

Involve evidence users and citizens in generation

Evidence users are keen to be involved in evidence production so the outputs are aligned to their needs. There are several ways that evidence is generated. The first is when generators create evidence they consider to be relevant and then 'push' it out to users (whether they want it or not, meaning it may not be aligned with user needs). Evidence is also generated when users 'pull' in evidence from generators (for example when a government department commissions research to address a particular policymaking need). Co-creative approaches involve generators and users working together to decide what evidence to create and how ([footnote 1](#)). Co-creative approaches are being actively encouraged in both academic and policy/practitioner circles ([footnote 2](#)). The perceived benefits are that it leads to better, more implementable solutions, and increases ownership in those who will need to take action to implement actions. At the same time, some experts are sceptical about the use of co-creative approaches, arguing they are not a panacea, that the reality may not live up to the ideal, and that there can be tensions with the messy world of policymaking, and the objectives and incentives for researchers ([footnote 3](#)). There are also important considerations about the associated costs and skills required to do co-creation well, and a risk of negative impacts on those participating ([footnote 4](#)).

Co production, design, creation

These terms - and others, such as 'engagement' - are used in varying ways to describe the involvement of evidence users (which may be in research or in policy or practice development, or both). Definitions may distinguish the terms by the stage at which users are included (for example, defining the problem and solutions as 'co-design', involvement with implementation as co-production'), ([footnote](#)) but the terms are often used interchangeably and without any agreed methodology ([footnote](#)). The involvement of users in developing policy or practice may also be labelled as collaborative governance, community involvement, participation and civic engagement ([footnote](#)). Though a distinction can be made between participation - being consulted - and co-creation, meaning active involvement. This Guiding Principles document uses the umbrella term co-creation, as it is favoured in the research evidence-use literature - for example to differentiate between push, pull and co-creative approaches to generation.

There are many different ways that evidence generators can work more closely with users, including:

- calls for Evidence, often issued by a government entity on a particular issue;
- directly Commissioned Research by government bodies or other funders, focused on a specific topic or need;
- co-Creation Activities, such as workshops, where stakeholders discuss problems and potential solutions on a political issue;
- professional Partnerships between policy/practice and research, usually with a limited lifespan, such as expert elicitation, committees, networks; and
- training and Fellowships: formal skills development schemes, often funded (for example, skills training for researchers and practitioners), secondments, internships, fellowships ([footnote 5](#)).

These mechanisms have varying levels of effectiveness. For example, calls for evidence are considered to be 'moderately effective', though they may require strategic planning of purposes

and goals, and good networks and relationships to work well. Directly commissioned evidence is considered effective for both short and long term policy decisions. Professional partnerships can be highly effective if they are: a) funded; b) take a long-term perspective; and 3) collaborative in nature. There is mixed evidence of effectiveness on training and fellowships [\(footnote 6\)](#). Further details on the effectiveness of different mechanisms can be found in the Technical Report.

Involving policymakers in generation

Co-creation of evidence is regularly hailed as the most useful way to promote evidence into policy [\(footnote 7\)](#). Early involvement, or even participation at later stages, can make evidence substantially more useful to policy. Ideally policymakers should be involved throughout, from designing the question to governing the process and interpreting the findings [\(footnote 8\)](#). One example suggested by evidence users is that evidence generators working on modelling should provide an interactive interface, where if the policymaker does not agree with the starting assumptions of the model, they can change them [\(footnote 9\)](#). Policymakers also involve users in multiple ways, from more traditional participation through formal consultation, to more recent approaches such as public dialogues and citizens assemblies [\(footnote 10\)](#).

“There needs to be much more joint working between academics and policymakers. We need more people working across this boundary both ways via secondments and other mechanisms.” – Former government civil servant

Involving practitioners in generation

Commercial evidence users point to the problem of evidence-generators failing to understand commercial realities - be they for a large international food retailer, or a sole enterprise street food stall owner. This can mean that evidence fails to be actioned, because how it will be implemented practically has not been considered. Involving users early in the research process can ensure the evidence is useful and actionable. Businesses also have a long history of involving customers in their own evidence generation, in the form of both traditional market research, but also increasingly through more co-creative methods [\(footnote 11\)](#).

“We have been working with a range of supermarket retailers in ongoing co-creation of evidence for our metrics for our initiative on halving the environmental impact of a shopping basket. The accuracy of our evidence is down to the sharing of data and information.” – Third Sector Practitioner

Involving citizens in evidence generation

There is a growing focus on citizen engagement in research, due to perceived benefits which include: improving relevance and uptake of evidence; representation of diverse (and unequal) groups; dissemination of findings beyond traditional academic audiences; and building public trust in science and research [\(footnote 12\)](#). There are a variety of different ways that citizens can be involved in evidence-generation, ranging from more traditional research methods, such as focus groups where researchers aim to understand the perspectives of citizens on a particular issue or activity, to tools like ‘living labs’, where citizens are involved in developing solutions for challenges [\(footnote 13\)](#), and citizen science methods [\(footnote 14\)](#). An example in the field of diet shift evidence is a lab involving a university caterer, students, and additional stakeholders, to develop a weekly farm-to-table cafeteria menu [\(footnote 15\)](#). Experiential knowledge on the ‘lived experiences’ of communities and individuals is also increasingly considered a valuable type of evidence when tackling diet shift. As with commercial practitioners, it can help ensure implementation of a piece of evidence is not hindered because of a lack of understanding of those directly affected. It can be used to shed new light on how citizens experience their food environments, and what influences their diets [\(footnote 16\)](#). However, such evidence can be time

consuming to collect, as it relies on trusted relationships, and there are a range of considerations around involving particularly disadvantaged groups in evidence-generation, including paying them for their contribution and designing the process to make it convenient and accessible to different needs.

“What resonates most for me is the voices of lived experience...this is now becoming increasingly called for. RCTS [randomised control trials] don’t work when people have complex lives.” – Academic

Practical examples: involving users and citizens

There are various guides available to help navigate the process of involving citizens and users in your research:

- the Centre for Food Policy has developed a guide on research methods which can be used to understand lived experience of food environments to inform policy. It notes that evidence on lived experiences of food environments is rarely focused on informing policy, which represents a missed opportunity to inform effective and equitable public policy to address all forms of malnutrition and diet-related ill-health. It has also created a community of practice, to support collaboration and engagement between researchers, and catalyse more and better research on the lived experience of food environments and to enhance the policy impact of research through exploring ways to translate and communicate findings effectively.
- the National Institute for Health Research-funded Applied Research Collaboration East of England, has produced a set of ‘Top Tips for Public Engagement’, many of which are also relevant to engaging with other types of stakeholders you may want to include in evidence generation.

Checklist

- could you involve evidence users in your generation and which users would be most relevant?
- do you understand the associated costs and skills required to engage users and the possible negative impacts on those participating?
- have you looked into the effectiveness of different methods for engaging users?

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