CREATING A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE USE: LESSONS FROM J-PAL'S GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS IN LATIN AMERICA

J-PAL
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STAFF FROM J-PAL LAC, IPA PERU, AND PERU'S MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS DISCUSS POLICIES TO REDUCE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. PHOTO: J-PAL

THE OPPORTUNITY

Governments—given their unmatched reach, widespread infrastructure, and mandates to provide critical public services—are some of the most important actors in addressing pressing social challenges like poverty and inequality. Administrative data and evidence from randomized evaluations are tools that have the potential to help governments identify social programs that are more likely to achieve their desired outcomes, monitor and improve program implementation, and design and test innovative programs before scaling them up. Although there are barriers to using data and evidence in policy, many governments around the world are eager to incorporate monitoring data and evidence from impact evaluations more systematically in their program design, implementation, evaluation, and learning cycles.

OUR EXPERIENCE

Since J-PAL was founded in 2003, we have been fortunate to build long-term partnerships with over 40 governments at the forefront of the evidence-informed policymaking movement in over 15 countries. In 2015, we launched the Government Partnership Initiative (GPI) to strengthen these partnerships to increase the use of evidence in policy and to draw out broader lessons about building a culture of data and evidence use in government. Over the past decade, J-PAL Latin America and the Caribbean (J-PAL LAC) has partnered with more than 15 national, state, and city governments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. In Colombia and Peru, these partnerships were always co-led with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). Whether the partnerships focus on establishing an Evaluation Lab to systematically pilot, test, and scale new policy innovations, improving administrative data systems and analytics, or reviewing existing evidence to inform a new policy strategy, our multifaceted Evidence to Policy Partnerships are designed to help governments use data and evidence more frequently and systematically.

J-PAL LAC'S GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

The purpose of the forthcoming report, "Creating a Culture of Evidence Use," is to share examples and lessons we have learned about building a culture of data and evidence use in government, and to celebrate the outstanding efforts of our government partners to increase the use of data and evidence in policy in LAC. To generate these insights, we conducted interviews with 40 officials in 15 of our partner agencies. We hope these insights will be valuable for both government agencies and organizations working on evidence-informed policymaking. While the focus of this report is our work in LAC, the lessons may also be relevant to other regions and countries.

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KEY INSIGHTS FOR GOVERNMENTS

1. It is important to allocate resources to evidence use, and make it someone's job to apply evidence in policy design.

While many governments and donors fund evaluation, few hire personnel or allocate personnel time to focus on evidence use, which takes time, resources, and specialized knowledge. In some cases, evaluation departments have no formal mechanism for feeding results into program design. Allocating even a small amount of resources and personnel to apply the lessons from data and impact evaluations in policy design and implementation, and setting up systems that facilitate this institutional learning, is a crucial part of building a culture of data-driven and evidence-informed decision-making.

2. Similarly, creating dedicated spaces where evidence use is encouraged and rewarded can help build a culture of evidence-informed innovation.

It can be challenging for policymakers to propose new policy ideas or processes. Day-to-day responsibilities can crowd out innovation and experimentation, and evaluation is often seen only as a tool for accountability. Where it is possible to go beyond reserving a small amount of staff time and resources to evidence use, innovation labs and other institutions dedicated to identifying and testing new policy solutions create incentives and safe spaces to propose and evaluate new ideas. These dedicated spaces help build an understanding of data and evidence as tools for learning and improvement, rather than only for accountability.

3. Greater investment in administrative data collection, management, and inter-agency data sharing can go a long way in helping advance the evidence use agenda.

Developing more user-friendly administrative data systems can enable government employees to use data and evidence more regularly in program management and implementation. Good administrative data also significantly reduce the costs of impact evaluation, including evaluating at scale, making it easier to embed evaluation in the policy cycle.

4. Collaborating with evidence-to-policy organizations and researchers can help establish a culture of data and evidence use.

Organizations and researchers that have expertise in generating, synthesizing, and applying data and evidence can be valuable partners in governments' efforts to use data and evidence more systematically. While some governments have the resources to build this expertise internally, many do not, and in these cases collaborating with others can help augment government capacity.

FIGURE 1. CURRENT AND PAST GOVERNMENT PARTNERS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ARGENTINA

Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, Salta

BRAZIL

Ministry of the Environment
National School of Public Administration
Public Security Institute of Rio de Janeiro State

CHILE

Budget Department, Ministry of Finance
Ministry of Economy, Development, and Tourism
National Fish and Aquaculture Service, Ministry of Economy, Development, and Finance

COLOMBIA (IN COLLABORATION WITH IPA)

Department of Security, Coexistence, and Justice, Mayor's Office, Bogotá
Division of Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies, National Planning Department

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Cabinet of Coordination of Social Policies, Office of the Viceminister for Development Policy, Ministry of the Presidency
Dominican Institute of Evaluation and Research on Education Quality
Ministry of Education

ECUADOR

Ministry of the Interior

PERU (IN COLLABORATION WITH IPA)

Ministry of Education
Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion
National Program against Family and Sexual Violence, Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations

PUERTO RICO (LED BY J-PAL NORTH AMERICA)

Department of Education

KEY INSIGHTS FOR EVIDENCE TO POLICY ORGANIZATIONS

BUILDING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

1. Proactive support from a senior official is crucial to advancing data and evidence use.

These champions can inspire support for evidence-informed policymaking throughout the institution, identify strategies to overcome bureaucratic barriers, encourage buy-in from other high-level officials, and help identify resources to ensure the project's sustainability.

DESIGNING PARTNERSHIPS

2. Increasing data and evidence use is an incremental process.

It is important to meet governments where they are. Government agencies enter partnerships with third-party organizations at different stages and with different goals. At the beginning of a partnership, it is important to take time to understand the institution's capacity, existing processes and incentive structures, and the availability of user-friendly datasets to identify the intermediate steps that will help the institution achieve its ultimate goals for evidence use.

3. Different types of government agencies may require different approaches.

When working with institutions that control and implement their own programs, partnerships can focus on conducting pilot research to diagnose problems, using existing evidence to formulate potential solutions, using administrative data to improve program implementation, developing impact evaluations, or creating systems that encourage evidence use in program design. Non-implementing institutions, which often evaluate or finance the programs run by implementing institutions, can often be conveners or places to build systems and processes that incorporate evidence in decision-making.

4. Respond quickly to opportunities and policy windows where there is interest and authority to use evidence.[1]
Impact evaluations and Evidence to Policy Partnerships that are conducted in close collaboration with policymakers, and designed to answer their priority questions from the start, are more likely to lead to data and evidence use that can improve policy.

ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY

5. Fostering broader institution-wide support is crucial for sustainability.

While support from champions is critical, changes are likely to be sustainable only if they have wider organizational support. Demonstrating concrete ways that data and evidence can improve service delivery through quick wins for the government and building capacity and infrastructure to engage with evidence can help cultivate broader buy-in.

6. Invest in and formalize long-term partnerships.

Having a long-term presence in a country and a long-term relationship with a government fosters greater trust and mutual understanding. Long-term partnerships allow us to respond quickly to policy windows where evidence could be useful, design research to be more useful for policy, know whom to work with, and maintain partnerships when key officials are transferred or administrations change. Collaborating on multiple projects also allows for more institutional learning than a one-time evaluation. In many cases, formal agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) can define how the relationship will continue beyond an individual champion's efforts.

Governments are some of the most important actors when it comes to reducing poverty and inequality and improving systems that provide critical services including education, health care, and social assistance. J-PAL's government partnerships are part of a much larger movement among governments across Latin America and around the world to use data and evidence to address pressing social challenges more effectively. We hope that sharing our experiences will inspire more governments to move in this direction, and more researchers and practitioners to collaborate with governments to improve social policy.

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[1]   Kingdon, J. W. 1995. *Agendas, alternatives and public policies.* HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995. Andrews, Matthew, Jesse McConnell, and Alison O. Wescott. 2010. "Development as Leadership-led Change-A Report for the Global Leadership Initiative and the World Bank Institute (WBI)."

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- **Similarly, creating dedicated spaces where evidence use is encouraged and rewarded can help build a culture of evidence-informed innovation.**

- **Greater investment in administrative data collection, management, and inter-agency data sharing can go a long way in helping advance the evidence use agenda.**

- **Collaborating with evidence-to-policy organizations and researchers can help establish a culture of data and evidence use.**

KEY INSIGHTS FOR EVIDENCE TO POLICY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Proactive support from a senior official is crucial to advancing data and evidence use.**

- **Increasing data and evidence use is an incremental process.**

- **Different types of government agencies may require different approaches.**

- **Respond quickly to opportunities and policy windows where there is interest and authority to use evidence.**

- **Fostering broader institution-wide support is crucial for sustainability.**

- **Invest in and formalize long-term partnerships.**

ABOUT J-PAL LAC

J-PAL Latin America and the Caribbean (J-PAL LAC) is J-PAL's regional office based at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile. J-PAL LAC works alongside governments and NGOs in the LAC region to identify and promote effective programs and policies in the region. With the help of our research, training, and policy teams, our network of affiliated professors measures the impact of these programs and policies through randomized evaluations that become critical inputs for informing public policy. In addition to its headquarters in Chile, J-PAL LAC has a presence in Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico. Additionally, J-PAL works alongside Innovations for Poverty Action in Peru.

povertyactionlab.org/LAC

ABOUT GPI

J-PAL's Government Partnership Initiative (GPI) is a competitive fund whose mission is to build and strengthen partnerships between governments and J-PAL affiliated researchers and J-PAL regional offices to increase the use of evidence in policymaking. The initiative supports partnerships with governments to design and evaluate policies and programs, to scale up policies already evaluated and found to be effective, and to institutionalize the use of evidence in policy more broadly. By funding a wide range of research, capacity building, and policy outreach activities, GPI aims to make it easier for researchers and governments to work together to increase the use of evidence in policymaking.

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