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How Are Governments Making Data and Evidence a Routine Part of their Decision Making? Three Lessons from IPA's Embedded Labs Cross-Country Learning Exchange

Around the world, governments are increasingly using data and evidence to inform policymaking and measure the effectiveness of their programs. This is especially true in the education sector, where governments are using rigorous evaluations to improve children's learning.

One strategy that governments use to incorporate data and evidence into practice is to embed data and evidence units within public sector bureaucracies. IPA, with the support of our researcher and partner network, supports these "embedded labs," and governments' efforts to make data and evidence routinely available and put into use. To enable these rapidly growing embedded evidence labs to learn from each other, IPA organized a cross-country learning exchange in Kigali, Rwanda, from November 14-16, 2022.

Government partners and IPA staff from 11 countries (Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Peru, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia) attended the exchange. Participants shared experiences and lessons learned around launching and institutionalizing embedded labs and how they collaborate to build a culture of evidence-based decision-making. Three fundamental best practices in building embedded labs emerged from their discussions.

1. Align data and evidence units, like embedded labs, with government priorities

Public sector colleagues from different labs described using various methods to ensure researchers' agendas were aligned with government priorities.

- **Organize the unit around a key policy strategy**: During the lab exchange, colleagues from Ghana, Zambia, and Kenya described their work to ensure alignment between labs' agendas and each country's Education Sector Plan.
- **Convene a Research Coordinating Committee (RCC) to ground research in priority policy areas**: Besnart Simunchembu, principal planning officer at the Zambia Ministry of Education (MoE), conveyed that the Zambia lab relies on an RCC to define the lab's scope of work and ensure it is addressing the needs of the MoE. This coordinating body grounds research in priority policy areas and decides which policies require monitoring and evaluation. Spearheading the development of the MoE's research strategy and monitoring its implementation, the RCC became a product of the lab that is dedicated to ensuring lab activities are working towards the Ministry's goals.
- **Engage stakeholders who are key to the lab's ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes:** Faustin Koffi, the general Inspector General of Côte d'Ivoire's

Ministry of Education and National Literacy, explained how the team hosted consultations with key stakeholders to discuss the feasibility of the lab and key priorities the lab would work to address, held a design workshop to finalize decisions, developed a joint work plan, and engaged the ministry's leadership throughout the process. By working to secure engagements from key actors, the lab is built in a co-created way that is context-relevant and receives full buy-in from key actors.

2. Demonstrate how evidence labs can contribute to key policy goals, such as improving learning outcomes

Showing partners, the value the lab can add helps create enthusiasm and buy-in from the onset.

- **Demonstrate the contribution through scaling up evidence-informed programs**: In his keynote speech, Rwandan Minister of State of Primary and Secondary Education, Honorable Gaspard Twagirayezu, discussed the work that the Rwanda Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), IPA, and the Georgetown University Initiative on Innovation, Development, and Evaluation (gui2de) are doing to scale up an evidence-informed teacher contract model. This partnership builds on a two-year randomized evaluation conducted among Rwandan public school teachers that showed improved learning outcomes as a result of pay-for-performance (P4P) teacher contracts. At the request of the Rwanda Basic Education Board, the partnership expanded its technical and analytical support by embedding three IPA staff in MINEDUC and its affiliated agencies to enhance two new critical national education systems needed for the potential scale-up of P4P: (1) the centralization of teacher recruitment and management; and (2) comprehensive national assessments. In this case, finding quick wins by responding to specific and concrete government partners' needs enabled partners to grasp the value of the lab and get political buy-in.

- **Demonstrate the contribution through policy influence**: In Côte d'Ivoire, the lab introduced the use of evidence in policymaking through the planning process of the *États Généraux de l'Éducation Nationale et de l'Alphabétisation,* a national framework and reforms aimed at improving the education system in Côte d'Ivoire. IPA mapped existing rigorous evidence to the priorities outlined in the *États Généraux* framework to ensure evidence-informed solutions would be prioritized in the framework. During the exchange, Inspector General Koffi highlighted that this work was an early demonstration of applying evidence to policy–a way to show stakeholders that the lab model works and is applicable to their priorities.

3. Plan for the labs' sustainability to ensure they last beyond IPA's support

Having this mindset ensures that labs can become fully operational by themselves.

- **Formalize the lab's processes**: Signing a memorandum of understanding, binding the parties in a shared undertaking, integrating the lab into a ministry's priorities, and establishing clear processes in line with the lab's mission can help maintain the focus of the lab through changes of staff. For example, colleagues from Peru explained that

when Peru's Ministry of Education, in partnership with IPA, J-PAL, and other partners, started developing MineduLAB, they decided to situate the lab and the monitoring and evaluation office within the Secretariat of Strategic Planning. The secretariat is strategic in that it controls budgetary decisions and also has access to administrative data to leverage for evaluations. The team also developed an operations manual that outlines the structure and functions of the lab to contribute to its sustainability. This manual was the basis of a directive developed by ministry officials formalizing the lab's creation.

- **Build knowledge and support for the use of data and evidence throughout the ministry:** Ghana's Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, & Evaluation Director, Mavis Asare, shared that successful lab should establish relationships with the technical staff within the institution to facilitate the spread of knowledge across department levels and sustain skills when there is turnover. Building the lab in close collaboration within the ministry's systems ensures that the ministry can run lab activities independently once IPA exits. Colleagues from Ghana explained how IPA has been able to successfully phase out its support of some agencies within the Ministry of Education, including the National School Inspections Authority, as detailed in this case study.

One of the most successful aspects of the exchange was how IPA was able to hand over much of the content of the event to government partners who shared their thoughts and best practices directly and authentically. These lessons will be distilled into case studies to share more learning and success stories with the partners and potential partners who can most benefit from the knowledge.