Prompts to assist in executing five strategies to be more efficient, systematic and transparent in using evidence in policy work

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This guide was prepared to enable policy analysts to strengthen over time their ability to leverage research evidence, including by becoming more discerning in interpreting inputs to decision-making, asking the right questions, and knowing where to find existing research evidence and how to present it. It can be used as a step-by-step guide or to support a particular task. Its focus is supporting the use of existing research evidence in its many forms (e.g., the findings from a modeling study or an evaluation), and not conducting the types of research that generate these forms of evidence. Moreover, its focus is supporting the best available research evidence, and it is important to note the limitations of that evidence (e.g., low quality, from before a period of interest, from different contexts to ours, or silent on findings from specific equity-deserving groups).

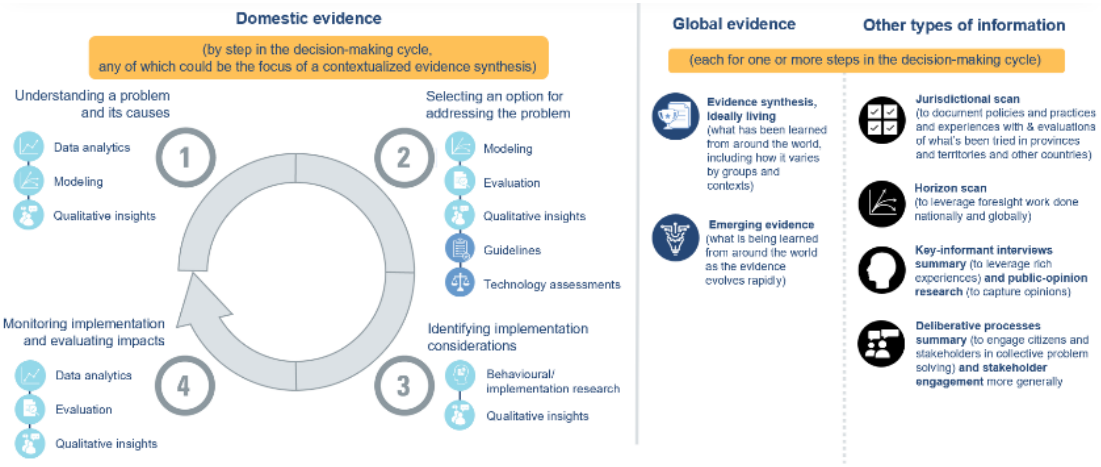
For additional context and details about these strategies, please see the slide deck that accompanies it, which was adapted based on feedback from two webinars with staff.

Strategy 1: Confirm that research evidence (or another content type) is actually what is needed

- Recognize that research evidence has **three attributes**: 1) is an output of empirical research that was conducted systematically and reported transparently (and regardless of whether it was peer-reviewed or where it was published or posted); 2) typically takes one of five forms of domestic evidence (data analytics; modeling; evaluation; behavioural / implementation research; qualitative insights), one form of global evidence (evidence synthesis), and two forms of recommendations (technology assessment / cost-effectiveness analysis and guidance); and 3) has explicit criteria that can be used to assess its quality (or credibility or risk of bias depending on the evidence paradigm being used), which we return to in strategy 4.
- Distinguish research evidence from helpful **complements** to it, such as: 1) stakeholder positions; 2) public sentiment (e.g., as expressed in social media); 3) events (and other signals of system problems); 4) misinformation claims (and sources); 5) internal policy documents; 6) other jurisdictions' work (provinces and territories; comparator countries); 7) lived experiences; 8) Indigenous ways of knowing. A stakeholder engagement (including an engagement of experts) can answer questions like how do the positions of key groups compare to others, but you then need to ask what evidence underpins their positions. A jurisdictional scan can answer questions like what are comparator countries doing on this topic, but you then need to ask what the evidence tells us about their approach.

Strategy 2: Use a framework to generate a mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (MECE) list to work with

- Use a **policy analysis** framework for: 1) understanding a problem and its causes (where data analytics, modeling and qualitative insights can help); 2) selecting an option for addressing the problem (where modeling, evaluation, qualitative insights, guidelines and technology assessments can help); 3) identifying implementation considerations (where behavioural/implementation research and qualitative insights can help); and 4) monitoring implementation and evaluating impacts (where data analytics, evaluation, and qualitative insights can help). One such framework is available here and reproduced below.
- Use a **program analysis** framework for asking whether: 1) the right problems and causes are being targeted for prioritized groups; 2) the most effective, cost-effective and valued interventions are being provided; 3) the most efficient delivery arrangements and implementation strategies are being used to get effective interventions to all those who need them; 4) monitoring and evaluation strategies are targeting the right reach and other process measures, and 5) there is the capacity to model contributions to impacts and/or cost savings. The same forms of evidence help with points 1-4 here as help in points 1-4 in the first bullet.
- Use a **systems analysis** framework for asking whether the causes of problems and potential solutions may lie in: 1) governance arrangements (who gets to make what types of decisions); 2) financial arrangements (how money flows through the system); 3) delivery arrangements (how we organize ourselves to get the right care to the people who need it); or 4) implementation strategies targeting citizens, service providers or organizations. The Health Systems Evidence taxonomy can help with #1, #2 and #3 in the list. The COM-B model can help with #4 in the list. The same forms of evidence help with any of these potential causes of problems or potential solutions as help with points 1 and 2, respectively, in the first bullet.
- Additional frameworks can also add value, including sector-specific frameworks, behavioural/implementation frameworks (e.g., COM-B), and equity analysis (e.g., SGBA+, PROGRESS-Plus).



Strategy 3: Leverage the right evidence repositories (and living evidence syntheses) for the form of evidence and topic area you are interested in

- Select the right repository of **quality-rated evidence syntheses (i.e., global evidence)**: 1) for clinical programs, services and products: ACCESSSS; 2) for public health programs and services: Health Evidence; 3) for governance, financial and delivery arrangements and implementation strategies in health systems: Health Systems Evidence; 4) for programs as well as governance, financial and delivery arrangements and implementation strategies in all non-health sectors: Social Systems Evidence; 5) for COVID-19 clinical management, public health and social measures, health-system arrangements, and economic and social responses: COVID-END Inventory; 6) for specific sectors outside health (to complement Social Systems Evidence) – a) education: Education Endowment Foundation, b) humanitarian assistance: Evidence Aid, c) international development: 3ie DEP. An evidence synthesis is a summary of what we have learned from around the world, including how it varies by groups and contexts. It involves systematically identifying, selecting, assessing and synthesizing all known studies addressing a question.
  - If the repository has a filter for 'living' evidence syntheses, use it to find evidence syntheses that are updated as the context, issue and/or evidence evolves, often AI-enabled on the front end, and often with a 'datasets out' approach that allows users to select only those studies relevant to their context or issue.
- Select the right repository for the **domestic evidence** you need – 1) bibliographic databases such as PubMed or EconLit; and 2) websites – and specify the form of evidence, topic area, and geographic focus, as well as recognize that you are typically on your own for quality ratings (see strategy 4).

Strategy 4: Know what to look for in the existing evidence, especially for evidence synthesis

- Confirm the **broad relevance to the scope** of your area of interest (i.e., an element in your MECE list – see strategy 2 above)
- Confirm the **specific relevance to the question(s)** being asked in your policy work (e.g., benefits and harms of a policy or program option)
- Identify the 'best' evidence for your question, either by relying on an inventory's determination of 'best' using the following three criteria (as Health Systems Evidence, Social Systems Evidence, and the COVID-END Inventory do for you) or by using each of the criteria yourself
  - Note whether the **quality** of the evidence synthesis is high (AMSTAR* score ≥ 8), medium (AMSTAR score from 4 to 7) or low (AMSTAR score of ≤ 3), keeping in mind that a high AMSTAR score means the evidence synthesis was conducted to a high standard, however, the evidence summarized in the synthesis may still cause concern (e.g., there may be no eligible studies or the studies may have a high risk of bias)
    - Quality is best assessed using an explicit set of criteria specific to the form of evidence → see report section 4.5 to find quality criteria for forms of evidence other than evidence synthesis
    - Avoid relying on poor proxies for quality, including credibility of the author(s), credibility of the organization that produced the work, credibility of the organization that funded the work, and whether the work has been peer reviewed
  - Note the availability of a **GRADE** evidence profile**, which will tell you how much certainty you can have about the evidence contained in an evidence synthesis (e.g., there is a lower risk of bias)
  - Note the **currency/recency** (of search for an evidence synthesis and data collection for an empirical study), not the publication date (and whether it's a living evidence synthesis that you can keep returning to)
  - Note the **countries studied**
- Summarize in plain language **what we know (and don't know)** based on the best available evidence (as illustrated in this sample of rapid evidence profiles)
  - Summary of key insights in relation to the chosen framework(s), emphasizing both where high-quality evidence was found and where it was not found
  - Supporting table that allows a reader to navigate to particular documents of interest (e.g., those listed in a cell corresponding to one element of the framework that comprises the row headers and one category of the outcomes that comprises the column headers) and to decide whether to open the document based on a hyperlinked declarative title (i.e., a statement about the main finding, such as that an intervention appears to be effective in improving a key outcome)

*AMSTAR is a tool for assessing the quality of an evidence synthesis (i.e., whether it was performed to a high standard). Those engaged in using evidence in policy work typically use the original AMSTAR tool, whereas those engaged in using evidence in clinical work typically use AMSTAR II. The AMSTAR tool gives a numerical score out of 8, 9, 10 or 11 depending on the number of applicable criteria.

** GRADE is a tool for assessing the certainty of a body of evidence contained in an evidence synthesis and for assessing the strength of guideline recommendations. Factors like risk of bias, imprecision, inconsistency, indirectness and publication bias are used judge whether the true effect, accuracy measure, or association is likely to lie on one side of a particular threshold or in a particular range.

Strategy 5: Know where to go to find high-performing evidence-support units, by form of evidence and topic area, and how to set standards for those supporting the flow of new evidence

- Clarify the form of evidence you're looking for
  - Data analytics, modeling, evaluation (esp. impact and process evaluation), behavioural / implementation research, and qualitative insights from your country
  - Evidence synthesis
  - Recommendations in the form of technology assessments and guidelines
- Decide whether you want a specific trade (producing any of the above eight forms of evidence) or a 'general contractor' who can mobilize the right trades'
- Look at their website to see what 'self-serve' options are available (e.g., databases of all existing evidence by topic area, not just their own evidence)
  Look at their website to see what evidence products and processes they can support (e.g., living products), on what timeline (hours and days, weeks and months, years), and with what engagement processes

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