


EdLabs alignment framework:

A 20-BULLET SUMMARY



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EDLABS ALIGNMENT FRAMEWORK: A 20-BULLET SUMMARY

The Jacobs Foundation works with Evidence Labs (EdLabs) to strengthen evidence use in education policy and practice - and through this work, is exploring various approaches that foster a culture of evidence production, communication and use in education systems within EdLabs in the Foundation's target regions (Figure 1). These mechanisms are central to each country's strategy and aim, ultimately, to improve children's learning outcomes alongside other Jacobs Foundation investments globally and locally.

The Foundation's EdLabs program tests different models, each with distinct activities, but all require a coherent, contextually responsive Theory of Change (ToC). The Jacobs Foundation expects EdLabs to create a relevant ToC aligned with suggested overarching outcomes for each partnership and

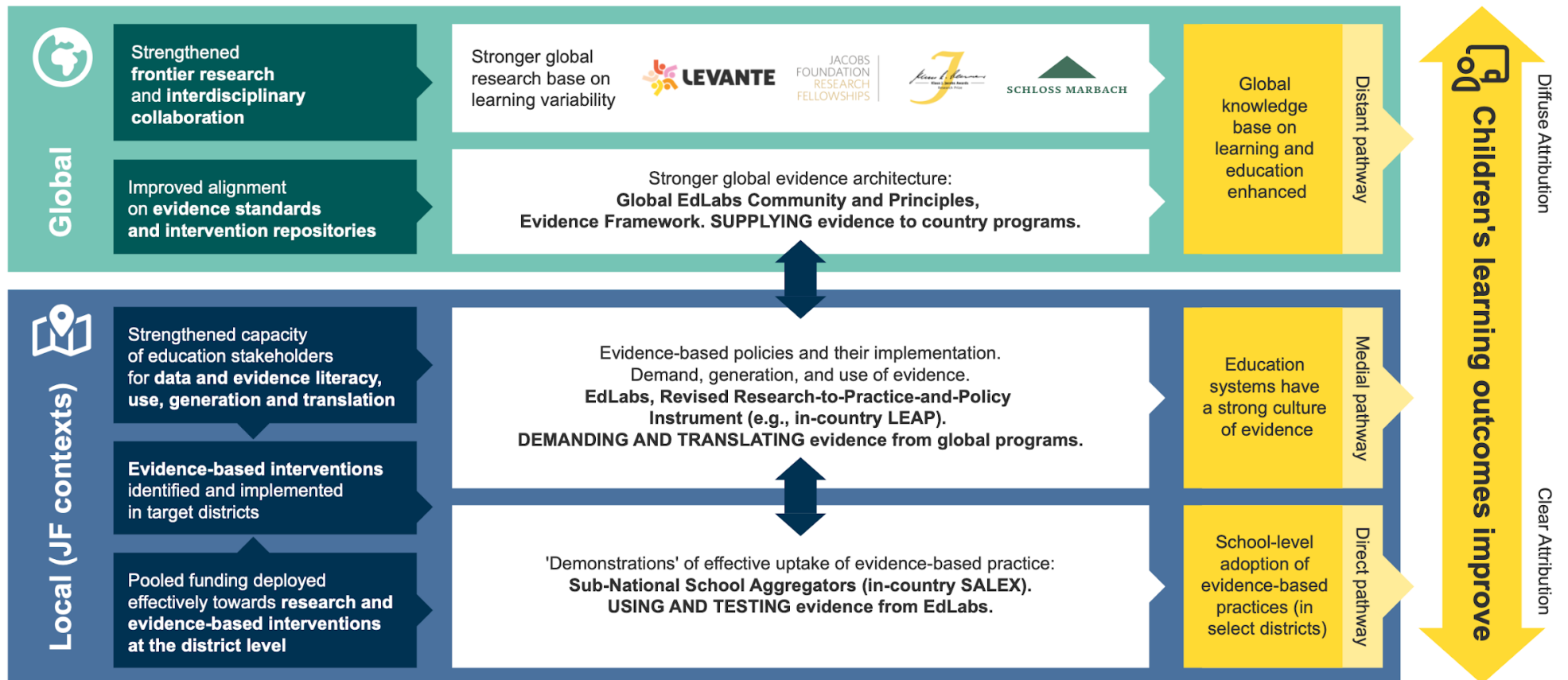
country. The Foundation is flexible in how partners achieve these goals depending on their context, organizational form, and activities.

This 20-bullet summary, drafted by the Jacobs Foundation Global Programs Team, is a tool for internal strategic alignment and a guide on what elements are key for each country partner to consider when designing EdLabs. It also includes key resources for EdLab teams to use when designing and setting up.

This framework is a work in progress, and comments or suggestions are taken continuously to revise and improve the document (latest update: December 10th, 2024). Share any feedback with Samuel Kembou: samuel.kembou@jacobsfoundation.org.

FIGURE 1.

Jacobs Foundation Simplified Theory of Change



EDLABS: ENHANCING EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING IN EDUCATION

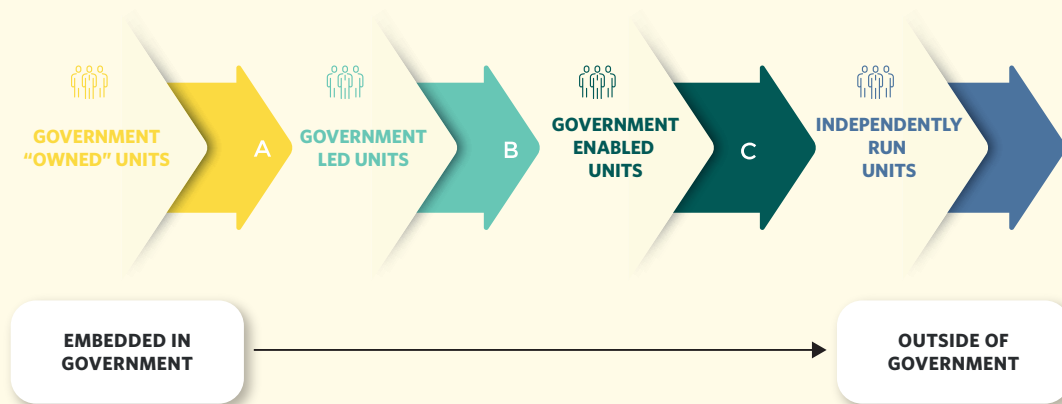
1 EdLabs refer to policy labs in the education sector.

The multifaceted forms and functions of policy labs make navigating their landscape intricate. A useful conceptualization of policy labs focuses on their principal aim: to inform public policy and enhance evidence-based decision-making, ultimately leading to better policy design and implementation.

2 Two primary facets are central to understanding EdLabs: their organizational structures and range of activities or functions.

The organizational setup of EdLabs often relates to their level of embeddedness in government, which influences their structure and functions. Policy labs generally fall into one of the four categories (see Figure 2 for types of organizational structure).

FIGURE 2.
Typology of the Organizational Setup of Policy Labs



Source: Hayter and Morales (2023), based on Lewis (2021) and McGann et al. (2020). At one extreme, labs are embedded within the government, such as the What Works Clearinghouse in the United States. At the other extreme are quasi-labs outside the government, resembling think tanks. In between, there are labs led by the government, like the Mindeulab in Peru, or those enabled by the government, such as the UK Education Endowment Foundation..

3**Existing labs decide and articulate their missions, vision, and values.**

They determine where the 'lab' should be placed and define their main functions depending on the context in which they operate. As entities embedded in political contexts, EdLabs carry out context analysis that informs these crucial decisions.

4**EdLabs in the Global South seem to prioritize activities surrounding policy-relevant evidence production, capacity development for evidence use, and brokering.**

This combination suggests a comprehensive approach toward evidence-informed policymaking. These labs not only focus on generating and assessing policy-driven evidence but also emphasize translating it into actionable insights, thus enhancing the capacity of stakeholders for its effective use. The prominence of brokering in these labs indicates a proactive approach to facilitating relationships and connections within the education sector.

5**EdLabs in the Global South proactively work to build credibility and legitimacy in the sector while maintaining some degree of alignment with government priorities.**

Proximity to political decision-makers can result in distrust from the research community or questions about the validity of the evidence being produced and used. Additionally, if the research agenda is perceived as influenced by funders or the international community, it may face scrutiny.

The Jacobs Foundation's vision for EdLabs: INSIGHTS AND RESPONSES

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High-level Theory of Change for Jacobs Foundation-supported EdLabs:

Based on the OTT-led review of EdLabs (Hayter and Morales, 2023) and internal alignment, the Foundation views EdLabs as organizations that simultaneously meet these conditions:

- **Continuous interrogation of the education system:** They continuously interrogate the educational system, understand the political context, the power dynamics and the factors that affect the demand for evidence, and aim to respond effectively to this demand and navigate politics while maintaining its credibility and legitimacy. The review provides more details on pages 30-33 and a set of useful and practice frameworks in Annex 6.
- **Clear policy and practice goals:** Their primary goal is to inform policy and practice. EdLabs do this by clearly defining the change they want to achieve (pages 26-29 of the review).
- **Relevance through iteration:** They remain relevant to policy and practice, iterating their approaches based on evidence of what is effective and what is not (Pages 44-58 of the review and the [Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation](#) toolkit are useful resources).
- **Skilled and capable staff:** EdLabs staff possess the necessary skillsets, mindsets, and relationships to support the translation of evidence into policy and practice (Check out pages 81-82 of the Review and the [Build a think tank guide](#) as additional resources).
- **Effective and adaptive leadership:** EdLabs leadership has the capacity to engage with diverse audiences to maintain the Lab's credibility and legitimacy; the leadership remains politically savvy, manages staff effectively and can innovate, learn and adapt (Check out pages 81-82 of the review and the [Build a think tank guide](#)).

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The Jacobs Foundation's EdLabs Response Framework:

The basis of our internal understanding of the description and assessment of EdLab functions in our target regions is described below through (1) the problems the Foundation aims to solve with this program, (2) the expected EdLab responses, and (3) some examples of EdLab interventions. Our learning and evaluation activities have identified four problems common to all target regions:

- There is a limited capacity of national authorities, public decision-makers, school leaders, and other key practitioners to understand and utilize relevant data and evidence in decision-making.
- The education policy cycle faces a pervasive challenge of underutilizing evidence, spanning from the prioritization of focus areas to the efficacy in selecting interventions and further extending to establishing a culture of rigor in codifying practices and evaluating outcomes.
- The evidence market inefficiency is characterized by supply-side challenges, including data scarcity, data fragmentation, bureaucratic obstacles for researchers, and misaligned project priorities. On the demand side, practitioners and policymakers seem to lack the incentives to use evidence as well as essential resources like tools, technical support, and funding for evaluations and capacity-building efforts.
- The field of learning variability grapples with a notable deficiency in high-quality data and rigorous evidence. EdLab efforts to coalize national education research groups can benefit LEVANTE, the other Jacobs Foundation mechanism designed to tackle this issue.

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Proposed solutions to the four common problems:

Below are four potential solutions for the common problems identified above; these interventions are provided as examples and are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive:

- **Evidence Capacity Building:** EdLabs could support the capacity of key stakeholders (at national and subnational levels) in accessing, understanding, prioritizing, and utilizing data and evidence. This could include:
 - Establishing Data Hubs with customizable data visualization/insights.
 - Creating accessible evidence repositories detailing the relevance, quality, and strength of evidence.
 - Offering guidance and resources to schools and organizations at various stages of their evidence journey, aiding in the progression towards evidence-based practices and culture.
 - Training programs for authorities and civil servants on understanding, prioritizing, and using data and evidence.
 - Assessing the gaps for evidence use and working towards improving the organizational processes, systems, and culture.
- **Evidence to Policy Facilitation (or Brokering):** EdLabs could implement an evidence communication and dissemination strategy. Examples include
 - Delivering translated and accessible data and evidence products to decision-makers.
 - Anticipating gaps in evidence and providing timely, synthesized data and evidence products tailored to decision-makers' contexts.

- On-demand customized provision of evidence assessment on specific plans, policies and interventions being considered.
 - Creating dialogue among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to ensure data and evidence products are adapted to meet specific demands and contexts.
- **Evidence Market Building:** EdLabs could create platforms for the intersection of evidence demand and supply and funding selected matches. Examples of interventions include:
- Supporting evidence to action collaborations.
 - Using research funds to support applied research collaborations in target geographies.
 - Supporting policymakers, schools, and organizations in accessing scientific capacity.
 - Funding selected evidence demands (e.g., evidence as a service, evaluations, technical assistance).
 - Supporting peer learning among practitioners such as communities of practice and other EdLabs.
- **Generating High-Quality Evidence:** EdLabs could create a culture of rigor through Research and Learning Agendas, including:
- Allocating their research funding to high-quality evidence and data generation, including (but not limited to) implementation research.
 - Collaborating with research funders to align funding priorities with emerging evidence needs and promote research that addresses critical gaps in knowledge.
 - Supporting stakeholders in creating Research and Learning Agendas and establishing research coalitions, shared Research and Learning Agendas, and collaborative research with leading local education groups.

The Jacobs Foundation's Partners

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Jacobs Foundation Partners are designing or implementing EdLabs in target regions with some differences in where they are in the process (in December 2024).

- **The lab in Côte d'Ivoire** is advanced, as evidenced by clarity on the organization setup (embedded within the government), the delivery of functions relevant to the Foundation's EdLab Response Framework, and strong government buy-in. Current conversations are around allocating a research fund to further the lab's activities.
- **The lab in Colombia** is in the final stage of its design phase. This lab is closely interrelated with the Communities of Change¹, meaning its development has been closely connected with them. Significant time was invested in creating strong and trustful relationships that allow the Lab to co-create with these communities under the lead of local authorities (Education Secretaries). It has been challenging to define its independent organizational structure and design and implement a relevant and useful management unit.
- **The lab in Ghana** is also in the design phase. Here, the ongoing conversation internally is around the support post-Minimum Viable Product² and the alignment with other country initiatives (Communities of Change and the country co-funding mechanism).
- **The lab in Switzerland** is led by the Jacobs Center. This center, highly committed to working towards changes in policy and practice, will collaborate closely with DEEP, an existing university research consortium. The Jacobs Center is in the process of designing the EdLab with Jacobs Foundation support.

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Navigating the challenge of long-term impact assessment in policy labs.

Our efforts with our learning partners (Mathematica and IPA) are grounded in existing evidence suggesting that, in terms of evaluating the results and impacts of policy labs, there is a tendency to emphasize short-term, process-related outcomes. Although success stories highlight connections, network-building, and stakeholder involvement, there is a notable absence of discussions surrounding long-term, structural change. As policy labs strive to demonstrate their impact and value, their ability to enact sustainable and transformative change becomes crucial in their institutionalization within government structures. Challenges of gauging effectiveness, coupled with the need for long-term impact assessment, necessitate the development of robust MEL frameworks, which partners are encouraged to develop.

¹ Territorial alliances aimed at consolidating a shared vision and developing educational policies and practices aimed at improving the quality of education (Source: Colombian EdLab Concept Note).

² A version of an EdLab with just enough features to be usable by early users who can then provide feedback for future EdLab development.

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Peer learning is a catalyst for designing EdLabs.

Despite being a sometimes-overlooked approach, peer learning consistently holds promise as a capacity development approach for lab partners, as underlined by the OTT review. The dispersed, interdisciplinary nature of the education sector, coupled with common factors influencing evidence use, presents rich opportunities for sectors and disciplines to learn from each other about strengthening evidence use. The Jacobs Foundation is supported by OTT for a one-year technical capacity-building effort for Foundation-supported lab partners.

Critical lessons from recent EdLab interventions

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Take the time to build in an extended inception phase in the EdLab's design.

Bureaucratic processes, understanding power dynamics, identifying windows of opportunity, and ensuring buy-in and co-creation typically take longer than expected. In this period, labs should set realistic and politically informed spaces for change. It is at this stage that political economy analyses are usually carried out. Another practical way to assess where change will have more impact is to look at the 'authority' (that leadership can gauge for the change), 'acceptance' (that implementing staff actually welcome the change) and 'ability' (that teams have the capacity to do so). In Colombia, many reforms start by identifying the authority, which, in that context, is the secretaries of education. However, looking at staff ability and acceptance are also key to success. Check out annex 6 of the OTT review for diagnostic tools or [triple A analysis](#) from the PDIA toolkit.

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Legally binding commitments should be secured.

Securing commitment from public sector partners is paramount to avoid relying only on individual champions. Labs should consider signing a Memorandum of Understanding with central ministries or written agreements between parties.

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EdLabs' target audience varies depending on the context.

In turn, context combined with internal capacities and other factors will define the type of activities the Lab will deliver. For example, in Colombia's highly decentralized education system, the EdLab's primary target audience is education secretaries and schools (teachers, principals). A secondary audience could be the Ministry of Education. In Côte d'Ivoire, the primary target audience is decision-makers in the Ministry of Education who have the power to implement large-scale reforms. EdLabs must conduct a context analysis and stakeholder mapping before defining its main activities. Check out page 41 of the review and the [AIIM tool](#) to help map stakeholders.

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Communication strategies are very different in each country.

Jacob's Foundation EdLabs are still in their early stages, so communication strategies haven't been widely implemented yet. However, an important lesson from discussions so far is to critically think and invest in communication strategies that respond to target audiences. Check out the [ROMA tool for policy engagement](#).

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Interventions should concurrently address three levels.

Building capacity at the individual level, enhancing organizational capacities and cultures, and strengthening relationships among evidence producers, intermediaries, and users.

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EdLabs' target audience varies depending on the context.

The Jacobs Foundation encourages partners to develop a research agenda co-created with relevant stakeholders to address these policy issues. In Colombia, for example, discussions were held with communities of change and in Côte d'Ivoire, a validation workshop was held after gathering research topics. Check out pages 39-40 of the review and [the slides](#) for guidance on Designing and deciding Research and Learning Agendas.

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Activities that aim to build state capabilities should concurrently address three levels.

Capacity at the individual level (skills, knowledge, attitudes), enhancing organizational capacities (processes, systems, values, culture, resources) and strengthening relationships among evidence producers, intermediaries, and users. Planning for post-training support, such as mentoring, is crucial for any capacity building. Check out pages 46-52 of the review and the [Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence toolkit](#).

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Developing or strengthening MEL capacities is a huge investment that pays off.

Hence, developing capacities in this area must be strategically planned and even prioritized (depending on context). This includes understanding the current mandate for evaluating programs and policies and determining if payment by results or any other incentive to do (and use!) MEL exists. CDI developed practical, hands-on material for its training. Check out pages 54 and 75 of the review and [this resource](#) for case studies in these areas.

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Advisory committees are useful governance mechanisms that help make decisions on the lab's research priorities.

They must include a diverse representation of relevant stakeholders. In practice, the advisory committee's important and sensitive functions have proven to delay negotiations and workplans. Both in CDI and Colombia, local implementing partners had to step in and implement some functions until the final set-up of these units. To strategically think about governance, check out the 'who' section in the [Build a think tank guide](#).

Next Steps

1. Collaborate with partners for country-level ToCs.
2. Other topics worth discussing:
 - Policy-driven research
 - Types of evidence - what evidence for what decisions
 - Stakeholders, inclusiveness, and equity
 - Innovation in public policy - are the EdLabs expected to innovate at all?

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