

Putting evidence at the centre of everyday life for citizens - a call to action

Citizen engagement in the future evidence synthesis ecosystem is vital to its success

People around the world make billions of decisions each day about the well-being of themselves and their families (for example, how can I support my child in their education, what services would my elderly parent benefit from, how do I reduce my risk of disease), their behaviours (for example, what can I do to address climate change), their communities and societies (for example, how can we distribute resources more equitably). Citizens¹ are making these decisions whilst facing high levels of uncertainty and access to vast amounts of information of variable trustworthiness from a wider range of sources than ever. Further, citizens expect that the services and professionals they interact with are informed about best evidence. Citizens also need access to reliable and trustworthy evidence to inform how they engage their elected leaders and their societies (for example, about their decisions, budget monitoring, and quality/quantity of public goods/services).

Evidence syntheses gather, appraise, and synthesise all the global evidence on a particular question. They are widely regarded as the gold standard for summarizing what we have learned from around the world and how it varies by groups and contexts. They are a key defence against misinformation. The high-quality standards used and the transparency with which syntheses are conducted, make evidence syntheses powerful tools that are uniquely positioned to hold science to account. Living systematic reviews (a recent innovation) that allow real-time synthesis of scientific data, support open science practices, and give government policymakers, organizational leaders, professionals, and citizens access to the most up-to-date evidence. Despite many advances in the last 30 years, especially in the health sector, there remain many evidence synthesis gaps that need to be addressed to better support citizens (and societies). There is an urgent need for timely, reliable, and trustworthy evidence to inform citizens' choices and actions.

Challenges for citizens trying to access and use evidence

Citizens face many challenges trying to access evidence including: knowing what evidence is most relevant to their questions; finding reliable and trustworthy evidence; structural challenges especially in the Global South where access to electronic resources may be unreliable; language challenges if evidence is produced in someone's second or third language; poor evidence literacy making it hard for citizens to judge what evidence is reliable and trustworthy; evidence that is not accessible or inclusive for persons with disabilities, and interpreting trustworthy and reliable evidence in their light of individual values and circumstances. In addition, citizens face other barriers such as precarious living conditions and power imbalances leading to marginalization of voices. Whilst other interest holders may face similar challenges, the magnitude of the challenges faced by the 8 billion citizens globally are much greater.

The need for citizen engagement in evidence synthesis processes

Citizen engagement is increasingly demanded by citizens, policy makers, and funders of evidence seeking to improve the authenticity, relevance, and legitimacy of decision-making. Evidence producers,

¹ We use the term 'citizen' to keep the focus on the individual, and not to imply formal citizenship status as determined by a government. For example, we include undocumented individuals and we recognize that Indigenous peoples were sometimes forced to decline their Indigenous status to achieve citizenship of a country that now includes their traditional lands. Alternative terms like 'public' or 'publics' are often considered a group, not individuals. More specific terms are often sector-specific, such as consumers (consumer protection), parents (education), patients and caregivers (healthcare), residents (housing), service users child, community and social services), taxpayers (economic development and growth), voters (citizenship), and workers (employment). Here we provide context for how citizens make decisions using questions likely to elicit factors that could support (or discourage) their use of evidence.

intermediaries (entities or individuals that work 'in between' decision-makers and evidence producers), funders and decision makers are key interest holders who recognise the importance of, and are involved in, citizen engagement, including the co-production of living evidence synthesis.

We use the term “citizen engagement” in the broadest sense of the term to encompass how citizens engage with evidence synthesis and support it being carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ citizens rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them. It is an active partnership between citizens and evidence synthesis producers that influences and shapes evidence.

Engagement also includes raising awareness of evidence synthesis and other forms of evidence, sharing evidence, or engaging and creating a dialogue with citizens. Co-production in evidence synthesis means interest holders (such as, though not restricted to, citizens, professionals, policymakers, and evidence producers) working together in ‘a partnership’ to produce, disseminate or contextualise evidence syntheses. Its principles are sharing power, inclusion of a range of skills and perspectives, respect for all participants, reciprocity, and cultivating and sustaining relationships.

Citizen engagement has a long history, evidence base, frameworks, and resources, but there is scope for more consistent and equitable application across sectors, geographies, and peoples. There is also an important role for citizen-led and citizen-serving NGOs. These organisations are a critical audience for the ESIC partnership in its work to meet citizens’ needs, and support citizens’ efforts to put evidence at the centre of everyday life.

Statement of values and principles to inform the work of ESIC: citizen engagement in the evidence synthesis ecosystem

- ESIC recognises that citizens are key interest holders, and the future evidence synthesis ecosystem must value and embed the perspectives of all interest holders, including citizens who are the ultimate beneficiaries of evidence.
- Citizen engagement in the form of co-production where citizens and evidence synthesis producers work in partnership, sharing power, throughout the evidence synthesis ecosystem enhances the relevance and meaning of evidence syntheses.
- Approaches to citizen engagement must create safe, welcoming spaces and tools for engagement tailored to respect socio-cultural practices and preferences (such as Indigenous communities or in settings where citizen engagement is nascent) and the realities of the citizens’ lives (vulnerable populations, refugees).
- Citizens must be embedded in evidence synthesis governance systems, bringing their perspectives to prioritisation, question formulation, and interpretation and translation of results.
- The evidence synthesis ecosystem should foster environments where citizens are equipped to ask about and see the evidence used by policymakers so that they can take part in the conduct of public affairs and make informed decisions.
- Evidence syntheses can democratise evidence, establishing a common ground where everyone (citizens, professionals, organizational leaders, and policy makers) are working from the same evidence base and reducing asymmetries of knowledge which lead to asymmetries of power.
- Citizen engagement in evidence intermediary and knowledge translation efforts will increase the likelihood of citizen-friendly knowledge translation approaches and the credibility of syntheses with other interest holders.
- Collaboration with existing and new international strategic partnerships, including citizen groups and intermediaries, to develop engagement and co-production, is fundamental to building a global community of citizen co-producers.
- Citizen engagement will increase the likelihood that syntheses address key concerns of citizens and strengthen evidence syntheses as a potential solution to address the many evidence gaps.

Call to action

These four calls to action (which target different actors in the evidence synthesis ecosystem) are meant to stimulate discussion within ESIC and beyond about how we can work together to redefine the evidence synthesis ecosystem.

1. Produce evidence that meets citizens' needs

Involve citizens in all aspects of ESIC, including demand-side engagement, data sharing and reusing, safe and responsible use of AI, methods and process innovation, and capacity sharing, as well as in the governance of ESIC.

- Engage citizens on the evidence demand side to increase the likelihood that citizens' priorities and questions are adequately considered and increase the legitimacy of evidence synthesis activities.
- Integrate citizen knowledge in evidence synthesis processes, including insights based on qualitative research among people with lived and living experience, and from different socio-economic groups, age categories etc.
- Test and adapt new AI tools designed to support evidence use by citizens, thereby stimulating citizen engagement to make synthesized evidence actionable, including consideration of existing and potential assistive technologies such as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to design interfaces that work for persons with disabilities.
- Ensure equity in evidence synthesis so that evidence meets the needs of under-represented individuals and groups in society who may have particular evidence needs different to the majority (e.g., children, young people, people underrepresented in research, in low- income settings, persons with disabilities)
- Invest in rapid and living evidence syntheses to address urgent societal challenges of interest to citizens (e.g., pandemics, climate crises, or economic instability)
- Networks of citizen-led and citizen-serving NGOs can help to develop novel approaches to data re-use, including for having confidence in quality-assured data.
- Draw upon citizen group innovations to support communication and use of evidence in diverse contexts that go beyond formal, traditional evidence dissemination methods.

2. Foster an evidence synthesis ecosystem where citizens can be co-producers of evidence

Commit to and invest in policies and actions that embed co-production in the creation of evidence syntheses that embed equitable practices.

- Evidence synthesis organisations and funders should commit to embed co-production in their evidence synthesis production
- Understand incentives and motivations for citizens to become involved in evidence synthesis and recognise, acknowledge, and reward citizens (monetary and non-monetary) involved in co-production, including understanding incentives and motivations for citizens to become involved in evidence synthesis (Cape Town notes)
- Invest in co-production methods research and resources, ensuring that the methods used to engage with diverse populations (e.g., children, young people, people underrepresented in research, in low- income settings, persons with disabilities) are appropriate and meaningful.

- Work towards consistently applying co-production principles and methods appropriately across the evidence synthesis ecosystem.

3. Enable citizens to be users of evidence

Ensure free and equitable access to evidence for citizens, in a range of formats, which are linguistically accessible and recognise contextual (attitudinal, environmental, geographical, historic, social, and environmental) barriers that impact on access and use of evidence

- Ensure that evidence is disseminated in ways that enable equitable access by all citizens.
- Enable citizen-led and citizen-serving NGOs to start putting actionable insights from AI-enabled living evidence synthesis alongside the many needed forms of local evidence and other inputs to their work.
- Advance evidence ‘translation’ processes, such as Wikipedia, storytelling, arts-based approaches, oral histories etc. that meet the needs of diverse and inclusive audiences.
- Recognize and foster the role for civil societies and evidence intermediaries globally to support culturally and linguistically appropriate access.
- Establish programmes to improve evidence literacy amongst citizens that cover understanding evidence, research, critical appraisal, and the use of evidence in decision making.
- Promote early evidence literacy through engagement with youth and school curricula.
- Advocate for shared decision making and the use of evidence in public and political discourse.

4. Support the role of citizens as advocates for evidence and trustworthy information

Focus on the role of citizens as advocates for evidence and engage citizens in efforts to address mis/disinformation using living evidence syntheses.

- Ensure citizens have access to information that clearly explains the scientific method, how evidence is created, and how this evidence compares to other forms of knowledge.
- Campaign to promote public understanding of evidence, including what does not constitute evidence (e.g., unfounded social media posts, news snippets, opinions) and the consequences of mis/disinformation.
- Invest in methods to challenge misinformation and disinformation that include citizen values, perspectives, and voices.

Summary

This is a rallying call to action that envisions the values and principles of an evidence ecosystem that encompasses all aspects of production and use of evidence in everyday life for all citizens in all geographic areas of the world. It is a call to support citizens in both the use and co-production of the best available evidence for their personal decisions and the decisions they make as responsible members of society. Evidence synthesis is a means to an end, and citizens need this to bring about change and make informed choices. This is a moment to be bold and create the structures and processes that embed citizen engagement in evidence synthesis to address these critical issues.

This call to action was initiated by ESIC citizen members (Euphrasia Ebai-Atuh Ndi, Michelle Hamilton-Page, Richard Morley, Maureen Smith). It was co-written by two of its citizen members (Richard Morley and Maureen Smith) with input and support from ESIC members and Secretariat (including Jeremy Grimshaw and John Lavis) and the wider evidence synthesis community for consideration in the ESIC roadmap and discussion by all evidence ecosystem interest holders at the ESIC consensus meeting in Cape Town in June 2025.