

Evidence Synthesis Infrastructure Collaborative (ESIC) planning process: Summary Report - PG1 Governance Planning Group

Governance and the Evidence Synthesis Ecosystem

Effective governance is fundamental to building a trustworthy, equitable, and resilient evidence synthesis ecosystem. As global interest in evidence-informed decision-making grows, so too does the need for transparent, inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive governance structures that reflect the diversity of actors and settings involved. The Governance Planning Group (GPG) was established to guide the ESIC community through foundational decisions about structure, legitimacy, coordination, and accountability. The GPG outlines essential governance principles, functions, testing models, and key decision points for the future. It offers a vision for governance that is not imposed from above, but co-created to support collaboration, decentralisation, and shared ownership across the ecosystem.

What principles should guide future governance?

The GPG established seven core principles to guide future governance of ESIC:

- **Equitable oversight:** where leadership, decision-making authority and resource control are shared across geographies, sectors and identities, and not concentrated in dominant institutions, and global power structures are rebalanced by centring the Global South in agenda-setting and decision-making.
- **Inclusivity and equity:** where diverse geographies are represented and where individuals and communities from historically underrepresented and marginalised groups, across regions, disciplines, sectors, and social identities, are meaningfully engaged and able to shape institutions, decisions, agendas, and outcomes.
- **Transparency and engagement:** where governance and decision-making are open and accountable.
- **Responsiveness and adaptability:** where governance is forward-looking and able to address emerging needs.
- **Standardisation and innovation:** where best practices and common frameworks are balanced with methodological and technological innovation in ways that are inclusive.
- **Sustainability and institutionalisation:** where governance fosters financial, operational, and institutional sustainability, creating lasting infrastructures that help embed synthesised evidence into policymaking structures around the globe.
- **Accountability to the evidence community:** where governance strengthens independent oversight of evidence synthesis functions by members of the evidence ecosystem, including citizens.

A central organising principle is *subsidiarity*, the idea that governance should occur at the most local or decentralised level feasible, unless a global or central mechanism is demonstrably more effective. These principles collectively prioritise legitimacy, power-sharing, and functionality, ensuring that future governance is both purpose-driven and inclusive by design.

What functions must governance support?

To move beyond traditional organisational models, the GPG proposes a functional approach to governance, articulated through four interlinked quadrants ('the four-quadrant model'):

- **Connector:** This is an external-facing function that facilitates strategic partnerships, mobilises resources, and advocates for the value of evidence synthesis. It plays a critical coordinating role across sectors, levels, and geographies.
- **Participatory Platforms:** These decentralised, regionally or sectorally grounded platforms ensure legitimacy and responsiveness by embedding participatory decision-making. They enable diverse interest holders, especially those from underrepresented regions and sectors, to shape priorities, provide feedback, and hold institutions accountable. For example, through interest holder assemblies, advisory panels, or community-led governance mechanisms that guide the work of the broader ecosystem.
- **Core Infrastructure:** This quadrant encompasses the central technical systems, including tools, methods, standards, and data architectures, necessary for coherent, high-quality, and interoperable synthesis work globally.



- **Engine Rooms:** These are regional or sectoral entities that provide operational capacity for synthesis, implementation, and contextualisation. They ensure that evidence is relevant and useful to specific local contexts, provide decentralised capacity, enable responsiveness to context-specific needs, while contributing to global learning and innovation.

Governance must ensure alignment and coordination across these quadrants while enabling decentralised ownership and avoiding duplication. Different entities may lead different functions, but effective governance must clearly define roles, relationships, and accountability among them.

What future governance decisions must be made?

The GPG has identified a set of critical decision points to guide deliberation on future governance models. These decisions are not merely technical, they involve complex trade-offs about legitimacy, efficiency, equity, and feasibility. These include:

- **Degree of Centralisation:** Determine whether governance should be consolidated in a central coordinating entity (such as a global secretariat), fully decentralised across regions and sectors, or adopt a hybrid model that balances coherence, equity, and subsidiarity. We recommend a central secretariat (see below).
- **Form and Role of a Coordinating Mechanism:** Decide what form central coordination should take, i.e. a new independent organisation, a hosted entity within an existing structure, or a distributed coordination function shared across multiple nodes. Each model has different implications for legitimacy, resource mobilisation, accountability, and agility.
- **Participation and Representation Models:** Clarify how diverse interest holders will participate and be represented, whether through open (e.g. through voluntary networks), curated (through designated representatives), or elected mechanisms, to ensure meaningful inclusion of the Global South, civil society, and non-health sectors.
- **Accountability Structures:** Identify how governance actors will be held accountable to the broader community, i.e. through oversight boards, stakeholder councils, peer review, or community feedback mechanisms, balancing legitimacy and efficiency.
- **Governance of Core Infrastructure:** Determine who will oversee the development, standardisation, and maintenance of core infrastructure, such as methods, tools, and data architectures. Should this be centralised to ensure coherence, or governed through modular, interoperable standards that allow for distributed innovation?
- **Mandates and Scope:** Determine what functions will fall under the remit of global governance, and which will remain at national, regional, or sectoral levels. The governance model must define, for example, whether it has the power to enforce standards, allocate funding, or provide coordination and guidance.
- **Interim and Transition Arrangements:** Determine what transitional mechanisms will enable continuity, legitimacy, and trust-building. This includes questions around who convenes decision-making spaces, how the process will be funded, and how to avoid power consolidation during the interim phase.

The GPG also developed a deliberation tool to support inclusive discussion of these trade-offs, helping interest holders reflect on values, unintended consequences, and ensure decisions reflect both practical realities and aspirational goals. As decisions are taken forward, ongoing consultation, transparency, and effective navigation of power imbalances will be crucial in building shared legitimacy.

Proposed coordination options

G.1: A central secretariat to a) deliver the connector functions, and b) provide support to other functions within the Connector quadrant. The secretariat would have 25-30 staff and would be centred in the Global South.

G.2: A smaller evidence synthesis network coordination team supporting improvements in coordination and communication across the evidence synthesis ecosystem. This would have 5-8 staff and would be centred in the Global South.

