



How Learning and Collaboration Hubs Can Strengthen Evidence-Informed Policymaking:

Lessons from PEERSS

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Overview

The field of evidence-informed policymaking (EIP) strongly advocates for collaboration and shared learning to facilitate change in resource-limited settings. By its very nature, the work of exchanging and translating knowledge requires boundary spanning, a systematic approach connecting and supporting cross-functional and multi-disciplinary groups to improve communication, facilitate alignment toward goals, and enhance the management of complex problems. Networks and alliances feature prominently, to enable capacity sharing and increase learning, and can either be permanently embedded within governments or mobilized to respond to short-term policy needs. Increasingly, there is an emphasis on strengthening teams that can support organizations and further institutionalize systems of evidence use. But despite a clear rationale for collaboration and shared learning, few examples are available of how these approaches have been applied, and little guidance is available to those attempting to use them for the first time.

Throughout the five-year initiative, the country teams in the Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Systems (PEERSS) sought to adapt numerous approaches and tools—including systematic evidence reviews, rapid evidence synthesis, evidence maps, stakeholder dialogues, and citizen panels—to their contexts and diverse social policies. They also collaborated with other teams, identifying similarities, differences, and opportunities for improvement in their evidence ecosystems. **To deepen learning and exchange between partner organizations, PEERSS introduced four Learning and**

From 2018 to early 2023, the [Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems \(PEERSS\)](#) worked to strengthen evidence generation and translation and build conducive environments for advancing EIP in social systems. Funded by the [International Development Research Centre](#) and the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#), PEERSS engaged more than 90 members in 13 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East—Burkina Faso, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Nigeria, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, and the United Kingdom—to learn from and support one another in promoting the use of research evidence in policymaking.

Collaboration Hubs (L&C Hubs) in September 2021 to provide tailored coaching and mentorship on how to provide EIP support to policymakers, respond to organizations' specific learning needs, and embed monitoring, evaluation, and learning strategies in all 13 countries in the partnership.



This brief summarizes our experiences as the organizations leading the L&C Hubs and initial reflections on how this model can support EIP. By describing our experiences and sharing what worked and what didn't, we hope to fill a gap in the EIP literature and convey the potential of this learning model to those who want to support, seed, and lead similar hubs, particularly for EIP. This brief is also a way to preserve institutional memory by documenting this approach to shared learning, with the hope that others can learn from and build on it.

Learning and Collaboration Hubs

In the early years of PEERSS, teams from Canada, Lebanon, South Africa, and the United Kingdom provided most of the EIP capacity-building support to other teams by serving as Synergy Support Teams (SST). In 2021, it became clear that the country teams needed more tailored, flexible support and mentorship so they could better respond to specific country and regional needs and strengthen collaboration with policymakers. After a series of consultations between the IDRC and SST, IDRC issued an open call for proposals in the partnership, for organizations to host and lead L&C Hubs, welcoming different approaches and designs that aligned with the experiences and expertise of the country teams that would

be submitting a proposal. Once selected as an L&C Hub, hub leads were encouraged to share their proposals with each other to avoid duplication and facilitate a coordinated approach to learning in the partnership.

The L&C Hubs were designed to address country teams' learning gaps – from improving access to tools and technical and tacit knowledge to offering a more flexible and tailored approach to learning and collaboration across the PEERSS partnership. We aimed to improve the quality, relevance, translation, and use of evidence, and foster a global culture of evidence use with the following four key objectives:

- Identify and document technical support and mentorship needs within the PEERSS partnership and match country teams with that assistance;
- Support the development of the PEERSS learning strategy and critical synthesis of learning across the partnership;
- Identify, create, and implement opportunities for technical collaboration across the partnership; and
- Produce “stories of change” focused on specific policies and programs as well as systemic policy issues, to contribute to the field of EIP.

Each L&C Hub identified different focus areas:

- The **ACE Hub**, led by the [Africa Centre for Evidence \(ACE\)](#) at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, focused on systems-level change in evidence use.
- The **EPPI Centre Hub**, led by the [Evidence for Policy & Practice Information \(EPPI\) Centre](#) at University College London in the U.K., focused on combining theoretical and empirical research with practical experience and autoethnography.
- The **K2P Hub**, led by the [Knowledge to Policy \(K2P\) Center](#) at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, focused on learning, mentorship, and capacity strengthening at both the individual and institutional levels.
- **Hub LAC**, the Latin American and the Caribbean Evidence Hub, was run jointly by several organizations in the region and focused on strengthening regional and national evidence ecosystems.

The four hubs launched in September 2021 with 16 months of funding to deliver their offerings across the PEERSS partnership. We used various approaches to identify the learning priorities of country teams, including virtual calls, surveys, and small group meetings, and used this information to further refine the hub offerings. The hub teams then convened monthly to share progress and learn together.



ACE Hub

The ACE Hub worked with PEERSS teams to promote systemic changes in evidence use by decision-makers. It addressed existing partners' efforts to further systems-level change and worked to improve collaboration and sharing of experiences among the partners. It also worked to formalize this joint learning into insights and structured guidance on how to foster systems-level change in evidence use across different contexts.



The ACE Hub's activities centered on three interconnected priorities:

- Building and enhancing evidence communities across the PEERSS partnership and at the field level
- Supporting and enhancing EIP capacities through mentoring and shared learning within a community of practice, by focusing on systems-level change to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- Documenting, synthesizing, and contextualizing learning on systems-level change within and across partner teams, to inform the EIP field globally

To carry out its work, the hub formed an online community of practice; convened members of seven PEERSS teams monthly; presented "tours" of each country's evidence ecosystem; supported the weeklong [Evidence2022 event](#) organized by the [Africa Evidence Network](#) (AEN) and led a session on systems-level change for evidence use; and reviewed the evidence base on systems-level change for evidence use.

Several developments after the hub's inception pointed to a promising shift toward more coordinated efforts to advance systems-level change at the national and global levels. In Brazil and South Africa, units and systems at the central government level were established to support greater systemwide evidence use. In South Africa, the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment System required all policies across all government sectors to use the same transparent process for evidence assurance. At the global level, the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges published 16 recommendations to support evidence use in alignment with a new World Health Organization checklist on the institutionalization of evidence use—an encouraging example of how tools and systems to support institutionalization can be better aligned.

The ACE Hub's new methodology of combining evidence ecosystems tours with a "Why I fell in love with evidence" activity proved so effective for rapid learning and exchanges that the team facilitated these exercises in a dedicated session at Evidence2022. The approach enabled teams to exchange their experiences in a structured way and identify similar pathways and entry points for evidence use across seemingly different evidence systems. For example, evidence advocates in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and South Africa could all trace their roots to national movements to overcome totalitarian rule.

The hub allowed teams to learn from one another much faster than they could have otherwise and to turn this joint learning into action. The best example of this was the mentoring of Hub LAC by the AEN. Hub LAC was keen to explore establishing a similar regional evidence network, and the 16-month mentoring relationship culminated in the much-celebrated inaugural [enLACe](#) event that same year—the first-ever regional meeting on EIP. Hub LAC was able to reach a stage of maturity in creating a regional evidence network that took the AEN four years to reach.

EPPI Centre Hub

The EPPI Centre Hub focused on how different geographic, historical, and cultural contexts affect the advancement of evidence-for-policy systems. The team hoped that if they could learn from their past, they could shape a better future.



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The hub team adapted a method known as *autoethnography*, a qualitative research approach typically used by individuals to look back at the personal challenges in their lives to understand and critique cultural norms and practices in society more broadly. They leveraged this approach to reflect on how organizations, as well as individual researchers' career pathways, have evolved within EIP. This approach allowed the teams to compare their EIP experiences with theories about how change happens, to understand how ideas germinate, spread within and across policy sectors and countries, and become established within influential organizations. Through guided work with the PEERSS county teams, organizations were also able to reflect on past experiences in which new ways of working led to new knowledge, changes in organizational procedures, or encouraged more constructive professional or personal behavior. Teams also had the opportunity to discuss their current EIP projects and the kinds of support that would be helpful to them.

As an organization, the consistent theme at the heart of EPPI Centre’s work was collaborative relationships spanning the research-policy interface and serving as the mechanism for developing programs that helped researchers and policy teams develop their evidence capacities. Early efforts of listening to service users, practitioners, and policymakers led to evidence products better suited to the decisions these people faced. Later collaborations culminated in portfolios of policy-relevant evidence products and collaborations between researchers and IT specialists supported the development of innovative software with features to help safeguard and analyze data. Two factors facilitated these increasingly sophisticated outputs: 1) EPPI Centre’s willingness to tailor ways of working to suit other organizations’ needs and 2) the other organizations’ readiness to embrace change.

The hub’s autoethnography of career pathways revealed a set of common characteristics among EIP practitioners: highly driven, self-motivated, and resilient. Like the organizations they work with, these practitioners’ careers have been supported by training and mentoring, by building relational networks, and by working in areas where they have deep contextual knowledge.

Overall, academic contributions to advancing evidence and policy systems were encouraged by research focusing attention on the research-policy interface, a willingness to work in unfamiliar fields, inclusive ways of working to move from conflict to consensus, and incentives and opportunities for reflection and consolidating learning. Through leadership and participation in the hub activities, researchers and policy teams have further developed their evidence skills and shared emerging lessons through several channels, including a poster for the [What Works Global Summit](#), and manuscripts for academic journals.

PEERSS teams found that they had much in common despite their distinct geographies, cultures, and histories. They were less motivated by structured learning opportunities than by the need to acquire new skills and new ways of working to address immediate challenges and have an impact on the wider world. Given the opportunities to learn from each other, they grew into a mutually supportive community that thrived on crossing organizational and cultural boundaries to create new knowledge.

K2P Hub

The K2P Hub was designed to provide PEERSS teams with greater access to technical support, mentorship, collaborative learning, and peer exchange. The hub’s activities centered around two broad domains: capacity strengthening and communities of practice.

The hub’s capacity-strengthening efforts built on the existing K2P Mentorship Program to identify country teams’ needs and match them with technical support and mentorship. Teams could choose from three learning tracks:

- **Entry/Fast Track:** A three-to-five-day intensive workshop designed for entry-level participants, covering the basics of EIP



- **“Learning by Doing” Track:** Designed for mature teams that were familiar with EIP and needed support in applying their knowledge and advancing their work on a current policy topic
- **Full Track:** A six-month to a one-year program covering everything from capacity assessment to capacity strengthening (at both the individual and institutional levels) and “learning by doing”

The Fast Track program gained traction both within and beyond the PEERSS partnership. The initial course was attended by 25 participants from Brazil, China, Colombia, and Ethiopia and involved a mix of presentations, case studies, and group discussions. Participants reported that the program significantly increased their EIP knowledge and skills. The team from China later invited K2P to lead a session at their regional workshop, “Introduction to Knowledge Translation,” which brought further exposure to the Fast Track program and its goals. Since the initial course, the program has expanded to cover additional topics (such as antimicrobial resistance) and countries beyond PEERSS (Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, and Uganda).

The hub’s communities of practice efforts, designed in collaboration with PEERSS teams, focused on priority setting, stakeholder engagement, and rapid-response services. Teams had opportunities to share their practical experiences and lessons learned and to collectively tackle the challenges they faced. This dynamic learning process, known as “thinking together,” enabled the teams to help guide each other in working through problems in their areas of mutual interest.

In addition, the hub provided tailored technical support to PEERSS teams. For instance, the Trinidad and Tobago team adapted K2P’s approach and institutional capacity assessment tools to assess the capacity of four social sector ministries. The China team sought input from K2P on two publication drafts—“[Standard reporting guidelines for Evidence Briefs for Policy \(STEP\)](#)” and “Scoping Review on Definition of Evidence in Health Sciences”—and members of the K2P team became coauthors.

K2P also operationalized its community of practice efforts and expanded the priority-setting thematic area to address the topics most likely to affect policy and practice. It is conducting a critical interpretive synthesis of a framework for prioritizing issues that will inform the development of a priority-setting tool for knowledge translation products.

Hub LAC

Hub LAC was co-led by [Instituto Veredas](#) (Veredas Institute), a Brazilian nongovernmental knowledge translation organization; [Unidad de Políticas de Salud Informadas por Evidencia](#) (Evidence-Informed Health Policy Unit), an evidence unit in Chile’s Ministry of Health; [Unidad de Evidencia y Deliberación para la Toma de Decisiones](#) (Evidence and Deliberation for Decision Making Unit), an evidence unit at the University of Antioquia in Colombia; and the [Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development](#) in Trinidad and Tobago. Hub LAC was created to address a need to strengthen the regional evidence ecosystem, including access to resources in Spanish and



Portuguese, and connect EIP practitioners, shared by PEERSS teams in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia.

During the scoping phase, the hub established a comprehensive map of regional stakeholders, created strategic alliances and partnerships, and conducted country EIP assessments. The results of the assessments were summarized in six country reports (for Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico), which described understanding of the evidence-to-decision infrastructure, the policy issues addressed, the methodologies applied, and the impact of using evidence to transform public policies and improve people's lives in these countries. Hub researchers dived deeper into three areas: education, health, and security, and observed profound social inequalities and diverse policy arrangements across the six countries. To conduct the assessments, early career researchers participated in the K2P Hub's capacity strengthening sessions and then adapted the Situation Analysis Manual from the World Health Organization's Evidence-informed Policy Network Europe to better suit the six-country contexts, including by creating new methodological approaches, which resulted in the hub's manual for situational analysis.

The hub also offered workshops, in collaboration with stakeholders from all over the region, where different institutions connected and shared experiences. The workshops had two main objectives: 1) to introduce Hub LAC and its vision, mission, values, and perspectives to the region and 2) to promote interaction among EIP actors in the region to foster more regional perspectives on the need to produce, translate, and use evidence in policy decision-making. In 2022, the hub organized the first regional [enLACe](#) event to connect established evidence centers in the health field with evidence centers dedicated to other social policies. The hub sees its role as a mobilizer and articulator of different knowledge centers, fulfilling its vision to reduce overlap and advance EIP across the region.

Early Reflections

As hub leads and EIP practitioners, we were keenly aware of the lack of documentation and practical guidance on shared learning and capacity-strengthening initiatives for EIP and were therefore motivated to adopt robust knowledge management strategies and routinely convene to reflect on our learnings. This was an effort to improve our own practice and hub offerings, test the underlying tools and processes that can support these types of multi-leader strengthening initiatives, and communicate the value of the overall approach.

We reflected on how the multi-hub model and these types of collaborative practices and learning spaces heightened our abilities to draw on and translate meaning from evidence sources and contribute to our practice in the field of EIP. Five early reflections emerged from our experience leading a multi-hub model:

1. ***The multi-hub model enabled a more holistic approach to EIP capacity strengthening.*** Openly sharing our proposals ensured a coordinated vision covering the breadth of the evidence ecosystem (individual, institutional, systems, and regional). While each hub focused on a different area of EIP capacity strengthening that aligned with their interests, needs, and expertise, there was also synergy among the hubs' offerings that would not have been feasible otherwise.



2. ***Communities of practice leveraging combined insights of global and local expertise strengthened EIP practice, including hub offerings and activities.*** As hub leads, we benefited from participating in each other's activities, as well as sharing our successes and workshopping our challenges together, allowing us to collectively reflect on our learning, and compare knowledge translation processes documented at the global level and through the lens of colleagues in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Western Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. This deepened our understanding of the evolution of EIP systems and further enriched our hub offerings, as well as enabled the development of knowledge and processes that will outlive and expand beyond PEERSS. Collaboration among the hubs and country teams facilitated a volume and quality of outputs that may not have been possible otherwise.

3. ***Collaborative learning models strengthened trust and enhanced collective problem solving.*** The work of translating, sharing, and brokering knowledge spans boundaries, and EIP practitioners may often feel like imposters as they work across diverse topic areas. Collaborating with trusted colleagues and mentors with similar experiences, capabilities, and goals enabled honest reflection on our boundary-spanning identities and generated clearer guidance on how to continue to build capacity in this field.



4. ***Alignment with well-established and influential organizations leading L&C Hub activities enhanced EIP capacity and lent credibility to the work and reputation of teams across the partnership.*** Aligning and collaborating with organizations who were well-established within their region not only directly strengthened team capacities and supported the generation and translation of knowledge but also enhanced the credibility of the work and reputation of teams and institutions they mentored and supported. This credibility benefited the Hubs and the PEERSS teams they engaged with, exposing each to new approaches and policymaking spaces and facilitating expansion of EIP from health into other social sectors.

5. *Accommodating flexible approaches to capacity strengthening, including a mix of pre-planned and on-demand support addressed the diversity of EIP needs of a wide range of actors.* The diversity of EIP practitioners and organizations and the evolving and

urgent nature of EIP work require a mix of approaches to meet organizations' capacity-strengthening needs. Several of us adjusted our learning cycles or formats to "meet country teams where they are," including changing the frequency of engagements or adjusting the content based on the audience, social and political structures, or specific learning styles. Preplanned approaches, such as training courses, did not suffice, as country teams also had new technical



support needs related to policymaker requests. The flexibility of the hub approach allowed teams to access support from multiple hub partners as needs emerged and from a hub lead that had the specific expertise and capacity to respond.

Reflecting on our experience, members of the hubs also collectively identified several lessons about the process of initiating and sustaining this type of learning model. These lessons were also foundational for trust and deeper collaboration among members. They include:

- Start with a pilot or inception phase to test and refine the approach, scope, and activities of hubs before scaling up and to understand the context of evidence-to-policy systems.
- Advertise both pre-planned and on-demand hub offerings and activities, and technical assistance to teams.
- Minimize language barriers, such as by using subtitles and translations.
- Improve communication within learning activities, such as by using visual resources and packaging information in different formats.
- Hold regular inter-hub meetings, with rotating leadership and facilitation responsibility, to report progress, encourage reflection, and facilitate shared learning.
- Use simple templates to document processes and track and communicate progress.

Discussion

Creating a structure to formalize learning on behalf of the partnership when that learning is owned and led by individual partners is inherently complex and challenging. Adding to that challenge is the dearth of examples of using shared learning approaches for EIP, which could improve practice and help substantiate the value of these models for funders. We attempted to address this gap as hubs.



Through the multi-hub model, we found an opportunity to generate new knowledge safely and constructively, and a shared learning approach which we are keen to continue to learn from, share, and evolve. However, we would be remiss to not discuss the challenges we faced. Our initial theory of change for the hubs, which assumed that PEERSS teams would easily engage with the learning activities of each hub and get involved, had shortcomings. We encountered the following challenges:

- **Understanding the purpose and objectives of the overall hub approach.** As hubs, we learnt a lot from each other, but it is less clear how much the country teams who were not part of the hub institutions benefited. Greater clarity early on about the hub's objectives (e.g., does "formalize learning on behalf of the partnership" mean that the hubs should define key learning topics and approaches, or should they respond to the needs identified by country teams?) would likely have resulted in different offerings or structures. We engaged in light mapping and needs assessment exercises, but more systematic approaches could have ensured better alignment with team needs and potentially increased participation.
- **Balancing ambition and capacity.** Fulfilling our role as hubs within the short timeline of the partnership was challenging because it required building staff capacity to move forward with hub offerings alongside other competing demands. PEERSS teams also had limited capacity to engage at times, despite their interest.
- **Learning how to work together effectively.** This was an iterative process. The original hub proposals included specific deliverables, but one of the main outcomes of the first year was better working together, as representatives of organizations with varied and diverse expertise. When we explained our way of working to each other and learned how other hubs worked, it was like holding up a mirror to ourselves. Together, we realized the importance of effectively communicating our work, successes, and country contexts to support our efforts and the work of the hubs.
- **Communication and documentation to help institutionalize good practice.** Communicating and documenting how we work, and continuously iterating based on our learnings was as important in setting up a sustainable learning model that can withstand changes in leadership, membership, and priorities, as it was in institutionalizing EIP practice.

Although the work generated through the hub model will continue in various ways, our time as hubs still feels incomplete. Part of our desire to document this experience was to minimize the "relearning" period in future engagements and build from our successes. As EIP practitioners, mentors, and advocates, through the multi-hub model, we enriched our approach to institutionalizing evidence use and sharpened the tools we now use in our daily practice. Working alongside other PEERSS country teams and partners, we better articulated our knowledge of EIP, as well as the gaps in that knowledge. As hub leads, we recognized that *how* we learned together was just as important as *what* we learned, and each hub member will carry that forward as we continue to support decision-makers and strengthen systems for EIP in our respective contexts.