

HOW TWO EVIDENCE-FOR-POLICYMAKING ORGANIZATIONS DEEPENED MUTUAL LEARNING ACROSS INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES

STORY OF CHANGE

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This is a story of mutual learning flourishing between two organizations in the Partnership for Evidence and Equity in Responsive Social Systems (PEERSS)—and how that benefited the government ministries they supporting to improve evidence-informed policymaking (EIP). This mutual learning led to capacity-strengthening reforms in government departments in both the Caribbean and Brazil.

In April 2021, the Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development (CCHSRD), a PEERSS partner in Trinidad and Tobago, had the opportunity to help four social sector ministries—Labour, Social Development and Family Services, Planning and Development, and Sport and Community Development—expand their EIP capacities.



Figure 1: Social sector ministries come together for EIP Capacity Building Workshop

The CCHSRD team had worked primarily with partners, collaborators, and stakeholders in the health sector, and they were most familiar with how the health sector used EIP approaches, methods, and tools. They did not have experience working with the social sector and were less familiar with qualitative research evidence, which is commonly used to inform social sector policy.

The CCHSRD team already had a plan: 1) assess the ministries' current relationship to research evidence, 2) identify key issues where evidence could inform decision-making, 3) host an EIP capacity-building workshop on finding, evaluating, and using evidence, and 4) create a program to coach the policymakers and co-produce evidence syntheses. But they needed guidance on how to adapt their work in the health sector to the social sector.

The team asked PEERSS for long-term mentoring and support from Sandy Oliver at the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information (EPPI) Centre, a PEERSS partner organization in the United Kingdom. Sandy was experienced with preparing evidence products for policymakers in the social sector, using a range of synthesis methods that included

qualitative research and leading skills workshops for collaborative learning. She was unfamiliar with Trinidad and Tobago, however, and with how to develop policy systems collaboratively. Neither mentor nor mentees held all the knowledge required for their work together to succeed.

Understanding the Perspectives of Others

The CCHSRD team and Sandy learned from one another by sharing experiences via email and video calls. The team drafted materials for assessing needs, setting priorities, leading workshops, and coaching and then discussed them with Sandy. While the materials about research evidence were technically strong, the early-career researchers who developed them needed help putting themselves in the policymakers' shoes and translating ideas for that audience when explaining the value of EIP. These were skills that Sandy had learned through extensive experience shaping systematic reviews and skills workshops to match the priorities of UK policymakers, managers, and community advocates. The mentoring discussions helped the CCHSRD team see their plans from another viewpoint and tailor their materials to better suit the needs of policy teams.



Figure 2: Representatives from the Ministry of Sport & Community Development Participate in EIP Capacity Building Workshop

Together, mentor and mentees reframed the research and training materials to start the conversation with policymakers in a way that invited them to share their experiences, working environment, and aspirations in their own words. This required the CCHSRD team to develop more a conversational presentation style and learn qualitative interviewing skills. They worked to frame questionnaires to capture policymakers' expertise and responsibilities while avoiding making them feel like they were being tested. This consideration was also important for workshops, where neither the researchers nor policymakers had a complete picture of how decision-making happened in the different ministries, or how it could happen in the future. This led mentor and mentees to design collaborative learning sessions about policymakers' roles and ministries' procedures.

Collaborative Learning in the Caribbean

The policymakers from the ministries were familiar with their own sector's priorities, decision-making procedures, and staff skills and responsibilities. But they were unfamiliar with how the health sector works with research evidence and the other ministries' ways of developing policy.

The researchers and policymakers all benefited from collaborative learning. Starting with the needs assessment which helped the researchers understand how evidence was being used in the ministries, the policymakers' EIP training needs, and how to incorporate evidence into the policymakers' ways of working. It led the ministries to commit to increasing their capacity to use evidence when making decisions.

The capacity-building workshop, attended by policymakers from the four ministries, helped reveal what the policymakers had in common and where their work differed. It also

helped identify gaps in gathering and using evidence and the potential for developing new skills and new ways of working. Joint learning sessions interspersed throughout the training workshop helped with collecting this knowledge.

The follow-on coaching program for policymakers helped reinforce the skills they acquired in the workshop and further identified gaps and solutions for developing EIP systems. The policymakers who received coaching and training subsequently shared tools and skills with colleagues at their respective ministries and through career development activities such as continuing education programs.



Figure 3: Participants from the Ministry of Planning & Development Participate in EIP Capacity Building Workshop

Collaborative Learning in Brazil and Beyond

While the work in the Caribbean was well underway, word of it reached PEERSS partners and policymakers in Brazil, resulting in two requests to PEERSS from Brazilian policymaking entities.

The first request came from the Evidence Center at the Department of Science and Technology of the Ministry of Health, which focuses mainly on producing rapid evidence syntheses. In an online discussion with Sandy Oliver at the EPPI Centre in the UK, Evidence Centre senior staff identified three challenges in their work: synthesizing qualitative evidence; delivering evidence to policymakers, especially those at the highest levels; and communicating findings, especially when they didn't meet policymakers' expectations. These challenges were familiar to Sandy, who shared her experience with (and materials for) working with policymakers to co-produce research syntheses. Her approach tailors the work to the policymakers' interests and constraints and manages, from the outset, the policymakers' expectations of what might be achieved. The Evidence Centre senior staff applied what they learned from her—which went far beyond evidence review skills to encompass policy analysts' responsibilities more broadly—to plan meetings and workshops with their wider team.

The second request came from Brazil's National School of Public Administration (ENAP). An initial virtual meeting with Sandy helped set the scene by introducing ENAP's work, the team's challenges with gathering evidence quickly enough to meet policy development timelines, and possible solutions. ENAP then invited Sandy to contribute to a series of training seminars convened by ENAP for officials of Brazilian ministries and agencies. Much like the Caribbean PEERSS partner, ENAP wanted to focus on the multifaceted roles of Brazilian policy analysts in reviewing evidence and leading skills workshops, not just policy issues. The result was a 90-minute seminar in November 2022 attended by 50 participants who asked thoughtful questions in a Q&A session. Feedback on the session was very positive, and a recording is now part of ENAP's national online learning materials.

After two experiences with co-developed training that put policy analysts' roles (rather than their evidence reviews or technical skills) at the center, Sandy Oliver adapted this approach for a March 2023 workshop for the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth &

Development Office on how to assess claims made in research reports. The discussion included the strengths and limitations of research and the views and experiences of multiple stakeholders.

Achievements and Lessons Learned

All the achievements in this story required collaboration. The parties learned from one another, acquiring skills as well as an understanding of unfamiliar contexts and ways of working. A key mechanism that made this possible was international networks, including the PEERSS partnership, as well as in-country evidence-for-policy networks, which are evolving across Latin America and rekindling past relationships from international networks in higher education. All these networks are part of a growing evidence workforce that reaches across policy sectors and across national borders.

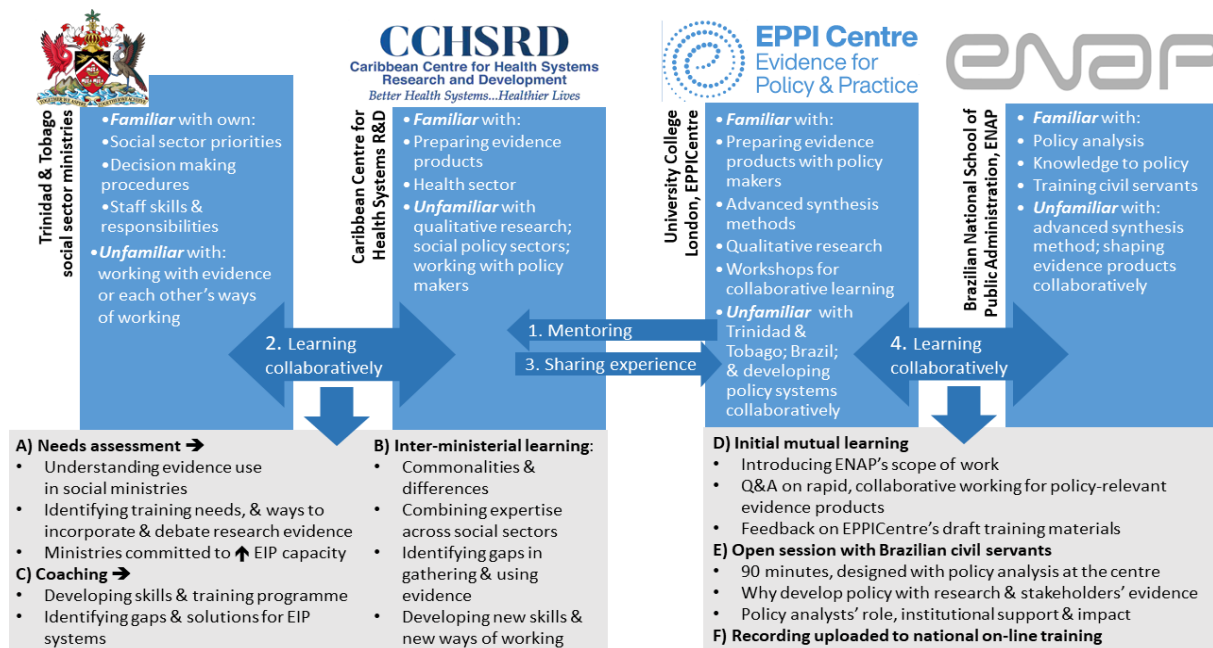


Figure 4: Illustrating the power of networks for nurturing and amplifying mutual learning