



Chapter 5. Role of evidence intermediaries

5.1 Types of evidence intermediaries	78
5.2 Characteristics of evidence intermediaries	80
5.3 Strategies used by evidence intermediaries	81
5.4 Conditions that can help and hinder evidence intermediaries	83
5.5 UN-system entities' use of evidence synthesis in their work	86
5.6 References	88

This chapter is the first of two chapters exploring how we can systematize the use of evidence, by the full range of decision-makers, in addressing societal challenges. Here we focus on evidence intermediaries. Chapter 6 is focused on global public goods and equitably distributed capacities.

Copyright © 2022 McMaster University. All rights reserved. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. No part of this report may be adapted in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher.

McMaster University is making this report chapter freely available to advance the public interest. However, the University does not give permission for this chapter to be posted on websites other than the website of the Evidence Commission secretariat (the McMaster Health Forum), or to be circulated electronically. The full report is also available for free downloading from the Evidence Commission website, and for purchase on Amazon and other online stores.

This report chapter and the information contained herein are for informative, public interest purposes only, are provided on an as-is basis (without warranty, express or implied), and are not meant to substitute for financial, legal or medical advice. McMaster University, the Evidence Commission secretariat, the commissioners and the publisher assume no responsibility or liability for loss or damage caused or allegedly caused, directly or indirectly, by the use of information contained in this report chapter, and they specifically disclaim any liability incurred from its use.

Acting on behalf of the Evidence Commission, the McMaster Health Forum welcomes feedback about the report, as well as suggestions about pathways to influence for the report's recommendations. Please send your comments to evidencecommission@mcmaster.ca.

The appropriate citation for this report is: Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges. Chapter 5. Role of evidence intermediaries. The Evidence Commission report: A wake-up call and path forward for decision-makers, evidence intermediaries, and impact-oriented evidence producers. Hamilton: McMaster Health Forum, 2022; p. 77-88.

ISBN 978-1-927565-31-5 (Online)

ISBN 978-1-927565-30-8 (Print)

5.1 Types of evidence intermediaries

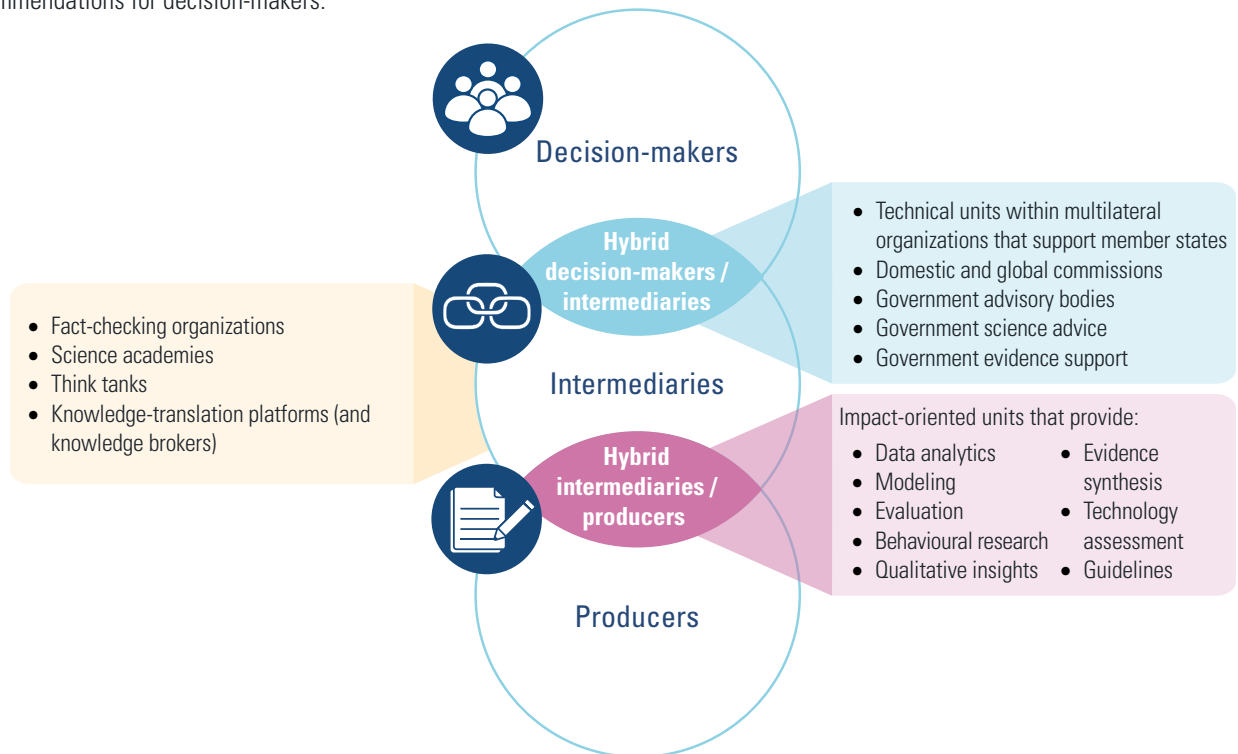
As the term suggests, evidence intermediaries are entities that work (or individuals who work) ‘in between’ decision-makers and evidence producers. They support decision-makers with best evidence and they support evidence producers with insights and opportunities for making an impact with evidence. There are many types of evidence intermediaries and we have included those that tend to focus significant energy specifically on using evidence to support decision-making. Some of these evidence intermediaries may use other labels to describe themselves, such as knowledge brokers.


We distinguish among:

- intermediaries that both use evidence themselves in their own work (i.e., they are involved in decision-making themselves) and directly support decision-making by government policymakers, organizational leaders, professionals and/or citizens
- intermediaries that use evidence to directly support decision-making
- intermediaries that may both produce generalizable knowledge (e.g., for publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals) and use evidence to directly support decision-making.

For the first and second broad types of evidence intermediaries, we have included some entities that don’t necessarily prioritize evidence in the way we call for in this report, as a motivating force in their work. They may instead rely on beliefs, values or interests. We were broadly inclusive because we hope that many of these entities will re-consider the priority they accord to evidence in their work after reading this report. We introduce in [section 5.2](#) some of the alignments and funding sources that may influence choices about the forces that motivate intermediaries’ work. We previously introduced in [sections 3.3 to 3.6](#) a range of other processes that can be (but are often not) the targets of intermediaries’ work (e.g., budgeting and planning for government policymakers and organizational leaders, continuing professional development for professionals, and traditional and social media for citizens).

For the third broad type of evidence intermediaries, some actually function as intermediaries for other evidence groups. For example, technology assessment and guideline groups may draw on evidence syntheses produced by others in preparing a report or recommendations for decision-makers.



Broad types	Specific focus (or type)	Examples of national entities and global (or regional) networks*
<p>Hybrid decision-makers / intermediaries</p> 	Technical units within multilateral organizations that support member states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN and its departments (e.g., Department of Economic and Social Affairs), funds (e.g., UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti), programs (e.g., UNDP's Human Development Reports), and specialized agencies (e.g., WHO Science Division and World Bank's research and publications) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) substantive directorates
	Domestic and global commissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic standing commissions (e.g., Australia's Productivity Commission) and ad hoc commissions (e.g., New Zealand's royal commissions) See section 8.1 for global commissions
	Government advisory bodies**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese government's expert advisory bodies No global or regional network identified
	Government science advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government Chief Scientific Advisor (UK) International Network for Government Science Advice
	Government evidence support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ugandan parliament's department of research services African Parliamentarians' Network on Development Evaluation
<p>Intermediaries</p> 	Fact-checking organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WebQoof (India) International Fact-Checking Network and Africa Check
	Science academies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (US) International Science Council and G-Science Academies
	Think tanks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RAND Corporation (US) Global Solutions Initiative and Think20
	Knowledge-translation platforms (and knowledge brokers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge to Policy Center (Lebanon) Evidence-Informed Policy Networks (EVIPNet) and Africa Evidence Network
<p>Hybrid intermediaries / producers</p> 	Impact-oriented data-analytics units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pulse Lab Jakarta (Indonesia) UN Global Pulse, which includes four such labs
	Impact-oriented modeling units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
	Impact-oriented evaluation units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) (US with offices in other countries) International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE) and Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results (CLEAR)
	Impact-oriented behavioural / implementation research units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behavioural Insights Team (UK with offices in other countries) UN Behavioural Science Group
	Impact-oriented qualitative-insights units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group
	Impact-oriented evidence synthesis units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) (South Africa) and EPPI-Centre (UK) Evidence Synthesis International (ESI) and Global Evidence Synthesis Initiative (GESI)*** and as well as What Works Network
	Technology-assessment units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (Canada) International Network of Agencies for Health Technology Assessment (INAHTA) and Red de Evaluación de Tecnologías en Salud de las Américas (RedETSA)
	Guideline units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (UK) Guidelines International Network (GIN)

* Some networks focus more on supporting evidence production than on supporting evidence-intermediary roles.

** Also called advisory groups, assessment panels, monitoring boards, review committees, and technical task forces, among other names.

*** Many additional thematically focused global networks exist, such as CAMARADES and SYRCLE focused on animal studies, Cochrane and JBI focused on health, Collaboration for Environmental Evidence focused on the environment, and Campbell Collaboration focused on a range of non-health topics.

5.2 Characteristics of evidence intermediaries



Evidence intermediaries can be described based on many characteristics. Here we present 10 such characteristics. One evidence intermediary may be large and diversified in its strategic focus, as well as highly committed to its endowment-enabled independence and to using evidence to shape societal agendas over long periods of time. Another entity may be small and specialized in a particular challenge, and dependent on service contracts with product manufacturers (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) to support decision-making by citizens.

If one can consistently predict that a conclusion from an evidence intermediary will involve either a government-led or market-based solution or will involve a policy or program that will benefit (or a product or service offered by) a group aligned with or funding the entity, then there is a good chance that the entity is motivated more by values or private interests, respectively, than by evidence.

Characteristics	Examples
Challenges focused upon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic sectoral (e.g., education) • Domestic cross-sectoral (e.g., economic and social policy) • Global coordination (e.g., international relations)
Decision-makers targeted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government policymakers (e.g., to influence executive-branch regulation and legislative voting) • Organizational leaders (e.g., to influence organizational strategy and operations) • Professionals (e.g., to influence professional practices) • Citizens (e.g., to influence public opinion and voting)
Motivating forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence • Other ideas about ‘what is,’ such as beliefs • Values or ideas about ‘what should be’ • Interests (public or private)
Alignments that may influence motivating forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political parties • Businesses or unions • Professional groups • Social movements • Not applicable (independent)
Funding sources that may influence motivating forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endowments • Foundations • Governments • Corporations • Individuals
Revenue streams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service contracts (e.g., 12 evidence products per year) • Licencing and subscription fees • Sales and events
Time horizons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term (e.g., responding to urgent needs for evidence) • Medium-term (e.g., preparing for next election or place to retreat when political party loses election and political appointment ends) • Long-term (e.g., undertaking a decade-long programmatic initiative to shape thinking on an emergent policy priority)
Agenda setters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funders • Entity leaders • Individual staff
Strategies emphasized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence production and support, which is the focus of section 5.3 • Consulting • Advocacy
Locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilateral organizations (e.g., UN specialized agencies; OECD) • Governments • Independent non-governmental organizations and for-profit entities • Universities

5.3 Strategies used by evidence intermediaries



Strategies	Examples
<p>Improving the climate for evidence use</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing examples of outcomes and impacts achieved using best evidence and of missed opportunities from failing to use best evidence • Demonstrating how to distinguish high- from low-quality evidence (see section 4.5), how to distinguish best evidence from 'other things' (section 4.8), and how to get more out of 'other things' (section 4.8) • 'Auditing' decision-making and advisory structures, processes and outputs, as well as the incentives that influence them, to identify opportunities to systematize evidence use (e.g., (1)) • Comparing a local (national or sub-national) evidence-support system to a high-functioning evidence-support system, or comparing a local evidence-implementation system to a high-functioning evidence-implementation system, using prompts like this list of strategies that evidence intermediaries can use
<p>Prioritizing and co-producing evidence</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in listening (e.g., rapid response) and foresight activities (e.g., horizon scanning) to identify emerging issues, make sense of them, prioritize those requiring evidence support, and commissioning or undertaking the evidence support • Co-producing – with decision-makers – new local (national or sub-national) evidence specific to the jurisdiction of focus (data analytics, modeling, evaluations, behavioural / implementation research, qualitative insights), synthesizing the best evidence globally (evidence synthesis), and translating global and local evidence into local evidence support specific to the jurisdiction (technology assessments and guidelines, as well as modeling if it is undertaken with this intent) • Co-developing and maintaining living evidence products (data analytics, modeling, evidence syntheses, and guidelines)

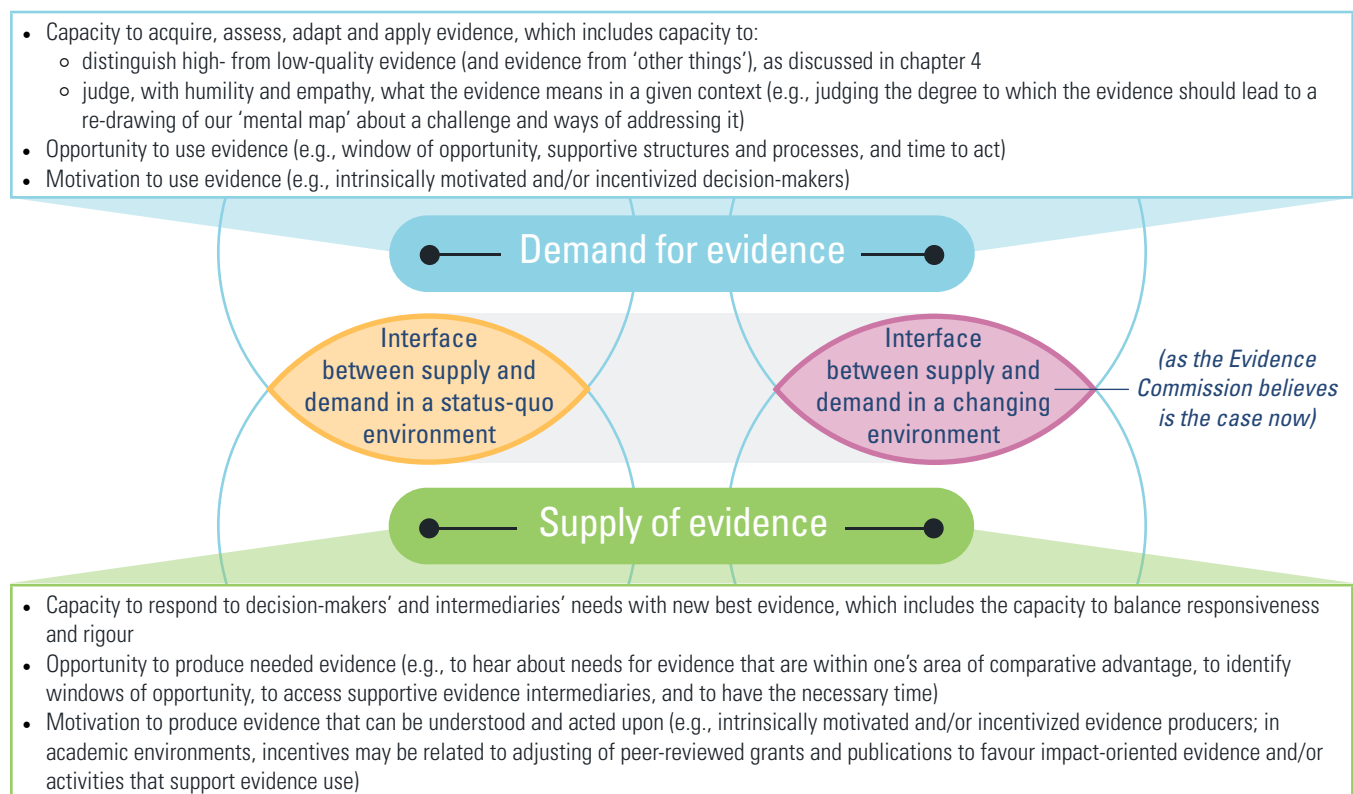


5.4 Conditions that can help and hinder evidence intermediaries

Some of the conditions that can help and hinder evidence intermediaries are within their sphere of control (e.g., aspects of their work at the interface between the demand for evidence by decision-makers and its production by researchers), while others are only within their sphere of influence. The simple behavioural-sciences framework of capacity, opportunity and motivation can be used to identify the conditions that can help evidence intermediaries.(2) The absence of each condition typically hinders evidence intermediaries.

Capacity can appear to be the easier ‘way in’; however, the types of capacity related to evidence synthesis addressed in chapter 4 (e.g., to distinguish high- from low-quality evidence) is in remarkably short supply. Many universities do not require the development of such capacity, with the result that having a PhD or other advanced degree does not guarantee that a person has the necessary skills.

Judgement, humility and empathy can also be in short supply.(3) Judgements about what the evidence means in a given context can take the form of Bayesian reasoning (as described in **section 4.7**). Such judgements are ideally leavened with both humility (e.g., we may need to downgrade our certainty about ‘what works’ and how to get it to those who need it, in light of our analysis of the local – national or sub-national – context) and empathy (e.g., we may also need to downgrade our certainty in light of how equity-seeking groups view ‘our’ evidence and how they describe their own ways of knowing). At the end of this section we describe – for the particular case of those supporting government policymakers – the additional types of capacity needed to make policy judgements with humility and empathy.



In a status-quo environment

- Capacity to respond to decision-makers' needs with best evidence, which includes the capacity to:
 - identify a need for evidence
 - match the right form(s) of evidence to the need
 - acquire (or support the production of) and assess the evidence
 - package it for and communicate it to decision-makers
 - convene deliberative dialogues and other processes that support judgements about what the evidence means in a particular context
- Opportunity to support the use of evidence (e.g., to hear about needs for evidence and windows of opportunity, to access supportive structures and processes, and to have the time to act)
- Motivation to support the use of evidence (e.g., intrinsically motivated and/or incentivized intermediaries; in academic environments, incentives may be related to peer-reviewed grants and publications being adjusted to give weight to impact-oriented evidence and/or activities that support evidence use)

In a changing environment

- Capacity to build the case for greater evidence use and to optimize supportive structures, processes and incentives, which includes the capacity to:
 - undertake the types of example sharing, demonstrations, internal audits and external comparisons described in [section 5.3](#) to build the case
 - design and implement (or adjust) structures, processes and incentives related to prioritizing and co-producing (including for living evidence products), packaging and 'push,' 'facilitating pull,' and exchange
 - routinize connections to complementary structures, processes and incentives (e.g., in the innovation and improvement systems)
- Opportunity to institutionalize the use of evidence and a high-functioning evidence-support system (e.g. window of opportunity and time to act)
- Motivation to institutionalize the use of evidence and a high-functioning evidence-support system, which will likely rely on intrinsic motivation rather than incentivization

In addition to capacity related to evidence synthesis, those supporting government policymakers need four other types of capacity to inform their judgements about what the evidence means in a given context.

Policy analysis

to clarify a policy problem and its causes, to frame options to address the problem, and to identify implementation considerations (which we addressed in [section 4.4](#))

Systems analysis

to understand who gets to make what types of decisions about the challenge now (governance arrangements), how money flows in addressing the challenge now (financial arrangements), and how efforts to address the challenge now (e.g., programs, services and products) reach and benefit those who need them (delivery arrangements); and to understand which of these system arrangements may need to change

Political analysis

to identify whether there is a compelling problem, a viable policy and conducive politics (i.e., a window of opportunity) to take action now; and to identify what it would take to open a window of opportunity if now is not the moment



Stakeholder engagement

to understand how a broad range of those who will be involved in or affected by any decision view a policy problem and its causes, options to address the problem, and key implementation considerations, and what they consider to be next steps for different constituencies; ideally such engagement is informed by evidence syntheses and the policy, systems and political analysis described above, but is also open to other ways of knowing and thinking, and is supported by robust conflict-of-interest policies and procedures.

Frameworks exist to help with systems analysis, such as the Health Systems Evidence taxonomy and Social Systems Evidence taxonomy, and to help with political analysis, such as the ‘Setting agendas and developing and implementing policies’ framework.



Evidence intermediary, Kerry Albright

Eternally curious international public servant bringing passion about evidence-informed decision-making, systems thinking, and help in understanding the value of evidence to international development

I want to celebrate the many successes we’ve collectively had with using evidence to address societal challenges – both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic – and to encourage all of us to re-double our efforts now to institutionalize what’s going well and improve in other areas. We have come a long way in the past, say, five years in different parts of the UN system, and we still have a long way to go in supporting evidence use by government policymakers and other decision-makers in member states, in using evidence in the UN’s normative guidance and technical assistance, and in making the most of partnerships with global public-good producers, which are the subject of many sections in chapters 5 and 6.

On the evidence-supply side, we need to recognize two points. First, there is a tension for researchers between promoting single studies (often their own, with case studies of impact often being linked to enhanced university funding) and promoting bodies of evidence, including the work of ‘competitors.’ As we address in **recommendations 22 and 23**, we need to re-visit the incentives created by academic institutions and journals to ensure that in future we support a focus on bodies of evidence and open science. Second, there is a tension for evidence intermediaries between distinguishing discrete forms of evidence and finding language that can capture more holistic approaches. In UNICEF, we are increasingly using a definition of implementation research that speaks to the generation and use of evidence being co-led by decision-makers, being integrated across all steps in decision-making (not just step 3 in **section 4.2**) including feeding into adaptive programming, and incorporating the types of complementary systems and political analyses described in **section 5.4**, as well as what I would call broader contextual analysis. This contextual analysis includes analyses of culture, relationships and power differentials, and can draw on tools such as situation analysis, social-network analysis, and power analysis.”

5.5 UN-system entities' use of evidence synthesis in their work

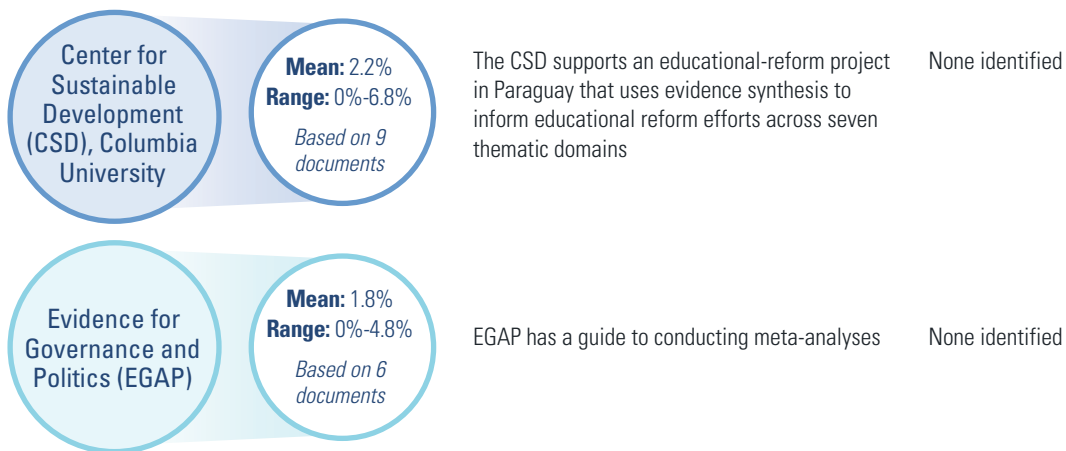
The UN system comprises a number of entities and works with a number of affiliated entities. These entities are key evidence intermediaries that are relied upon both by member states and other parts of the UN system to support evidence-informed decision-making. For the reasons outlined in **section 4.4**, syntheses of the best evidence globally (i.e., evidence syntheses) are the logical place to start in understanding what's known and not known, and can then be combined with local evidence (e.g., national or sub-national data analytics) by member states.

A 2021 report analyzed three UN entities (UNICEF Innocenti, World Bank Group, and UN DESA) and three UN-affiliated entities, including an international NGO (SDSN), a research centre (CSD) and a research network (EGAP). The analysis found significant opportunities for improvement in how UN-system entities use evidence syntheses in their technical work:(4)

- evidence syntheses constitute a low percentage (0.5% to 17.0%) of citations in key documents, with 27 of 78 documents not citing any evidence synthesis
- capacity-building efforts rarely focused on evidence synthesis
- few guidelines or policies exist to support evidence synthesis or robust guideline-development processes
- UNICEF Innocenti was often the only positive outlier among these Sustainable Development Goal-supporting entities.

Intermediary	Evidence syntheses as a percentage of all citations in key documents	Evidence synthesis-related capacity-building efforts	Evidence synthesis-related guidelines or policies for making recommendations and justifying decisions
--------------	--	--	---

 <p>UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti</p>	<p>Mean: 17.0% Range: 2.3%-100% <i>Based on 12 documents</i></p>	<p>UNICEF Innocenti has an eight-part series about conducting evidence syntheses, maintains a webpage on evidence gap maps, and supports capacity building about methods like evidence synthesis, among other activities</p>	<p>The UNICEF procedure for quality assurance in research suggests conducting an evidence synthesis about new research topics to avoid duplication and enable collaboration with internal and external collaborators</p>
 <p>World Bank Group</p>	<p>Mean: 9.0% Range: 0% - 40.0% <i>Based on 18 documents</i></p>	<p>The World Bank Independent Evaluation Group has a working paper on evidence-gap maps World Bank blog posts outline the key features of impact evaluations to facilitate inclusion in evidence syntheses (bit.ly/3w0ZEBu) and strategies for improving the robustness and usefulness of evidence syntheses (bit.ly/31LvYJR)</p>	<p>The World Bank's Operational Policies for Poverty Reductions state that a poverty assessment for a member state will include a synthesis of the evidence about the assessment of the poverty situation and about poverty monitoring and evaluation systems (bit.ly/3D7XvTE)</p>
 <p>UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)</p>	<p>Mean: 0.5% Range: 0%-3.1% <i>Based on 12 documents</i></p>	<p>A UN DESA issue brief mentions the emerging need to make science useful for policymaking and to translate it in ways that support its use (bit.ly/3c9KVY6)</p>	<p>The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) methodology document states that member states and UN system entities desire the GSDR to synthesize evidence relevant for policy (bit.ly/3C68Y4Z)</p>
 <p>Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)</p>	<p>Mean: 2.5% Range: 0%-25.0% <i>Based on 21 documents</i></p>	<p>An SDSN-sponsored report highlights the role universities can play in synthesizing knowledge for the SDGs (bit.ly/30kVdCg)</p>	<p>None identified</p>



Similar analyses have been undertaken before.

A 2007 study of one UN entity – the World Health Organization (WHO) – found that evidence syntheses and robust guideline-development processes were rarely used in developing recommendations despite WHO’s own 2003 guidelines that supported a shift away from its reliance on expert opinion and informal group processes.⁽⁵⁾ WHO responded immediately by establishing a guidelines review committee to support staff in developing evidence-based guidelines and a broader, institution-wide change in culture and behaviour.⁽⁶⁾

A 2009 study of two UN entities – WHO and the World Bank – found that: 1) only two of eight publications cited evidence syntheses; 2) only five of 14 WHO recommendations and two of seven World Bank recommendations were consistent with both the direction and nature of effect claims from evidence syntheses; and 3) ten of 14 WHO recommendations and five of seven World Bank recommendations were consistent with the direction of effect claims only.⁽⁷⁾

5.6 References

1. Sense About Science. Transparency of evidence: An assessment of government policy proposals May 2015 to May 2016. London: Sense About Science; 2016.
2. Michie S, van Stralen MM, West R. The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science* 2011; 6(1): 42.
3. Brooks R. Competence is critical for democracy: Let's redefine it. *The New York Times*, 2021; 15 August.
4. Sharma K. Evidence needs for the Sustainable Development Goals: Thesis report. Hamilton: McMaster University; 2021.
5. Oxman AD, Lavis JN, Fretheim A. Use of evidence in WHO recommendations. *The Lancet* 2007; 369(9576): 1883-1889.
6. The Lancet. WHO signals strong commitment to evidence. *The Lancet* 2007; 369(9574): 1669.
7. Hoffman SJ, Lavis JN, Bennett S. The use of research evidence in two international organizations' recommendations about health systems. *Healthcare Policy* 2009; 5(1): 66-86.