relevant, tailored to the context and potentially scalable.

Implications for Development Partners

Our findings have a number of implications for development partners (DPs) interested in supporting translators and evidence-informed policymaking.

- DPs have an opportunity to support translation and the uptake of evidence by *calling attention to the translation function, producing further evidence about when and how translators and translation can be effective and documenting and sharing best practices.*

- DPs can provide *support to individuals and organizations* — within and outside of the government — *that have the potential to play a translation role*. Support may take the shape of brokering connections with policymakers and potential partners, training and mentoring for the translator skills that need to be developed and resources to carry out this function. In particular, development partners may want to *consider flexible funding that non-governmental grantees can use to invest in skills development and in building relationships with policymakers and other partners.*

- DPs should prioritize *working with individuals and organizations known for their credibility and political savvy*. Political savvy requires a practical understanding of the political economy context, an awareness of key stakeholders' incentives and a sense of when, where and how to intervene. Typically, such actors are deeply embedded in the context; while they are often domestic actors, external actors with a deep understanding of the context and strong relationships with key stakeholders can also be effective translators.

- DPs can help *develop translators' credibility by advising partners on how to build credibility and the skills essential to credibility*, including political savvy and stakeholder engagement skills.

- While our research did not explicitly validate the importance of some of the skills that are typically considered key to evidence translation, DPs should *continue to support the development of essential translation skills, particularly analytical skills and the ability to adapt, transform and communicate evidence.*

- DPs should *support EIP efforts across contexts, including where such efforts are not the norm, since this is often where they are most needed*. In challenging policymaking contexts, DPs should focus on supporting translators' political savvy and stakeholder-engagement skills as translators' ability to mitigate challenges will be key to their success.

- DPs can *enable translators to overcome resource constraints* by supporting the development of translators' skills and by helping secure funding for the scale-up of proven initiatives where financial constraints are the most important obstacle to evidence uptake.

- DPs should *support translators in their complementary use of non-impact evidence and less rigorous evidence*, including direct experience and observation, to enable policymakers and other key stakeholders to "observe" the evidence first hand.

- DPs should also *encourage translators to initiate and participate in evidence-informed participatory processes* that enable a wide range of evidence and perspectives to be shared and considered.

- DPs also have an important role in *supporting reformist government officials interested in developing evidence-informed policymaking system.* They can provide support, including financial resources and technical assistance, promote knowledge-sharing and learning and help ensure that evidence from evaluations is actually used to inform policies. While this longer-term strategy does not provide direct and immediate support to translators, it promotes the development and institutionalization of evidence generation and translation systems within the government — EIP advocates' ultimate goal.
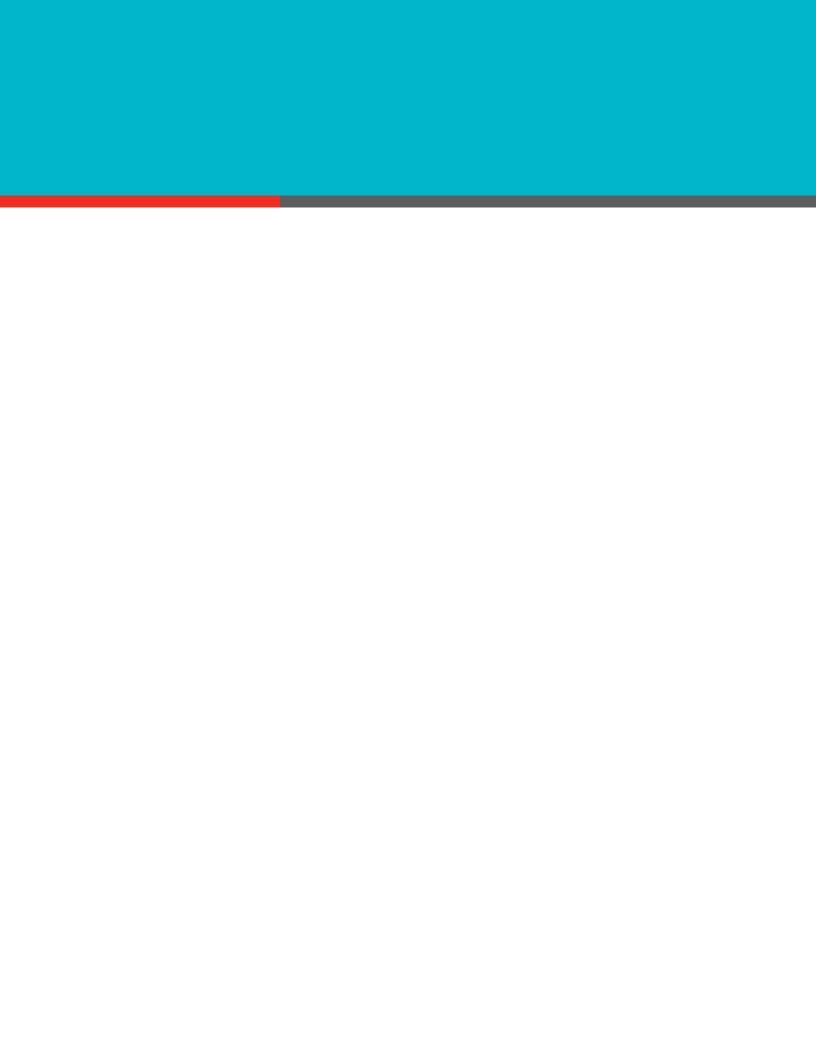
Contributions to the Field and Next Steps

The contributions of the overall research approach to the field are considerable. In an area where little was known about evidence translators, the findings of this study have identified several factors that enable and constrain translators' ability to effectively support evidence-informed policymaking and provides guidance for how to most effectively support these actors in their work. It has also generated a very focused analysis of what might matter for other contexts, providing researchers with a foundation for further investigation. The research also suggests a number of areas to explore in more depth. In particular, further research is needed to answer the following research questions:

- In cases ripe for translation, where rigorous policy-relevant evidence is being generated, can external actors successfully identify and support individuals to carry out the translation role, or must such individuals take up the role organically?

- Are translators in particular formal positions (for example, inside or outside the government) more likely to be effective in particular policymaking contexts?

- Are particular characteristics and skills more important for intermediary translators than for researchers playing a translation role within the government or a research institution?

- What are the main components of political savvy and how can EIP supporters identify actors who possess this skill?

- How can government evaluation and EIP systems be designed to ensure that the evidence that is generated actually informs policymaking?

As part of the validation stage, researchers were able to confirm the presence of key factors from the initial findings in separate case studies. Because these secondary case studies were not focused on the agency of translators, but rather on the role of evidence in policymaking, the absence of detailed descriptions of translators is *not* evidence of their irrelevance. To the contrary, translators are extremely important to the use of evidence in policymaking, and further, focused studies will bear this out. The current study has provided a framework for understanding how translators function. It has also identified factors that may be present across differing contexts, some of which have already been confirmed in the validation stage of the study. The implication is that translators are vital for the use of evidence in policymaking and should be supported in their work.