

## **Evidence Synthesis Infrastructure Collaborative (ESIC) planning process: Summary Report – WG1 Demand-side engagement**

### **Advancing demand-side engagement in evidence synthesis**

Evidence synthesis can play a vital role in informing policy and practice, however, it often fails to reach decision-makers, practitioners, and communities who could benefit. Demand-side actors (those who use or seek to use evidence) sometimes face barriers to accessing evidence synthesis or find that existing evidence synthesis does not meet their needs in terms of relevance and timeliness, particularly in underrepresented sectors and regions. On the other hand, producers of evidence synthesis sometimes struggle to engage with evidence end-users to ensure that evidence products closely match their evidence needs and the questions they are trying to answer.

Working Group 1 (WG1) has identified scalable, inclusive strategies to better connect evidence synthesis with real-world decision-making. This requires a shift from supply-driven models to systems co-created with evidence users, supported by intermediaries, and grounded in local governance. As challenges become more complex and context-specific, investing in demand-side engagement is both a matter of equity and a prerequisite for impact.

### **The landscape: who needs evidence and why?**

Evidence users include policymakers, international organisations, government ministries, practitioners, and civil society actors (including citizens) seeking to improve health, education, environmental, and social outcomes. Many operate in settings where access to timely, relevant, and actionable evidence is inconsistent or lacking. Decision-making is often urgent, politically sensitive, and resource-constrained, making the availability of clear, contextualised synthesis critical to achieving better outcomes. Users are increasingly seeking engagement models that reflect their realities, involve them in shaping priorities, and support the integration of evidence into real-time decisions.

### **Capability gaps and maturity: where are we now?**

There are stark disparities in the maturity of evidence-use systems. Sectors such as health and development have benefited from decades of investment in evidence intermediaries, technical infrastructure, and capacity-building programs.

By contrast, sectors such as education, climate, housing, and humanitarian response often lack dedicated institutional support or recognition for evidence-use roles. Many regions have promising, emerging actors, but in many cases, they are under-resourced, unsupported, and disconnected from global evidence synthesis processes. This limits their ability to participate in setting research priorities or adapting evidence for local use.

### **Key issues: what's holding us back?**

Key barriers include the fragmentation of coordination efforts across geographies, inconsistent capacity among intermediaries, and limited mechanisms for end-user involvement in shaping synthesis outputs. Many evidence systems remain producer-driven, with little engagement from policymakers or the public in setting agendas. Equity concerns are prominent, especially when existing models fail to reach underrepresented regions or sectors. At the same time, innovation is constrained by rigid funding models and a lack of experimentation at the point of decision-making, limiting responsiveness to urgent and emerging needs.



## Solutions for progress: what can we do next?

WG1 recommends a layered, modular approach to enhancing demand-side engagement, centred on five solutions. The first three- regional secretariats, intermediary support, and co-design labs- are seen as foundational, mutually reinforcing components of a future-fit evidence ecosystem. The remaining two, grants and thematic repositories, are flexible, complementary tools that can be deployed as capability matures or to support specific contexts.

**1.1 System-level: regional demand-side secretariats:** These governance structures can provide coordinated oversight and legitimacy, ensuring cross-sectoral learning and responsiveness to evidence needs. They should work closely with Regional and country-based learning and development centres (WG5 5.3).

**1.2 Mid-level: support to intermediaries:** Strengthening capacity-building efforts enhances the ability of evidence intermediaries (entities or individuals) to bridge gaps between evidence producers and end-users, making evidence more relevant, accessible and actionable. This aligns with and complements mentoring and train-the-trainer models (WG5 5.4).

**1.3 Local-level: co-production labs where producers and users work together on synthesis projects:** Frontline engagement spaces that facilitate direct collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and citizens, ensuring evidence is relevant and effectively integrated into decision-making.

The remaining two solutions, which involve **offering small grants to evidence intermediaries and end users**, and **developing repositories of priority themes or questions**, can be utilised as flexible local options or further developed as key actions are embedded within the above solutions.

WG1 recognises that there are multiple ways that these recommendations could be implemented in terms of scaling and sequencing.

## Outcomes: what is likely to change?

The proposed solutions from WG1 are expected to improve the coordination, relevance, and legitimacy of evidence synthesis use across diverse regions and sectors. Regional demand-side secretariats will enable stronger system-level oversight and foster cross-sectoral learning, particularly in areas that currently lack institutional mechanisms for engaging with evidence. These secretariats will also serve as platforms for building trust and sustained engagement between evidence producers, users, and regional policy actors.

Targeted support for intermediaries will enhance professional capacity, improve the translation and contextualization of synthesis outputs, and strengthen engagement pathways between producers and end-users. As a result, intermediaries will be better positioned to operate as permanent features of the evidence ecosystem, able to tailor outputs to diverse decision-making contexts and support continuous knowledge brokering.

Co-production labs will enhance collaboration and co-production, allowing end-users to shape synthesis questions and outputs more effectively. These labs will also provide innovation spaces where new methods for inclusive priority-setting, community engagement, and real-time responsiveness can be tested and refined.

Together, these interventions are likely to reduce fragmentation, increase responsiveness to user needs, and improve equity by supporting underrepresented actors to participate meaningfully in the evidence ecosystem.

