Global Commission on Evidence
to Address Societal Challenges

Strengthening domestic evidence-support systems: Procedures for conducting rapid evidence-support system assessments (RESSAs)

Introduction

The Evidence Commission report (released in January 2022, along with an executive summary) had two main goals: provide recommendations about how we can and must improve the use of evidence, both in routine times and in future global crises; and provide the context, concepts or vocabulary that underpin work in this area. Update 2023 (released in January 2023) describes our progress towards improving the use of evidence to address societal challenges and how we are moving from recommendations into action.

Our work is focused on three implementation priorities:

- Formalize and strengthen domestic evidence-support systems
- Enhance and leverage the global evidence architecture
- Put evidence at the centre of everyday life

The first of three implementation priorities – formalize and strengthen evidence-support systems – provides the mechanisms for on-the- ground impacts with the second priority and it can underpin many of the mechanisms with the third priority.

To fulfill our first priority, the Evidence Commission's secretariat and its partners are conducting rapid evidence-support system assessments, or RESSAs, and sharing lessons learned through the RESSA Country Leads Group. The goal in each country is to identify what is 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. A RESSA may focus at the national or sub-national level – we use the term region to refer to either level.

Conducting a RESSA

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 (please refer to Update 2023, p. 6-7).

Drawing on websites, documents and interviews, 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. Examples of these questions, the potential features of an evidence-support system, as well as examples of the types of things we are hearing from the RESSAs are available (please refer to Update 2023, p. 6-7).

Undertaking a RESSA involves reviews of websites and documents and interviews with approximately 10-15 key informants to document the structures and processes that contribute to evidence-demand, the interface of demand and supply of evidence, and the supply of timely evidence. A data-collection template is available in Excel (see the Appendix) and can be iteratively updated over time. The key output is a slide deck describing draft priorities for strengthening a given region's domestic evidence infrastructure (to see a sample slide deck contact evidencecommission@mcmaster.ca).

Optional resources

In addition to the background resources noted above (the 2022 Evidence Commission report and executive summary; Update 2023 – particularly the section on p. 6-7, formalizing and strengthening domestic evidence-support systems – and the RESSA Country Leads Group), please also see:

- A documented example of a RESSA, in this case for a specific sector, can be found here
- The RESSA approach, as featured in 2023 by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), a global initiative of the United Nations, via the PANORAMA (solutions for a healthy planet) platform and the Global Solutions Forum
    - Read the full RESSA solution on the PANORAMA platform
    - Watch a video about our RESSA work produced by SDSN
    - Read a summary of the GSF 2023 forum

Should you have any questions about undertaking a RESSA, please email the Evidence Commission at evidencecommission@mcmaster.ca.

Step 1: Customizing the columns in the data-collection template

The following column headers in the Appendix require customization for each region:

- in row 2, columns C to E, insert the names of central government agencies (and add additional columns as needed) – the example below provides an overview of how it was approached for the federal level in Canada

Central government agencies					
President's or prime minster's office	**Cabinet office**	**Treasury**	**Science and technology**	**Legislature or parliament**	**Judiciary (if relevant)**
Prime Minister's Office	Privy Council Office	Treasury Board	Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada	Parliament	Not applicable

- in row 2, columns F to N, insert the names of relevant divisions/ministries/departments in the first sector/topic of interest (and add additional columns as needed) – the example below provides an overview of how it was approaches for health at the federal level in Canada

Sector/topic 1 - Health				
Functional area #1 (drugs and devices)	**Functional area #2 (health products and food)**	**Functional area #3 (health services and systems)**	**Functional area #4 (population and public health)**	**Fuctional area #5 (e.g., COVID-19 response: public-health measures, clinical management, health-system arrangements, and economic and social responses)**
Patented Medicines Prices Review Board, Health Canada	Health Products and Food Branch, Health Canada	Strategic Policy Branch, Health Canada	Public Health Agency of Canada	Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada, ISED and CIHR working largely independently

Each region should select two other sectors or topics as the focus of the assessment, ideally from the following list of candidates:

1) digitally supported-economic transformation
2) education
3) gender-based violence
4) humanitarian emergency
5) net-zero emissions

The corresponding column headers then must be customized accordingly in row 2. Government organizational charts and staff directories are typically the best way to source such information.

Step 2: Using the row headers as prompts to document the evidence-support system

Following the instruction in row 3 (again in the Appendix), provide a brief description of the information that matches the description in the row header, and hyperlink it to the document or website that provides greater detail (and please add additional rows to create additional cells that capture additional units or procedures that match to the same description). Please do this to:

- capture structures and processes influencing the **demand for evidence** (prompts in the light-shaded green rows)

Evidence demand-side	What decisions are made and what types of evidence is needed?
	What sources of evidence are currently drawn upon to inform decisions?
	Are expert panels or advisory committees used to inform decisions?
	What procedures that govern how expert panels are set up and operated (e.g., members with the right mix of issue-specific knowledge, evidence-appraisal expertise, and lived experience; pre-circulated evidence synthesis; declaration of conflict of interest; recommendations or options backed by a summary of the supporting evidence; recommendations adjusted as the evidence or situation evolves (i.e., living expert panels); and whether the recommendation are an input to a decision or mandatory and whether the recommendations and/or decision are made public
	Is there a dedicated science advisor that plays an evidence support function?
	What procedures that govern how science advice is provided (e.g., pre-circulated statements, declaration of conflict of interest, documentation of how the supporting evidence was identified, assessed and interpreted)?
	Are there enablers in place to support the culture and capacity of using evidence, which could include:
	a) Legal instruments (e.g., an evidence act)
	b) Economic instruments (e.g., amount or budget percentage dedicated to the evidence infrastructure; licencing of journals with paywalls)?
	c) Voluntary instruments (e.g., codes of practice, standards, guidelines, procedures, handbooks, toolkits, metrics, ministerial mandate letters or briefing templates, cabinet-submission checklists, and periodic audits of evidence use)
	d) Information/education instruments (e.g., training for public servants in how to find and use evidence, convene expert panels or provide science advice)
	e) Formalized 'ways in' for evidence into 'mainstream' policy processes, which could include ministerial mandate letters, cabinet submissions, budget proposals, spending plans, briefing notes, evaluation plans, and auditing processes, as well as defined re-assessment points (e.g., strategic policy reviews) and appointed commissions/panels
	f) Evidence-attuned human-resource processes, including hiring criteria, performance-review criteria, promotion criteria, and professional development for policy, program, technical and library staff

Do the same to:

- capture structures and processes that operate at the **interface of evidence demand and supply** (prompts in the medium-shaded green rows)

- capture timely, demand-driven evidence units on the **evidence-supply side** (prompts in the dark-shaded green rows).

Government websites, organizational charts and staff directories are typically the optimal way to identify or learn about in-house units, whereas a broad range of websites and documents can help to identify partners and United Nations system entities providing evidence support.

Using the template as a guide, key informants can help with initial brainstorming, as a check on what has already been found, or both, as well as sharing 'big picture' insights about what is going particularly well and what are the priorities for the next year. Informants should ideally bring a 'big picture' perspective to the task and one that complements other key informants.

Rest assured that most cells will remain blank. Two final rows have been provided for any 'big picture' insights. Additional context for the row headers can be found in corresponding sections of the Evidence Commission report:
- section 3.3: government policymakers and the context for their use of evidence
- section 4.2: definitions of forms in which evidence is typically encountered
- section 4.14: features of an ideal national evidence infrastructure
- section 5.3: strategies used by evidence intermediaries
- section 6.2: equitably distributed capacities needed to support evidence use
- recommendations targeting government policymakers (5-8), citizens (13), evidence intermediaries (14 and 16), and funders (24).

See also Update 2023, p. 6-7.

Step 3: Preparing a slide deck

The slide deck can be brief and focus only on priorities for the next year, include a summary of what's going well that needs to be systematized and what gaps to fill, or the brief can be longer and include the broader context as captured in the Evidence Commission report.

Ideally, the key domestic exemplars used in the slide deck are highlighted in the Excel file (Appendix 1) to allow people to dig more deeply into the exemplars.

When inspirational exemplars are drawn from other countries, it's important to explain that they are offered to spur discussion about new approaches that could be adapted and tried in the country. Our interest is not in asking what countries are faring the 'best,' but in having individuals in a given country ask how they can systematize what's going well and use inspirational exemplars from elsewhere to think about how to fill gaps.

For more information, please reach out to evidencecommission@mcmaster.ca.

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