Evidence Commission update 2023

Strengthening domestic evidence-support systems, enhancing the global evidence architecture, and putting evidence at the centre of everyday life

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Introduction

One year since the publication of the report
(which is now available in seven language and in multiple formats)

- While government policymakers in some countries (like newly elected ones in some Latin American countries) are open to new approaches to decision-making and evidence use, many policymakers, organizational leaders and professionals have largely returned to pre-pandemic approaches
- While some funders and donors and some impact-oriented evidence producers have piloted coordination mechanisms, many evidence producers continue to operate without coordination and to generate significant research waste
- While many citizens have become more aware of the potential value of evidence, many others have become more distrustful of decision-makers and evidence

This (first) annual update is focused on three implementation priorities

- Agreed in partnership with the producers of the two other global reports published on this topic in the last 18 months (Cochrane Convenes and the Global Evidence-to-Policy Summit)
- Being addressed with the support of the Evidence Commission Implementation Council and three other groups (**appendix 1**)
- Collectively cover 20 of the Evidence Commission's 24 recommendations and do so as a more actionable package (**appendix 2**)

Formalize and strengthen domestic evidence-support systems

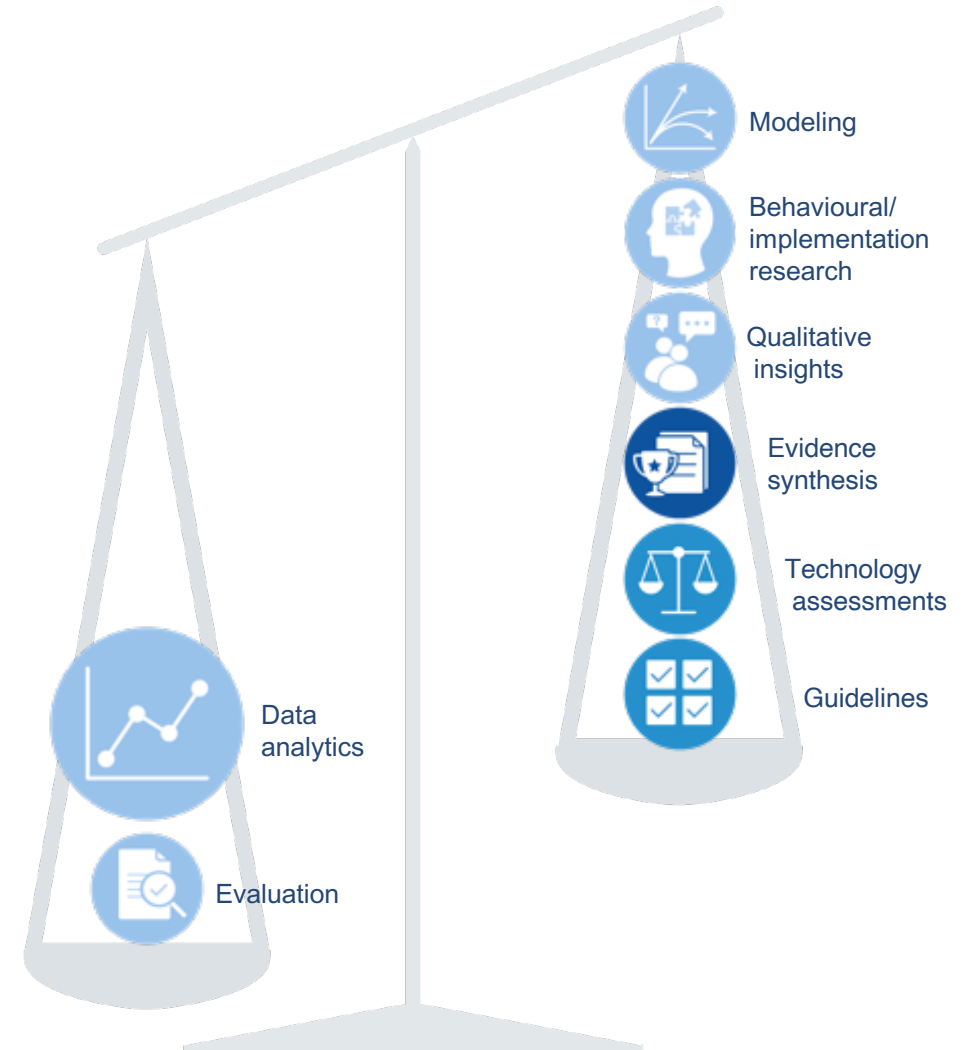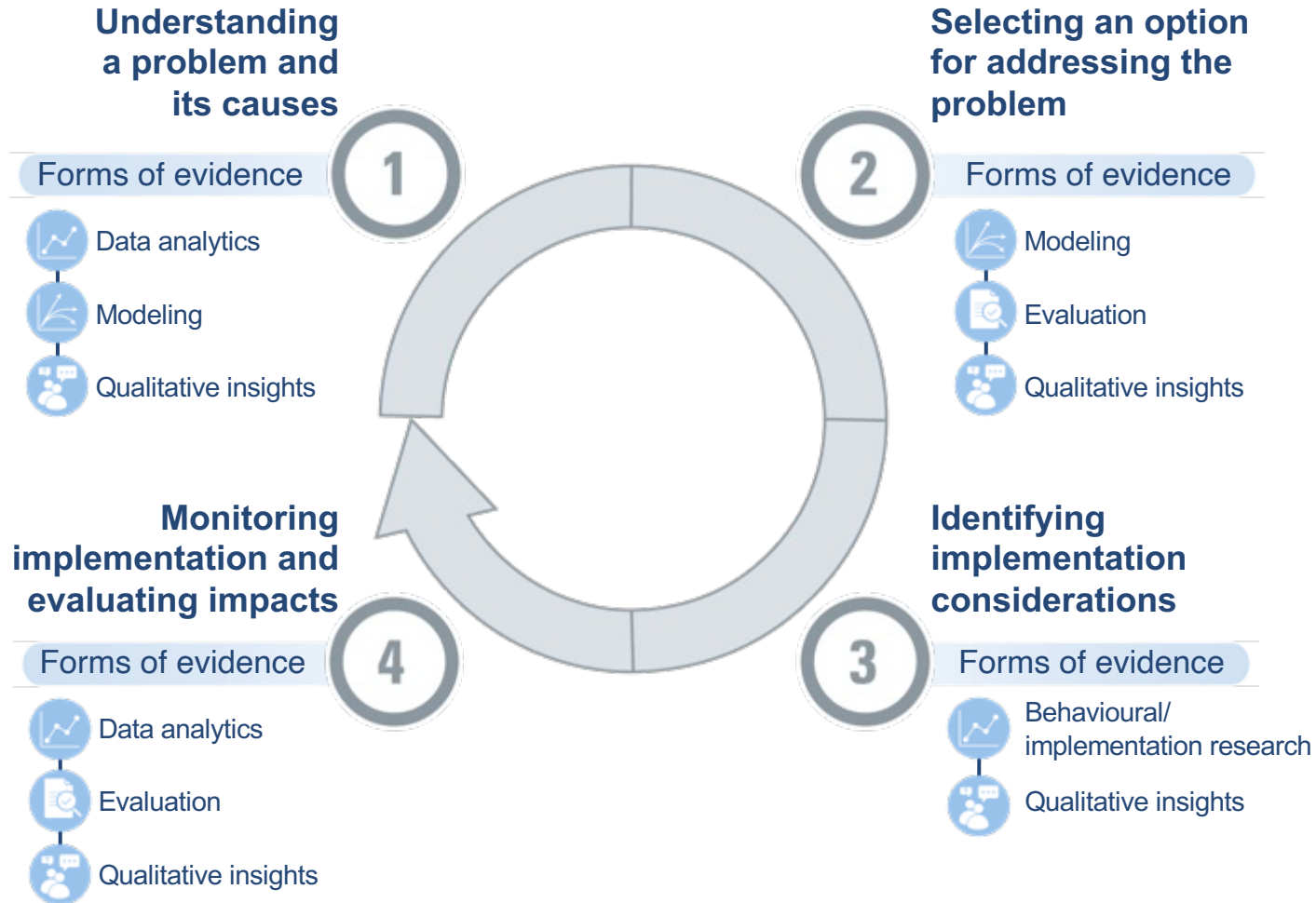### Enhance and leverage the global evidence architecture

Put evidence at the centre of everyday life

Underpinning these three priorities is the growing recognition of how evidence can be used to address societal challenges
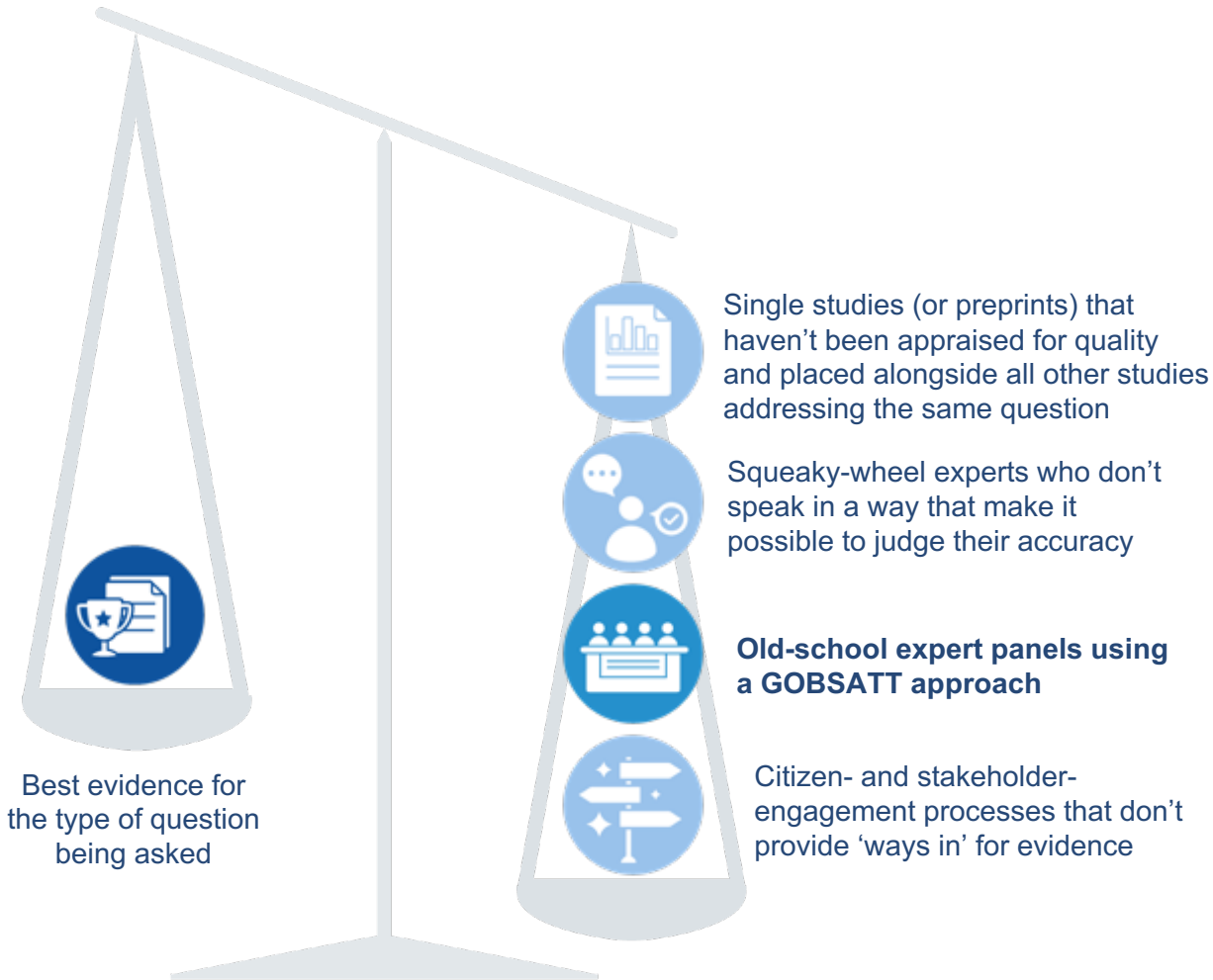(as well as about the many other steps needed to support citizens)

- Respond to decision-makers' questions with the right mix of forms of evidence (versus select forms of evidence) → **slides 6 and 7**
  - Match the forms of domestic evidence to the right step in the decision-making process
  - Combine domestic evidence (what has been learned in our country) and global evidence (what has been learned from around the world, including how it varies by groups and contexts), the latter of which is enabled by the global evidence architecture (e.g., Campbell and Cochrane)
- Embed evidence in cycles of rapid learning and improvement → **slide 8**
- Use 'best evidence' (versus 'other things') → **slide 9**

Respond to decision-makers' questions with the right mix of forms of evidence (versus select forms of evidence that get a lot of attention now)

1) Match the forms of domestic evidence to the right step in the decision-making process

Understanding a problem and its causes

1

Forms of evidence

- Data analytics
- Modeling
- Qualitative insights

Selecting an option for addressing the problem

2

Forms of evidence

- Modeling
- Evaluation
- Qualitative insights

Monitoring implementation and evaluating impacts

4

Forms of evidence

- Data analytics
- Evaluation
- Qualitative insights

Identifying implementation considerations

3

Forms of evidence

- Behavioural/ implementation research
- Qualitative insights

- Modeling
- Behavioural/ implementation research
- Qualitative insights
- Evidence synthesis
- Technology assessments
- Guidelines

- Data analytics
- Evaluation

Use best evidence (vs other things that get a lot of attention now), and the specific example of expert panels

Best evidence for the type of question being asked

Single studies (or preprints) that haven't been appraised for quality and placed alongside all other studies addressing the same question

Squeaky-wheel experts who don't speak in a way that make it possible to judge their accuracy

Old-school expert panels using a GOBSATT approach

Citizen- and stakeholder-engagement processes that don't provide 'ways in' for evidence

If Australia can go for the gold with its national health guidelines, why can't we do it in our country and for other sectors?

Gold

Expert panels that:
1) convene people with the right mix of issue-specific knowledge, evidence-appraisal expertise, and lived experience
2) follow rigorous processes to develop their recommendations (e.g., pre-circulate evidence summaries and clarify what evidence and experiences underpin the recommendations)
3) adjust their recommendations as the context, issues and evidence evolve (in the case of living expert panels)

Will never make it to the podium

Expert panels using a GOBSATT (good old boys sitting around the table) approach

Formalize and strengthen domestic evidence-support systems

- The first of three implementation priorities provides the mechanisms for on-the-ground impacts with the second priority and it can underpin many of the mechanisms with the third priority

- The Evidence Commission secretariat and its partners in 12 countries are conducting rapid evidence-support system assessments, or RESSAs, and sharing lessons learned through the RESSA Country Team Leads Group
  - Goal in each country is to identify what's going well that needs to be systematized and scaled up, and what gaps should be prioritized to fill, and to work with government policymakers, organizational leaders, professionals and citizens to push for improvements

Conducting a RESSA starts with a solid understanding of what a domestic evidence-support system is, and how it differs from research and innovation systems

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Evidence-support system

Research system

Innovation system
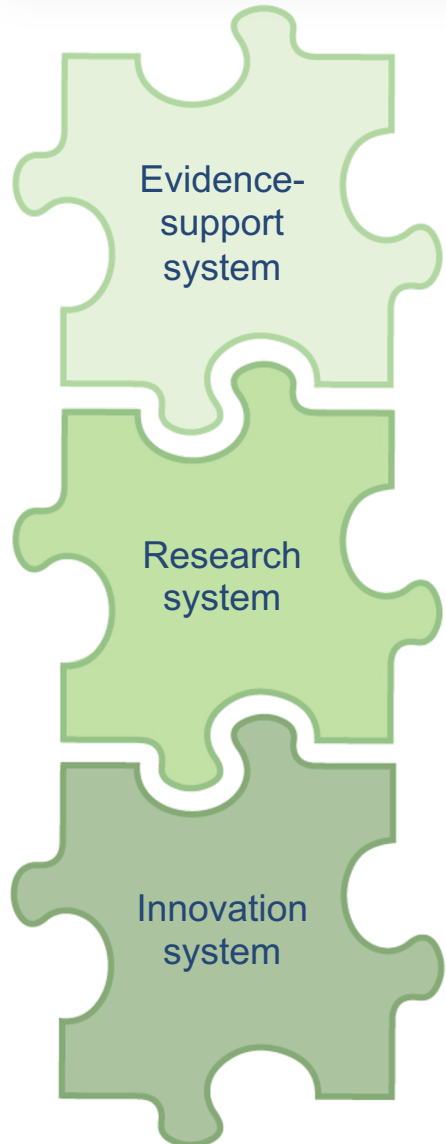
An **evidence-support system** includes many types of infrastructure
- Structures and processes on the **evidence-demand side** to:
  - incorporate evidence use into routine advisory and decision-making processes (e.g., ministerial briefings, cabinet submissions, budget proposals, spending plans)
  - build and sustain an evidence culture (e.g., requirements for transparency in evidence inputs)
  - strengthen capacity for evidence use (as well as broader policy and program capacity) among policy and program staff, government science advisors, and those supporting expert panels and citizen- and stakeholder-engagement processes
- Coordination mechanisms at the **interface between the evidence demand and supply sides** to:
  - elicit and prioritize the evidence needs decision-makers and their advisors
  - package evidence from multiple sources into inputs that align with the requirements of advisory and decision-making processes
- Evidence-support units (in-house or within partner organizations) on the **evidence-supply side** that:
  - understand the domestic context, evidence standards, and decision-makers' preferred communication formats
  - are timely and demand-driven
  - focus on contextualizing the stock of existing evidence – both domestic evidence (in its many forms) and global evidence – for a given decision in an equity-sensitive way (and can also contribute to the flow of future evidence)

The **research system** tends to focus on creating generalizable knowledge and to measure success with peer-reviewed grants and publications (although this is beginning to shift as a result of the Declaration on Research Assessment)

The **innovation system** tends to focus on commercializing products and processes and to measure success with revenues
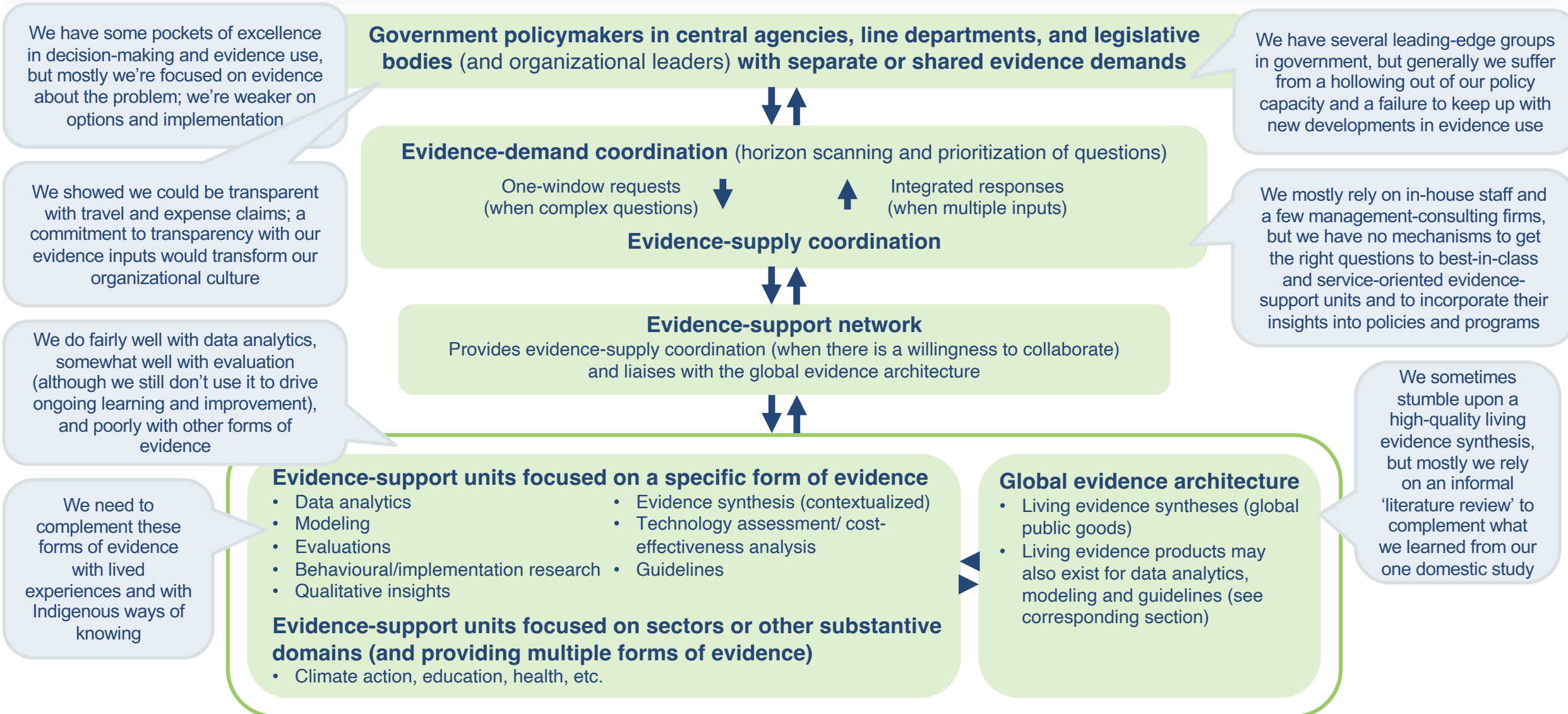
Conducting a RESSA involves asking questions about each of the potential features of an evidence-support system – as a 'baseline' – and taking action based on what is learned

Drawing on websites, documents and interviews, ask what's going well that needs to be systematized and scaled up and what gaps should be prioritized to fill

- For each agency, department or body on the evidence-demand side
  - What types of decisions are made and what does this mean for the types of evidence needed?
  - What sources of 'evidence' are currently drawn upon (e.g., domestic data analytics and evaluations, evidence syntheses, and expert panels like the gold medal-earning one on the previous page)?
  - Are the enablers (e.g., explicit standard for evidence use in cabinet submissions), culture and capacity in place?
- For the demand side of any coordination mechanism
  - Are there people who have experience with horizon scanning and with prioritizing and scoping questions in all decision-making steps?
  - Are the questions typically similar to those being asked by other groups and is a mechanism in place to share questions and responses across groups?
  - Are the questions typically complex and do they require the engagement of multiple evidence-support units?
- For the supply side of any coordination mechanism
  - Are there people who can act as 'general contractors' and bring in the right 'trades,' or forms of evidence, depending on the question?
    - ✓ for changes to policy and system arrangements, these are typically policy and systems researchers
    - ✓ for behaviour changes among professionals and citizens, these are typically behavioural/implementation researchers
  - Is it possible to provide integrated responses that may take the form of one or more of:
    - ✓ evidence scan across all applicable forms of evidence (to capture best evidence)
    - ✓ jurisdictional scan (to learn from the experiences of other countries)
    - ✓ horizon scan (to leverage foresight work done nationally and globally)
    - ✓ key-informant interviews (to leverage rich experiences)
    - ✓ deliberative processes (to engage citizens and stakeholders in collective problem-solving)?
- For the evidence-supply side
  - Are all forms of evidence covered by existing evidence-support units of the type described in the first infographic?

The potential features of an evidence-support system that we're looking for are in green below…

… and examples of the types of things we're hearing are in comment boxes (in brief, most countries have few features, and … even fewer working optimally, especially when crises emerge)

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We have some pockets of excellence in decision-making and evidence use, but mostly we're focused on evidence about the problem; we're weaker on options and implementation

Government policymakers in central agencies, line departments, and legislative bodies (and organizational leaders) **with separate or shared evidence demands**

We have several leading-edge groups in government, but generally we suffer from a hollowing out of our policy capacity and a failure to keep up with new developments in evidence use

Evidence-demand coordination (horizon scanning and prioritization of questions)

We showed we could be transparent with travel and expense claims; a commitment to transparency with our evidence inputs would transform our organizational culture

One-window requests (when complex questions)

Integrated responses (when multiple inputs)

Evidence-supply coordination

We mostly rely on in-house staff and a few management-consulting firms, but we have no mechanisms to get the right questions to best-in-class and service-oriented evidence-support units and to incorporate their insights into policies and programs

We do fairly well with data analytics, somewhat well with evaluation (although we still don't use it to drive ongoing learning and improvement), and poorly with other forms of evidence

Evidence-support network
Provides evidence-supply coordination (when there is a willingness to collaborate) and liaises with the global evidence architecture

We sometimes stumble upon a high-quality living evidence synthesis, but mostly we rely on an informal 'literature review' to complement what we learned from our one domestic study

We need to complement these forms of evidence with lived experiences and with Indigenous ways of knowing

Evidence-support units focused on a specific form of evidence
- Data analytics
- Modeling
- Evaluations
- Behavioural/implementation research
- Qualitative insights
- Evidence synthesis (contextualized)
- Technology assessment/ cost-effectiveness analysis
- Guidelines

Global evidence architecture
- Living evidence syntheses (global public goods)
- Living evidence products may also exist for data analytics, modeling and guidelines (see corresponding section)

Evidence-support units focused on sectors or other substantive domains (and providing multiple forms of evidence)
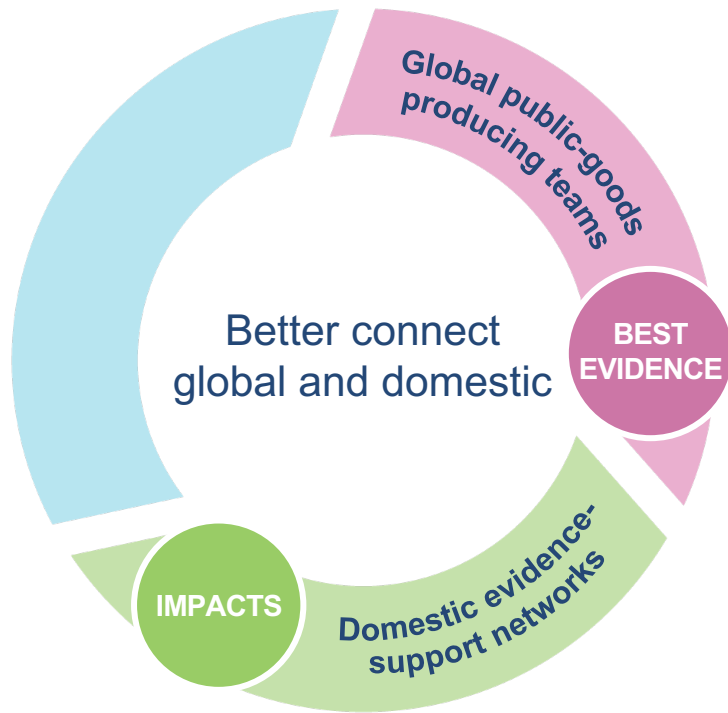- Climate action, education, health, etc.

Enhance and leverage the global evidence architecture

- The second implementation priority is a key enabler of the first priority and of the evidence-informed efforts of multilateral organizations to support their member states

- Ongoing leadership by WHO (e.g., with its normative guidance), and pockets of leadership at UNICEF and UNDP, but little response from other multilateral organizations

- Some pilots but no broad efforts to coordinate the production of evidence-related global public goods
  - Continued low signal-to-noise ratio with uneven coverage, low quality and outdatedness the pattern for both SDG-focused evidence syntheses and COVID-19-focused evidence syntheses, as well as continued duplication and hence research waste
  - Many anecdotal examples of funders/donors and global public good producers 'going their own way'

- The Evidence Commission secretariat and its partners are speaking with many funders and donors and with many global public good producers (through the Global Evidence Producers Group) and conducting an assessment of past efforts to enhance aspects of the global evidence architecture
  - Goal is to develop one or more viable models and to seek funding and the support of evidence producers to pilot the model and then to scale it up based on lessons learned

Global public-goods producing teams

- Each commits to respond to emerging global priorities in ways that increase coordination and reduce duplication in the production of **living evidence syntheses**
- They collectively commit to work with existing networks and platforms to maximize efficiencies and synergies and to strengthen and implement standards (for a fuller list, see the footnote on the preceding page)
  - Networks of producers of global public goods (e.g., Campbell, Cochrane, IPCC)
  - Platforms that support the production of global public goods (e.g., PROSPERO)
  - Networks of guideline and technology-assessment groups that use these global public goods
  - **Domestic evidence-support networks** that use these global public goods and that can bring forward the perspectives of many types of decision-makers who use these global public goods (government policymakers, organizational leaders, professionals, and citizens)

Domestic evidence-support networks

- Each commits to respond to emerging domestic priorities in ways that leverage and enable the implementation of global public goods (e.g., through **contextualized evidence synthesis and support**) and to support the continuous improvement of global public goods (through partnerships with teams in their region or with similar topic coverage)
- They collectively commit to work with existing networks and platforms to maximize efficiencies and synergies and to strengthen and implement standards
  - Networks of evidence-support units (e.g., Brazil Coalition for Evidence, What Works Network in the U.K., EVIPNet in low- and middle-income countries)

Global public-goods producing teams

Better connect global and domestic

BEST EVIDENCE

IMPACTS

Domestic evidence-support networks

The Living Evidence Alliance is a promising prototype, but we have a long way to go with hundreds of low-quality evidence syntheses for unimportant questions and none for many of society's most important questions

We were able to respond to a question from national policymakers with a contextualized evidence synthesis on climate-adaptation strategies in three days because a living evidence synthesis was 'sitting there' with more than 17,000 studies already identified and assessed

Paradoxically, some global public-goods producers like Cochrane are in their most fragile funding position ever, and others like Campbell have never been sustainably funded

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One possible model for improving coordination:
Use funding as a lever for change
(better address domestic evidence needs with money saved from research waste)
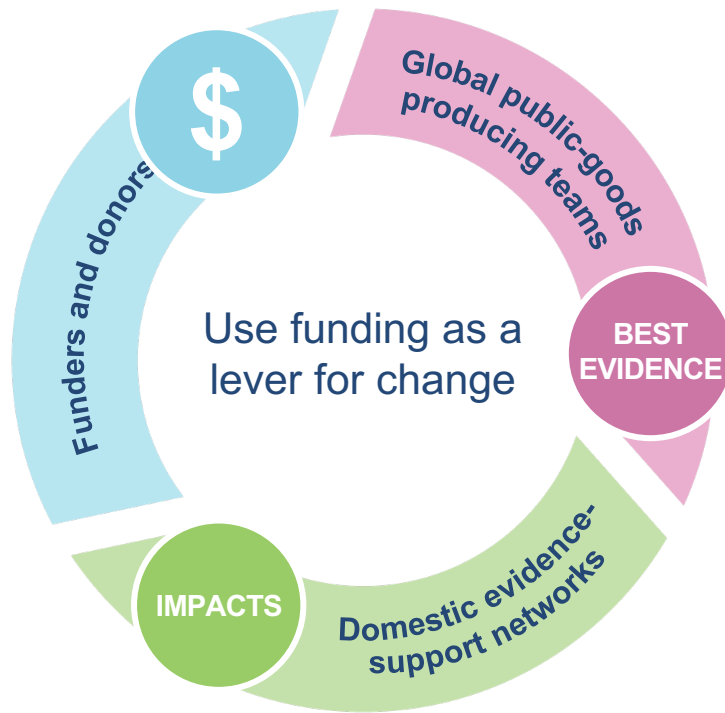
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Funders and donors

- Global funders, national funders and donors collectively commit to supporting an evolving suite of **living evidence syntheses** addressing periodically and dynamically prioritized questions (e.g., X teams – equitably distributed around the globe – addressing Y questions)
- Their collaboration could progress
  - Share information → coordinate → pool funds
- They can issue calls with common standards for teams about:
  - processes (e.g., machine learning; merit review by decision-makers, evidence intermediaries, and evidence producers; immediate online posting of updates)
  - products (e.g., foreground equity and context considerations; infographics; downloadable data; open-access publishing)
  - partnerships (e.g., co-production with domestic evidence-support networks and domestic pools of citizen partners)
- They can measure and manage teams' performance (e.g., responsive to needs, agile in finding ways to add value, reliable in quality and timeliness, and partnered with impact-focused domestic evidence-support networks)
- Complemented by national entities funding **domestic evidence-support networks** (and global funders and donors helping to fund those based in low- and middle-income countries)

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Put evidence at the centre for everyday life

- The third implementation priority is where we turn our focus to citizens

- Small-scale responses from governments and from citizen-serving NGOs
  - More focus on polarization and misinformation and efforts to address them
  - More recognition of the need to maximize the benefits of artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) while minimizing its harms
  - Our own two citizen panels

- Evidence Commission secretariat, the Citizen Leadership Group and their partners are speaking with many citizen-serving NGOs and citizen leaders
  - Goal is to identify what's going well that needs to be systematized and scaled up, and what gaps should be prioritized to fill, and to work with government policymakers and citizen-serving NGOs, among others, to push for improvements

Context for and challenges with putting evidence at the centre for everyday life

Citizens make many decisions where evidence could be helpful, such as:

Managing my health, safety and well-being (and that of my family's)

Spending my money on products and services

Volunteering my time and donating money

Three challenges

We live in an era of too much information and lots of misinformation (false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead)

We are typically left on our own to find, understand and use evidence
- Opportunity to look for evidence, including time and internet access
- Motivation to look for and make sense of evidence
- Capacity to use digital platforms like websites and social media (digital literacy), select the right sources for them (media literacy), to put what's known in a bigger context (e.g., education, health and climate literacy) distinguish between best evidence and other things and to understand what it may mean for them (evidence literacy) or understand what they are reading (general literacy)

Governments, businesses and NGOs do not set things up to make it easy for us
- Services are commonly offered without evidence to help distinguish among them
- Products are commonly sold in-store and online without evidence to back up their claims (and they may be sold alongside proven products)
- Information is commonly presented online based on profile and search history and not based on evidence (and laws protecting us against advertising and selling products that may be harmful or dangerous, or about making false claims, do not apply yet to information)
- Compelling stories and visuals are commonly created by people with limited evidence literacy

These are early days in understanding 'what works' in putting evidence at the centre for everyday life

Help citizens judge what others are claiming or more generally find (and receive) reliable information on a topic

- Tools and training to develop critical-thinking skills (e.g., thatsaclaim.org and Sense About Science's risk know-how framework), including in schools
- Plain-language summaries of best evidence on different topics (e.g., Campbell and Cochrane) and accompanying audio-visual materials
- Journalism and science-communication strategies (e.g., fact-checking services, 'pre-bunking' to help people know what to watch out for with misinformation and conspiracy theories, and 'truth-sandwiches' to what the evidence says immediately before and after covering misinformation)
- Campaigns to build a culture where evidence is understood, valued and used (evidence weeks and #askforevidence hashtag)

Make evidence available to citizens when they are making choices

- Online sites like Wirecutter for shopping products, 80,000 hours for finding high-impact careers or high-impact volunteering opportunities, and GiveWell for giving to the charities that make the most of every dollar they receive
- Tools, such as decision aids, that help to work through options in light of their pros and cons

> I often tell my fellow citizen leaders: Google is a great place to go to pick a restaurant or learn more about a public figure; it poses real challenges if you're looking for best evidence to make an important decision

Engage citizens in asking questions and answering them (with new research or with existing evidence)

- Website questions can be submitted to organizations funding research
- Prioritization processes that engage citizens (e.g., James Lind Alliance)
- Support for citizens to become partners in a research team undertaking a new research study or synthesizing what's known from all studies addressing the same question

> While this approach sounds promising, those of us working in citizen-serving NGOs have come to realize that declining trust in government and business leaders has led to rising concerns about this approach among citizens

Make evidence-based choices the default or easy option

- Laws that require products, services and information to be evidence-based (and make it illegal to spread misinformation)
- Rewards for businesses advertising evidence-based products, services and information (and penalties for not)
- Algorithms for big tech companies presenting products, services and information in part based on supporting evidence (and for limiting the spread of misinformation)
- Using 'nudge' strategies to steer citizens towards evidence-based choices, while still allowing them to go look at other choices too (e.g., automatic enrolments, product placements, symbols or 'kitemarks')

Conclusion

- We need to capitalize on 'windows of opportunity' and not just return to old ways of doing things
  - COVID-19 showed us the perils of many old ways of doing things, but also spurred many innovations that need to become the 'new normal' in using evidence to address societal challenges
  - If we don't act now, we won't be prepared to pivot to address future crises

- These implementation priorities are highly synergistic
  - While we've given more explicit attention to the synergies between domestic evidence-support systems and the global evidence architecture, there are also synergies between domestic evidence-support systems and putting evidence at the centre of everyday life (and citizens are the ones to hold government policymakers and others to account when they do harm or waste money on ineffective solutions)

- The Evidence Commission's secretariat and Implementation Council are keen to work with any groups interested in contributing to our three implementation priorities
  - Formalize and strengthen domestic evidence-support systems → **conduct or participate in a rapid evidence-support** system assessment for your country and find ways to act on the lessons learned if one has already been conducted
  - Enhance and leverage the global evidence architecture → **encourage funders/donors** -- both in your own country and those operating globally – to be part of the solution **and encourage impact-oriented evidence producers** – especially those producing global public goods like living evidence syntheses – to work in more coordinated ways and to build connections to domestic evidence-support networks and units
  - Put evidence at the centre of everyday life → **support citizen-serving NGOs and citizen leaders** to take action in your country

- The Evidence Commission's secretariat and Implementation Council also welcome expressions of interest from any groups interested in complementing what we're doing – with the three implementation priorities, with recommendations that don't fall within these current priorities (e.g., those related to UN system entities) or with formally monitoring progress against each recommendation