

What we heard: a summary report of the 13 December 2018 workshop Evidence-Informed Policymaking hosted by Evidence for Democracy and the Institute on Governance.

Table of Contents

Context.....	2
Conceptualizing a field of evidence-informed policy making.....	2
Institutionalizing evidence use through support and accountability.....	5
Incentives.....	5
Trust / risk/failure.....	6
Relationships.....	7
Strengthening messaging and stimulating public engagement.....	8
Inspiring global commitments to systematic use of evidence.....	10
Appendix A: Evidence-Informed Policy Participant List.....	12
Appendix B: Evidence-Informed Policy Workshop Agenda.....	13

Context

In August 2018, the [Hewlett Foundation](#) convened a group of 18 leaders who value the role of evidence in decision making. The leaders – participating from more than half a dozen countries – came together to outline a series of ideas that could advance the practice of evidence-informed policy making. Staff from the Hewlett Foundation captured the themes, ideas and questions that emerged from that workshop, which became the focus of a discussion paper.

The discussion paper reflects a very distinct view of evidence-informed policy making, heavily contextualized by the home states of the participants¹. Workshop participation was dominated by individuals from developing countries. In addition, participants were mostly trained in disciplines from the natural or medical sciences.

In response to the Hewlett Foundation’s call for feedback on the initial discussion paper, and to add additional Canadian perspective to this discussion, Evidence for Democracy partnered with the Institute on Governance² to host a half-day workshop. A group of 17 individuals – from the federal government of Canada, academia and non-government sectors – explored the four potential areas for action, as identified in the initial discussion paper. This paper captures the workshop participants’ reflections.³

Conceptualizing a field of evidence-informed policy making

Area for action one pertained to clarifying shared goals, principles, norms, and conceptual understanding within the field of evidence-informed policy making, with an aim to improve collaboration, work toward shared goals, and support one another. At the Hewlett meeting, some proposed solutions included creation of a working group or commission to advance consensus. This area (along with *Institutionalizing evidence use through support and accountability*) was one of the two most popular discussion topics among the Canadian participants⁴.

¹ Participants came from India, South Africa, Uganda, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, Mexico. Two of 18 participants were from Canada/the U.S. It should be noted that the home country of all participants was not disclosed in the paper. The list of representative countries is not exhaustive and has been determined based on in-depth online research.

² A special thank you to Rhonda Moore and Jeff Kinder from the Institute on Governance for pulling the workshop together and to Steve Tomlins for helping with note taking.

³ See the appendices for the workshop agenda and a list of participants.

⁴ The summaries for these two sections represent the output of two separate break-out sessions where the other two themes were only discussed in a single break-out discussion each.

Prior to the workshop, participants were provided with copies of the Hewlett Foundation's *Evidence-Informed Policymaking Strategy*, the September draft of the discussion paper for consultation, and, at the workshop, participants received a verbal debrief of the Bellagio workshop. The latter is relevant to the Canadian conversation because it was from the verbal debrief that they learned that, among feedback on the discussion paper to date, there was little support for the idea of a high-level commission to develop a framework for conceptualizing the field or for top-down coordination efforts from any one organization.

The Canadian participants – from a broad range of disciplines and sectors – offered mixed reactions to the idea of a more organic approach to developing this field and many voiced support for a more top-down approach. Participants agreed that there is a portion of each of their fields which is devoted to the generation, curation and protection of evidence for use with integrity. Yet it is their disciplines and sectors which reinforce those silos and prevent the multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary connections and networks.

Participants also voiced concerns about

- the range of definitions or acceptable types of evidence that might emerge from a field with a decentralized approach,
- the challenge of attracting funding to research in a field if it is not recognized or supported in a top-down approach and
- A potential lack of accountability – on the part of decision-making bodies – if there is no formal institution involved which has the authority to penalize another for non-compliance.

A top-down approach – the right top-down approach – could enable actors to break down those silos. A majority of the participants that engaged on this subject indicated their preference for a combination of ground up activity and support from the 'top-down'.

Participants then undertook to define evidence, so as to ensure they had a common understanding of the field they are conceptualizing. The group adopted the following definitions put forward by MIT⁵, with edits reflecting changes made by the participants through discussion:

- Evidence is information produced by knowledge systems.

⁵ Global Systems for Sustainable Development Knowledge systems. Available online: <https://gssd.mit.edu/knowledge-system>. Accessed 13 December 2018.

- A knowledge system is defined by its ability to meet the following criteria
 - a) generates and represents contents, components, classes or types of knowledge information
 - b) is reinforced by a set of logical relationships connected to its value
 - c) includes iterative processes for evolution, revision, adaptation and advancement
 - d) includes criteria of relevance, reliability, and quality

Participants agreed that drawing some boundaries is necessary to create focus on a central collection of ideas or tenets that become the foundation of a field.

The group then established the following boundaries around this nascent field:

<i>In the field</i>	<i>Outside the field</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Western science ● Peer review ● Data ● Science integrity ● Indigenous knowledge ● Community and local knowledge (need to define criteria of a knowledge system that produces knowledge) ● Field or paradigm-specific practices to ensure research validity and quality ● Practice of acknowledging uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anecdotes that are not rooted in evidence ● Values ● Religious beliefs ● Absolute certainty/ failure to acknowledge a lack of certainty

Participants also identified some elements that are not currently represented in this characterization of the field, including: methodology, guides, archives, access to data, conflict of interest disclosures etc.

Impact measurements are another means by which a field can be defined. The field could be coordinated through a framework – including standards of practice, knowledge base,

leadership and grassroots support, and an enabling environment – which is agreed upon at a global scale, and provides practitioners with the flexibility and authority to interpret that framework locally. One participant drew a comparison with international food safety criteria, which is both internationally recognized and amended locally to reflect various factors. Several participants reflected on the importance of recognizing Indigenous knowledge in the context of Canada’s history, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the current action to adopt all 88 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is a strong driving force in Canada, but not a reality for many other countries.

Practically speaking, for a field to become widely accepted and recognized, it must demonstrate a practical use. Could this intersection come with audit activities? Public policy studies? What other areas offer natural partnerships to a field of evidence-informed decision making? Participants suggested the following as viable fields with which to align evidence-informed decision making: Evaluation, Foresight, Philosophy of knowledge (incl. Philosophy of science, Indigenous knowledge, other knowledge systems), Methods in evidence-generation (incl. Health, finance, environmental assessment, other disciplines), Communication of evidence (incl. psychology, rhetoric), knowledge synthesis/assessment.

Institutionalizing evidence use through support and accountability

The second area for action discussed pertained to institutionalizing evidence at national levels through support for identifying and implementing mechanisms to systematically embed evidence use into public sector organizations’ routine practices and mechanisms for ongoing accountability to ensure these systems are used. This area (along with *Conceptualizing a field of evidence-informed policy making*) was one of the two most popular discussion topics among the Canadian participants⁶.

Participants focused on three broad areas: incentives and accountability, trust/risk/failure, and relationships.

Incentives

There was broad support among participants for both greater incentives to accurately use evidence in decision making at all levels of government and calls for greater accountability at

⁶ The summaries for these two sections represent the output of two separate break-out sessions where the other two themes were only discussed in a single break-out discussion each.

certain stages of the decision making and public-policy processes.

Participants agreed that beginning with the premise that there is an abundance of evidence and that evidence can be used to support any policy position is problematic for the advancement of this field. Data and evidence should be assessed; there is need to develop a systematic manner in which data and evidence are evaluated for their use/ inclusion in public policy development, analysis and evaluation. Such a system should be easy to use (e.g. efficient and effective), and reduce or eliminate the ability of individuals to misuse evidence which supports their emotions or values (if they are incongruous with the issue).

To improve accountability, participants offered two suggestions. First, it was suggested that accurate use of evidence become part of the employee reward system or code of conduct, and tied to the annual performance reviews of those functions for public sector employees. In becoming an incentive, employees are required to develop an understanding of the effective use of knowledge if they want to progress in their career.

Many participants also focused on transparency as low hanging fruit that is an essential step towards accountability. Part of incentivizing public sector employees to better evaluate and use evidence must also include new systems to support transparency. One participant noted that “surfacing information and data that informs decision-making, renders it debatable.” It was widely agreed upon that more transparency is possible within the federal public sector but some also noted that there will be some departments and issues where this is less possible (for e.g. National Defence).

Participants also discussed a growing trend within the federal public service to create generalists. Public servants – outside of some specific technical or scientific functions – are no longer valued for their expertise. Historically, public servants stayed within a portfolio/department and moved up in areas of their expertise. Today the trend is to move to another job in another department to receive a promotion. This is a big change which has resulted in a checkerboard/checker-playing system, where employees are often building new areas of expertise every couple of years. By comparison, a system that allows employees to be recognized and promoted within a single department also positively reinforces deep knowledge in a specific area, and the value of that evidence, by extension. This model also makes it easier for the public and external experts to find experts within government.

Trust / risk/failure

Canadians, and Canadian politicians, have become stereotyped as being extremely risk averse. Participants shared several examples of political decisions taken – at all levels of government

– that appeal to a risk averse constituency, even when data or evidence demonstrate another decision to be more effective (though a greater departure from the status quo, and so becomes labelled as risky behaviour).

Evidence ‘champions’ have an opportunity to play a role that focuses on increasing scientific literacy and exploring the risks associated with any decision in a way that is not aggressive, argumentative nor where the challenge and potential solutions are presented as a zero-sum game. Participants noted that at present, evidence champions and scientists have a tendency to provide more and more data when the question is obvious but the many inputs to a policy are not. For example, in the case of climate change, evidence champions could consider ‘what do we imbed in the discussion?’ Maybe it’s not more data? Climate change is really a debate about values, so more data doesn’t seem to matter. We need to think from the other side; what exactly is the problem there? Creating more room for public discourse on an issue – and leveraging experts from all sectors – enables a culture of change and can contribute to improved scientific literacy. Perhaps there is need for more effective communications training for scientists that is based on communication research.

Relationships

How do we enable evidence ‘champions’ or reformers within the system? Actors or influencers from other sectors add value to the government’s decision-making process. The private, academic and nonprofit sectors all provide information to the government, whether through advocacy, public information or other means. But this information is only valuable at the right times and when delivered to the right people. These sectors must seek out windows of opportunity and inform policy when it is being developed. The government, in turn, has a responsibility to increase transparency of priority topics and policies in development, to help other sectors identify those windows.

Some participants suggested that the federal government has a strong track record for performing evaluations, but not at acting on the outcomes of those evaluations. Evidence of these evaluations, and other data the government considers as input during its policy making process could be made available, to improve transparency in decision-making. Evaluations are also generally taken at one point in time and then become stagnant and do not evolve.

On a smaller scale, relationships between sectors can be improved through job-shadowing, interchange agreements, and upstream consultation where policy makers invite the perspectives and reactions of experts from other sectors on work-in-progress. The government could leverage the academic community or think tanks to conduct policy development research. Participants identified that it is hard for potential academic

collaborators to find the right entry point into government policy development and government does not currently have systematic ways for reaching out to academics. Participants suggested this could be improved through better policy training programs for scientists as many scientists have a strong desire for their research to have uptake at the policy level but have little understanding of the policy landscape.

Strengthening messaging and stimulating public engagement

This area for action focused on improving how we communicate the value of evidence to build broader public engagement and support for evidence-informed policymaking to create political pressure to incentivize change.

Participants clarified the difference between messaging and public engagement, noting that the two are very different. Messaging is the *what* we communicate and stakeholder engagement is the two-way, interactive, iterative *how* we communicate. Some participants noted that true public engagement is difficult because it necessitates breaking into echo chambers and bubbles, and it can be hard to have a discussion ‘across bubbles’ where everyone understands each other. Existing guidelines for public participation were pointed to as a helpful starting point.⁷

Recognizing the difference between the messaging or *what* and the public engagement or *how*, the themes of this conversation can be divided accordingly.

How does one identify the right messages? The right content? The right way to reach people?

- Polling, along with other forms of audience research, can be a helpful means by which to engage elected officials, as the numbers can be directly related to their constituencies.
- The effective use of anecdotes and metaphors, supported by data or other types of evidence, can also be useful ways to find topics on which to engage people. For example, health care, environmental, housing and other social policy issues are often ‘hot button’ topics that trigger broad public interest. These topics, in the proper context, can be skillfully employed to illustrate the opportunities associated with evidence-informed policies.

⁷ International Association for Public Participation. The 3 Pillars for Public Participation. Available online: <https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>. Accessed 16 January 2019.

- Effective messaging does not sacrifice accuracy or oversimplify the core message. Effective messaging leverages different communications styles to reach a wide variety of people. For example, participants said they really liked the opening language in the beginning of the Hewlett document, they had never really thought of themselves as an ‘evidence champion’ before. Discussion of an ‘evidence champion’ type campaign that could incorporate storytelling to highlight people working on evidence in different ways and in different sectors to highlight their work and how it ultimately supports the public good.

How do you get people to care about evidence-informed policy (EIP)? Different people will care, and engage, for different reasons. It is important for ‘evidence champions’ to have an understanding of their audience and how it segments (by age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, academic discipline, political ideology, etc) in order to design messages which, appeal to and engage different groups. Indeed, this approach is not unique to ‘evidence champions.’ Knowing one’s target demographic is useful in any role where there is a public facing or public engagement component. For example, participants noted that this knowledge is useful in contexts where (senior) public servants are communicating to (more) senior public servants or even elected officials. Participants also noted that some people will never care about EIP and it is more important to reach those people who might care rather than wasting resources on people who will never change their minds. Being better able to distinguish between people who will never care and people who might care is another benefit to investing in audience research.

Participants also discussed the context in which this public engagement is taking place. They raised four separate and inter-related ideas:

- **Critical thinking** is an important skill. In this post-truth area, critical thinking must also be applied to the sources which provide our news and current events analysis. Are the sources credible? Are they checking their facts? By whom are these sources funded? What role can public servants play in a campaign or movement to support evidence-informed decision making and policy making without compromising the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector?
- The current **post-truth** moment could provide an opportunity to grow the evidence-informed policy movement. Collectively, how can we ensure this movement develops its own principles and guiding tenets, and that it is not merely born of deficit thinking in reaction to the post-truth era?

- Levels of **trust** in public institutions are declining around the world, but remain relatively strong in Canada⁸. Will these global trends begin to be apparent in Canada? How can trust in public institutions be maintained and ideally improved? Many of the public institutions, offices and the procedures and protocols by which they operate are not transparent. Is it possible to improve critical thinking skills and also increase trust in public institutions?
- As demonstrated in the previous section *Conceptualizing a field of evidence-informed policy making*, acknowledging **(a lack of) certainty** is one of the defining characteristics of this area. Imbedded in the concept of certainty is the element of risk, and the reality of failure. Calculated risk can yield benefits, as does failure when it presents new knowledge. However, as long as the risk tolerance of elected officials is low, evidence champions will be challenged to get them on side.

Inspiring global commitments to systematic use of evidence

This action item pertained to catalyzing global commitments around evidence-based-decision making. Participants in this subgroup were sensitive to the desire from the broad community that the field of evidence-informed policy be conceptualized from the ground up. While there are advantages and disadvantages to such an approach (see *Conceptualizing the field*), participants agreed that a field which is conceptualized from the ground up should not have its own proper organization at the international level. Instead, the group discussed opportunities for aligning the movement or field of evidence-informed policy with international organizations that already have a strong research-based brand. Suggestions included American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), the International Science Council, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Any international organization which adopts the evidence-informed movement must have a strong presence in the global north and the global south, and recognize that countries in each will approach this theme from very different places. Speaking broadly, many countries in the global south face severe social and economic challenges, and proportionately more so than their northern counterparts.

⁸ 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report. Available online: https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf. Accessed 16 January 2019.

As a country, Canada has both an opportunity to lead and model good behaviour that could form the basis for global commitments to the systematic use of evidence. Canada also has an opportunity to learn in many areas.

For example, Canada has limited government corruption relative to other countries. Canada has strong public institutions and processes and protocols it can point to which ensure democratic processes. Canada also ranks high, relative to other OECD countries in investments in research and STEM education for children in primary and secondary education. Canada, through IDRC, has a strong presence in the global south as it funds projects which developing social and physical infrastructure, promote good health practices and good governance in many emerging and developing economies.

Canada could learn from other countries who are more successful at battling racism, at achieving reconciliation with Indigenous people, and at commercializing products and services coming out of university or government labs.

All of the above examples are relative, and for the most part, moving targets. Canada's relative strength or weakness in these areas is correlated to political leadership at the municipal, provincial and territorial and federal levels of government, to investments in these areas, and perhaps most importantly, the degree to which Canadians want to see change in these areas. Participants posited this to be true for any country that might join work to inspire global commitments for the systematic use of evidence.

Appendix A: Evidence-Informed Policy Participant List

PARTICIPANT LIST

The 13 December workshop operated under the auspices of Chatham House Rules. As such, the content of this paper is derived from, but cannot be attributed to any one of the following workshop participants:

- *Emma Bugg*, Communications and Engagement Coordinator, Evidence for Democracy
- *Laura Butler*, Director of Programs, Trottier Family Foundation
- *Doris Fortin*, Director, Science and Technology Policy, Environment and Climate Change Canada
- *Katie Gibbs*, Executive Director, Evidence for Democracy
- *Steve Higham*, Independent Policy Analyst and Researcher
- *Jeff Kinder*, Executive Director, Science and Innovation, Institute on Governance
- *Michael Leczner*, Director, Powered by Data
- *Marie Anick Maille*, Executive Director, Federal S&T Secretariat, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada
- *Rachel Maxwell*, Manager, Public Affairs, Genome Canada
- *Rhonda Moore*, Institute on Governance
- *André Patry*, Director, Accelerated Business Solutions Lab, Canada Revenue Agency
- *Jason Pearman*, Senior Fellow, Social Innovation, McConnell Foundation
- *Sally Rutherford*, Executive Director, Canadian Association of Graduate Studies
- *Laura Schnurr*, Advisor, President's Office, McConnell Foundation
- *Eric St. Pierre*, Executive Director, Trottier Family Foundation
- *Steve Tomlins*, Senior Researcher, Institute on Governance
- *Alana Westwood*, Mitacs Science Policy Fellow, Natural Resources Canada

The following individuals also contributed to this discussion paper:

- *Jaigris Hodson*, Mitacs Science Policy Fellow, Environment and Climate Change Canada and Associate Professor and Program Head, MAIS, Royal Roads University
- *Alexandre Bourque Viens*, Senior Analyst, Office of the Chief Science Advisor, Natural Resources Canada
- *Tracey Lauriault*, Assistant Professor of Critical Media and Big Data in the School of Journalism and Communication, Communication Studies, at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada
- *Kimberly Girling*, Research and Policy Director at Evidence for Democracy and former Mitacs Science Policy Fellow

Appendix B: Evidence-Informed Policy Workshop Agenda

Evidence-informed Policy: A Workshop
IOG, ASPIRE Lab
60 George Street, Ottawa ON
Thursday December 13, 2018
08:00 - 13:30

AGENDA

- 8:00 – 8:10 Welcome and introductions
Jeff Kinder, Executive Director, Science and Innovation
- 8:10 – 8:30 Workshop purpose, goal and overview
Katie Gibbs, Executive Director, E4D
A question and answer period will follow this presentation
- 8:30 – 10:30 Small group workshop and discussion
Facilitators: *Katie Gibbs, Rhonda Moore*
Note-takers: *Emma Bugg, Steve Tomlin*
- 10:30 – 11:00 Break
- 11:00 – 12:00 Small group discussion (new groups)
- 12:00 – 12:30 Wrap up and next steps
Katie Gibbs, Executive Director, E4D
- 12:30 – 1:30 Networking lunch