

Authors

Juan Hernández-Agramonte
Senior Director, Embedded Labs

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To Know the Road Ahead, Ask Those Coming Back | What We Learned from the Embedded Lab Cross-Country Learning Exchange

Introduction

An old adage goes, “To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.” While no two roads are the same, those with experience can provide valuable insights for others. In this spirit, the third edition of IPA’s Cross-Country Learning Exchange convened Ministries of Education from Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the Philippines, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. These teams gathered to share and learn from each other’s journeys implementing Embedded Evidence Labs. A Lab is a team within the government that maps the policy challenges and addresses them through research and learning strategies. To make these teams sustainable, the Labs are institutionalized within the government, which leads and owns them. Embarking on this journey isn’t easy. It involves changing the government's processes and structures while navigating technical, political, budgetary, and legal considerations. It may require shifting perceptions and changing the way things “have always been done.” Many questions arise, which is why sharing knowledge from other’s efforts is essential. In this blog, we highlight some ideas that emerged from the exchange between the different Labs of the participating governments.



The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports Embedded Lab Team, and the IPA Philippines Embedded Lab Team for the Department of Education of The Philippines exchange on their Lab design, successes, and challenges.

Lessons Learned

1. Embedded Evidence Labs improve policies and systems.

In the [previous](#) Cross-Country Learning Exchange, several Labs shared how they achieve policy impact, for example, by scaling evidence-based interventions, as demonstrated by Rwanda's Ministry of Education Lab [teacher pay for performance policy](#). In this year's event, we discussed how Labs have an impact at the system level because they change the processes, structures, and capacities of the hosting institution. For example, the Ministry of Education and National Alphabetization of Côte d'Ivoire (MENA) has assigned a team of eight people who constitute the Ed Lab. This is a significant financial investment in a structure within the Ministry for supporting data and evidence-informed decision-making. Another example is the change or generation of legal frameworks for enabling and sustaining processes that promote the use of evidence, as demonstrated in the examples shared by the Ministry of Education of Kenya Evidence Hub team or in the case of Peru's Lab mentioned below.

2. Labs are flexible models that adapt to what is relevant and feasible in the system.

Each Lab is unique and tailored to the capacities, processes, and priorities of different partners. Multiple government representatives presented what their Lab looked like, which allowed participants to see the diversity of designs and discuss the rationale behind each model. For example, Rwanda's Ministry of Education Lab, Colombia's [ICBF Lab](#), and Peru's [MineduLab](#), all support Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). In addition to providing RCT support, Rwanda's Lab builds and strengthens information systems. On the other hand, Colombia's Lab focuses on Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning services. Labs can also vary in other aspects such as their structure, governance, or funding mechanisms.

3. The institutionalization and design of Embedded Evidence Labs is an interconnected process.

The decisions around the design of a Lab have an impact on its sustainability. Therefore, teams designing Labs always need to consider not only what design is effective, but whether they will ultimately be able to institutionalize it. For example, Côte d'Ivoire's MENA EdLab considered multiple factors when identifying which unit within the Ministry would host the Lab, such as: mandate, influence, political exposure, ability to engage with other units, expertise, and access to resources. Failing to consider these realities during the initial Lab design may hinder its capacity and sustainability.

4. Labs gain legitimacy, resources, and sustainability by being included in legal frameworks and strategic plans.

One strategy that Labs can consider for their institutionalization is to integrate within legal or strategic documents of the government agency. For instance, Kenya's National Education Sector Strategic Plan ([NESSP](#)) 2023-2027 incorporated the Ministry of Education Evidence Hub, providing the Hub with a budget and legitimacy as an official Ministry strategy for the coming years. This strategy was also used by the Ministry of Education of Peru, which approved a [directive](#) that defines the objectives, actors involved, and the evidence-based innovation process that MineduLab must follow.

5. Political and sector ecosystem support is vital for the feasibility and sustainability of the Labs.

As [Gonzalo Hernández Licon](#) reminded us, "Setting up a Lab is an institutional and political challenge with technical elements, not the other way around". Political support and negotiation are fundamental, and government teams must incorporate strategies to ensure it. The same goes for the support of organizations within the ecosystem. Labs are not isolated entities; they engage with development organizations, think tanks, universities, and other government agencies. For example, Côte d'Ivoire's MENA EdLab works with an education group made up of development partners to identify sector priorities for which the Lab should generate evidence. These engagements enable Labs to be relevant to the broader ecosystem, gaining support and accessing various resources such as financial or technical assistance. It also helps Labs to contribute to or generate networks that promote the use of data and evidence.

6. There is an opportunity to learn and share about how to make Labs more effective.

Together with the Labs supported by IPA, we had the participation of teams from GEEDLab, Jacobs Foundation, the Tanzania Institute of Education, What Works Hubs Global Education, Innovation, data and Experiments in Education (IDEE), and the Abdul Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL). These organizations, together with IPA, propose diverse approaches to Labs, offering a collaborative opportunity to learn how to enhance their effectiveness. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with them while also aligning with the agendas of the Ministries of Education that implement Labs.

Next Steps

The Uganda Cross-Country Learning Exchange revealed lessons at the crossroads of technical, political, and institutional factors. This highlights the need for spaces where government teams, operating at this intersection daily, can share and learn. Therefore, IPA's Embedded Evidence Labs program will be working on fostering more exchange spaces among Lab teams and sharing the lessons through various formats such as blogs and toolkits. Stay tuned!