# What are the primary theories of change linking M&E systems strengthening interventions to improved evaluative evidence demand, supply, and/or use?

## Executive Summary

This review synthesizes relevant Theories of Change (ToCs) from the extant literature that explain how M&E-system-strengthening interventions foster demand for, supply of, and use of evaluative evidence. Focusing on five influential frameworks – King & Alkin (2018), Kuchenmüller et al. (2022), Ottoson (2009), Stewart (2015), and Yearwood (2018) – it explores multilevel influence models, knowledge-translation networks, knowledge-for-action lenses, capacity-building ecosystems, and push–pull–exchange mechanisms. Each framework articulates distinct causal pathways but shares a systemic orientation: effective M&E strengthening requires integrated, context-responsive strategies that link technical improvements to relational, cultural, and institutional change.

The analysis prioritizes system-level interventions (e.g., governance structures, mandates, networks, incentives) over the influence of discrete evaluations, highlighting how use is institutionalized through overlapping mechanisms of supply, demand, and exchange. Common enablers include political leadership, trusted relationships, tailored capacity support, and a culture of reflective learning. Across theories, one message is clear: evidence systems thrive not through stand-alone tools or reports but through coherent ecosystems that embed evidence in how institutions think, plan, and act.

Gaps remain, particularly in understanding how context shapes the sequencing, interaction, and durability of mechanisms. Longitudinal, comparative research across governance settings is essential to refine ToCs and improve the design, adaptation, and evaluation of M&E-system interventions.

## Introduction

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems play a foundational role in enabling evidence-informed decision-making across government and development institutions. Yet many strengthening efforts focus on producing more data or evaluations, without understanding how system-level interventions create the enabling conditions for evidence to be demanded, supplied, and used routinely. This review asks a more strategic question: How do interventions that strengthen M&E systems – not isolated evaluations – lead to sustained improvements in the institutionalization of evaluative evidence?

To answer this, the second section unpacks five Theories of Change that explicitly link M&E system strengthening to evidence use, each grounded in a different disciplinary tradition or policy experience. The third section synthesizes their mechanisms into supply-side, demand-side, and interactive strategies. The fourth section explores cross-cutting themes – including political context, governance, relational trust, and time horizons. Finally, the paper outlines the implications of these insights and identifies key research gaps.

This review aims to inform practitioners designing, implementing, or evaluating M&E-system-strengthening strategies – particularly those working in complex governance settings where change is non-linear, relational, and context-dependent.

## Theories of Change Connecting M&E-System Strengthening to Evidence Use

### Multilevel Influence Frameworks (King & Alkin, 2018)

King and Alkin (2018) propose a multilevel framework that integrates earlier models of evaluation use and influence, particularly Henry and Mark’s (2003) Schematic Theory and Kirkhart’s (2000) Integrated Theory. Their work categorizes influence into three nested levels (individual, interpersonal, and collective) and three outcome domains (cognitive/affective, motivational, and behavioral). This yields nine distinct influence pathways that may unfold through and beyond an organization’s engagement with evaluation.

To illustrate the multilevel nature of this framework, consider how a well-resourced M&E unit might impact individual staff knowledge (cognitive/affective), shift team attitudes toward evidence-informed decision-making (motivational), and eventually foster new bureaucratic procedures or budget allocations (behavioral). The model also distinguishes between direct, indirect, and symbolic use, helping evaluators track longer-term and less tangible effects. These elements align the model with a realist “what works for whom under what conditions” lens, as it emphasizes context-mechanism-outcome patterns rather than linear logic.

King and Alkin further classify theories of use by scale, labeling them as “species” that range from one-off settings to influence across time and institutional space (i.e., systemic uptake). This classification supports M&E system strengthening efforts by clarifying which types of change (e.g., uptake of findings, development of evidence norms, procedural change) are likely to manifest at which levels and through which mechanisms.

By combining descriptive and normative insights, the framework offers a flexible yet empirically grounded theory of change for M&E strengthening. Its multilevel schema underscores that individual evaluator behavior, organizational culture, and external policy systems interact dynamically to shape how evidence is produced, shared, and used.

### Knowledge-Translation Network Theory (Kuchenmüller et al., 2022)

Kuchenmüller et al. (2022) present a comprehensive Theory of Change (ToC) and monitoring and evaluation framework developed for the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) Europe, which is designed to institutionalize knowledge translation (KT) across countries through coordinated, multi-actor, multi-level governance structures. Their framework draws heavily on systems thinking and recognizes that improving evidence use requires more than enhancing technical capacity; it necessitates cultural, organizational, and relational transformation.

The ToC articulates three core domains through which KT interventions are expected to operate: (1) KT capacity and skill building, (2) network structure, governance, and leadership, and (3) KT and evidence-informed policy (EIP) value and culture. These domains are intentionally designed to span both individual country teams – referred to as Knowledge Translation Platforms (KTPs) – and the regional Secretariat, which facilitates peer learning, technical assistance, and strategic coherence. The model is meant to evolve from a centralized hub-and-spoke structure to a more decentralized, interconnected web of mutual support.

Notably, the theory emphasizes polycentric governance as an enabler of institutional change. By codifying standards, facilitating joint indicator development, and convening learning exchanges, EVIPNet’s secretariat supports the emergence of stable ‘rules of the game’ for KT. These governance mechanisms are as central to the theory as evidence briefs or training sessions. In fact, the theory reframes M&E-system strengthening as a process of institutionalizing these structural and cultural arrangements.

A key contribution of Kuchenmüller et al.’s framework is its attention to different network life-cycle phases – from formation to sustainability – and how Secretariat and country-level roles must evolve accordingly. The theory assumes that, over time, local actors will increasingly take ownership of KT practices, sustained by shared norms, embedded tools, and networked accountability. This provides a long-range vision for how KT structures can be institutionalized within policy systems, making it highly relevant for M&E strengthening efforts.

### Knowledge-for-Action Lenses (Ottoson, 2009)

Ottoson (2009) synthesizes five influential theoretical perspectives – knowledge utilization, diffusion, implementation, transfer, and translation – into what she calls “knowledge-for-action” theories. These lenses offer complementary insights into how different types of knowledge move through and are acted upon within complex systems. Crucially, Ottoson’s framework is not about evaluating uptake from a single study, but about analyzing how systemic, institutional, and contextual factors shape the conditions under which knowledge becomes actionable.

Each theory contributes distinct evaluative emphases:

* *Knowledge utilization theory* focuses on whether and how research is used by decision-makers – whether instrumentally, conceptually, or symbolically – and the motivations or constraints surrounding that use.
* *Diffusion theory* centers on the spread of innovation through social systems over time, emphasizing the role of communication channels and peer influence.
* *Implementation theory* examines how new knowledge or practices are adopted, routinized, or resisted in organizational settings, often emphasizing fidelity, authority, and power dynamics.
* *Transfer theory* draws attention to how knowledge adapts, or is reshaped, when it moves across contexts, highlighting issues of ownership, fit, and meaning.
* *Translation theory* explores how knowledge is reformulated into actionable terms for different audiences, underlining the co-construction of meaning between knowledge producers and users.

By juxtaposing these theories, Ottoson demonstrates that knowledge does not travel in a vacuum; it is filtered through multiple layers of context, culture, power, and intention. This complexity is often overlooked when M&E system strengthening focuses narrowly on production or dissemination. Instead, Ottoson urges evaluators to recognize that effective M&E strengthening must account for diverse forms of knowledge movement, each shaped by different incentives, organizational structures, and interpersonal relationships.

Her framework is especially valuable for system-level M&E because it discourages a one-size-fits-all theory of change and instead supports a diagnostic approach: What kind of knowledge is being moved? To whom? Through what channels? For what purpose? How is it being interpreted? These questions allow evaluators to identify the most relevant mechanisms and interventions across varied settings.

### Capacity-Building Ecosystem Theory of Change (Stewart, 2015)

Stewart (2015) proposes a people-centered, demand-led Theory of Change (ToC) for building the capacity of decision-makers to use research evidence, grounded in the governance, economic, and social realities of Southern Africa. Her framework reframes capacity building not as isolated skill development but as part of a broader system of incentives, organizational structures, and political context. The central insight is that individual capacity gains will not lead to meaningful or sustained evidence use unless embedded in institutional ecosystems that support and reinforce such behaviors.

The theory identifies three interdependent elements necessary to foster evidence-informed decision-making: (1) accessible and relevant research, (2) decision-makers equipped with the motivation and skills to use that research, and (3) enabling environments that provide both the opportunity and expectation to act on evidence. Stewart underscores the importance of ‘pull’ factors – motivations and organizational demand for evidence – and stresses that M&E system strengthening must go beyond supply-side activities like producing evaluations or training analysts.

Concrete interventions aligned with the theory include the integration of evidence use into human resource performance systems, formal mentorship programs, earmarked budget lines for evaluation, and organizational mandates that reward evidence-informed practice. These mechanisms help institutionalize evidence use as a routine component of decision-making, rather than a one-off or externally driven effort.

Stewart also emphasizes the critical role of trust, co-production, and long-term partnerships between researchers and policy actors. Drawing on experiences from the Africa Evidence Network, the ToC reflects an explicit commitment to participatory approaches that are responsive to local power dynamics and political realities. These insights align with findings from broader literature on behavioral change and continuing professional development, which show that collaborative, sustained, and context-specific efforts yield better outcomes than standalone technical training.

This ecosystemic approach strengthens M&E systems by ensuring that capacity development is not only aligned with institutional goals but embedded in a supportive culture that values evidence. Stewart’s contribution shifts the focus of system strengthening from episodic interventions to long-term institutional change.

### Push–Pull–Exchange Mechanism (Yearwood, 2018)

Yearwood (2018) presents a Theory of Change grounded in the EvIDeNCe initiative – an integrated regional effort led by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) to strengthen the uptake of research in health policymaking. This model blends three key mechanisms – push, pull, and exchange – into a coherent framework designed to close the persistent gap between research generation and policy action across diverse institutional contexts in the Caribbean.

The ‘push’ component emphasizes the synthesis and dissemination of relevant research through tools such as evidence briefs, while the ‘pull’ dimension focuses on strengthening policymakers’ capacities to seek, appraise, and apply that evidence. The ‘exchange’ mechanism is arguably the most transformative: it refers to structured, repeated interactions between researchers and decision-makers through stakeholder dialogues, communities of practice, and joint governance bodies. These exchanges not only transfer knowledge but also build shared understanding, trust, and alignment around policy priorities.

The EvIDeNCe initiative institutionalized these mechanisms through five interventions: (1) an online evidence portal, (2) production and distribution of evidence briefs, (3) stakeholder dialogues, (4) training workshops for policymakers, and (5) the envisioned creation of a regional community of practice. Although the fifth component was not fully realized due to resource constraints, the other elements were implemented and evaluated between 2014 and 2017.

Applying a scale based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, Yearwood 's evaluation found high levels of intent to use research evidence following participation in dialogues and trainings – mean scores exceeded 6.3 on a 7-point scale, corresponding to strong agreement. Though stated intent is not the same as actually using evidence, these findings offer preliminary support for the potential value of interactive engagement to enhance uptake. Moreover, the model’s backward-mapped ToC explicitly aligns interventions with long-term goals, preconditions, and context-specific barriers, such as limited access to literature, weak institutional incentives, and a mismatch between research outputs and policy needs.

Importantly, this model illustrates that strengthening M&E systems is not just about data production or technical platforms, but about creating infrastructures for interaction, shared governance, and political legitimacy. CARPHA’s role in anchoring and coordinating such efforts across 24 Caribbean countries demonstrates how regional bodies can catalyze institutional reforms and embed evidence practices within national policymaking processes.

## Mechanisms and Pathways Across Contexts

Despite their distinct conceptual origins, the reviewed frameworks converge around a set of interlocking mechanisms through which M&E system strengthening is expected to foster the use of evaluative evidence. These mechanisms are best understood not as discrete channels but as interacting layers that reinforce or constrain each other, depending on the political, institutional, and relational context.

*Supply-side mechanisms* focus on improving the availability, quality, and usability of evidence. Across frameworks, this includes efforts such as upgrading data systems, producing tailored evidence briefs, establishing interagency portals (Ottoson, 2009; Yearwood, 2018), and harmonizing indicator sets across networks (Kuchenmüller et al., 2022). These interventions aim to ensure that credible and policy-relevant information exists and is accessible when needed – yet the assumption that “better supply equals better use” is widely challenged.

*Demand-side mechanisms* aim to build the motivation, skills, and institutional incentives to seek and apply evidence. Stewart (2015) emphasizes that evidence use must be institutionally rewarded – through HR systems, budget allocations, and leadership mandates – to become routine. Similarly, frameworks by King & Alkin (2018) and Kuchenmüller et al. (2022) underscore how political salience, cultural alignment, and organizational readiness condition whether actors even perceive evidence as valuable.

*Interactive mechanisms* connect supply and demand through dialogic, iterative relationships. These include stakeholder dialogues (Yearwood, 2018), mentorship networks (Stewart, 2015), and co-productive spaces for agenda-setting and sensemaking (Ottoson, 2009). Crucially, such spaces are not neutral – they require governance rules, trust, and shared epistemic frameworks to be effective. Network charters, peer-review mechanisms, and Secretariat facilitation (Kuchenmüller et al., 2022) help institutionalize these exchanges and legitimize the resulting knowledge.

The reviewed theories collectively show that interventions often span multiple mechanisms. For instance, a capacity-building workshop may enhance demand (by building skills), improve supply (by refining communication of findings), and foster interaction (by creating a peer network). These multi-mechanism interventions activate virtuous cycles, where each success strengthens the next: credible outputs raise demand, stronger demand spurs better evidence, and sustained engagement normalizes use.

This systems view of mechanisms also draws attention to negative feedback loops and absorptive limits. Poorly contextualized training may generate cynicism. An oversupply of unrequested studies may erode trust. These risks underscore the value of diagnostic approaches – like Ottoson’s (2009) composite lens or King and Alkin’s multilevel schema – that help identify the mechanisms most likely to succeed under particular conditions.

Ultimately, sustainable evidence use requires not just mechanism alignment, but system coherence. Strengthened M&E systems work best when interventions are layered strategically, adapted to context, and anchored in shared rules and incentives.

## Cross-Cutting Insights and Synthesis

Across the five frameworks analyzed, several cross-cutting themes emerge that illuminate the conditions under which M&E system-strengthening interventions are most likely to generate sustainable demand, supply, and use of evaluative evidence. While each theory foregrounds different actors, pathways, or institutional configurations, their convergence around key enablers and risks underscores the importance of a systems-oriented approach.

**1. Organizational and Political Culture**

The presence of a learning-oriented culture – where experimentation, reflection, and iteration are normalized – is consistently cited as foundational. Stewart (2015) and Ottoson (2009) stress that without an enabling environment, even the best-trained staff are unlikely to use evidence. Similarly, Kuchenmüller et al. (2022) show how the internalization of evidence values across a network (e.g., through peer learning, shared tools, and mutual accountability) shapes the durability of reforms.

**2. Governance and Institutionalization**

All frameworks emphasize that technical improvements (e.g., data portals, evaluation briefs) must be embedded in formal governance arrangements and institutional mandates to endure. These include codified roles for M&E units, integration of evidence standards into national planning systems, and Secretariat-facilitated peer review mechanisms (Yearwood, 2018; Kuchenmüller et al., 2022). King and Alkin (2018) go further to suggest that system-level influence hinges on such institutional codification, which transforms isolated use into collective, routinized influence.

**3. Relational Infrastructure and Trust**

Effective knowledge exchange depends on more than tools or training; it hinges on relationships. Yearwood (2018) and Stewart (2015) both highlight how communities of practice, stakeholder dialogues, and sustained mentorship can build mutual trust and legitimacy. Ottoson ’s (2009) diffusion and translation theories likewise emphasize the role of networks, champions, and co-constructed meanings in spreading and sustaining evidence-informed practices.

**4. Fit-for-Context Design**

Each theory assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, that interventions must be adapted to contextual features like political stability, bureaucratic incentives, sectoral priorities, and local knowledge traditions. Stewart’s (2015) Southern African ToC explicitly incorporates poverty, inequality, and donor reliance into its logic, while Kuchenmüller’s (2022) network ToC acknowledges that KT systems evolve through different maturity phases, requiring varying forms of support.

**5. Time Horizons and Evaluation Focus**

Several models caution against overly narrow or short-term conceptions of success. Kirkhart’s long-term influence model (via King & Alkin, 2018) and Yearwood’s backward-mapped ToC both encourage planners to anticipate distal, indirect effects. This includes shifting attitudes, procedural changes, or political repositioning – outcomes that matter, even if not easily captured in typical results frameworks.

**6. Conceptual Precision and Theoretical Pluralism**

Ottoson (2009) contributes a crucial insight by refusing to collapse diverse theories into a single use model. Her five-lens framework reminds evaluators that different settings may require different conceptual tools: what counts as “use” or “success” in one space (e.g., uptake of briefs) may look entirely different in another (e.g., altered funding flows or rhetorical shifts). This conceptual pluralism supports more context-sensitive, fit-for-purpose theories of change.

Together, these insights underscore the central argument of this review: M&E system-strengthening efforts are not linear delivery programs but political, relational, and adaptive systems-change processes. They require a shift in mindset from disseminating products to reconfiguring institutional environments and a toolbox of integrated, flexible strategies guided by sound theory and grounded in context.

## Conclusion

Theories of Change linking M&E system strengthening to evidence use converge on a shared insight: sustainable uptake of evaluative evidence depends on more than technical fixes. It requires a systems approach that combines capacity-building, governance reform, knowledge brokering, and cultural change. This synthesis highlights that efforts to improve evidence use must target not only the production of data or reports, but also the environments in which knowledge is generated, interpreted, and acted upon.

Successful M&E strengthening interventions operate across multiple levels – shaping individual skills, team norms, organizational mandates, and policy networks. They embed evidence in HR systems, planning protocols, and decision routines. They build peer learning structures, mutual accountability mechanisms, and trust-based partnerships between researchers and decision-makers.

Future research should trace these ToCs longitudinally and comparatively across diverse governance settings. Greater attention to feedback loops, absorptive capacity, political incentives, and contextual alignment will help refine causal assumptions and strengthen the design of interventions. Theories of change are not blueprints but learning tools and refining them is essential for ensuring M&E investments translate into real-world impact.

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