22nd session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration

Remarks by Mr. Ronald Mendoza[1]

The considerable challenges during the pandemic and the immediate post-pandemic era -- combined with the ambitious goals of achieving the SDGs -- require data and evidence, in order to guide policymakers to make the most cost-effective policy decisions. Nevertheless, the already existing divides in data and evidence generation and use, across and within nations prior to the pandemic, are likely to prove challenging to overcome as countries recover not just from the pandemic but also the populist wave that has affected governance and policymaking in recent years.

On top of this, in many countries, often inter-related challenges of anti-science and anti-expertise sentiments, and populism, have swept across the world, upending once strong links across the research and scientific community with policymakers and citizens in many countries. It is clear that advocates of evidence based policymaking as a form of good governance must make a stronger case with fellow citizens on how this can produce more sustained and high social and economic development impacts.

As clarified in our discussions and research among members in CEPA, there are various stakeholders and underlying institutions -- as well as a necessary prevailing culture -- supporting data and evidence based policymaking processes. Multilateral development partners and philanthropic donors help resource many studies and in some cases even set up the foundations for program and policy reforms for possible scaling up, working with government and civil society partners. Academic institutions, think tanks, and policy research groups like my organization IDInsight as well as other evaluation and policy research groups like 3ie, IPA and J-PAL (often in close partnership with technical experts in government or in international development agencies) co-produce some of the research, as well as supply part of the expertise for this evidence ecosystem.

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[1] This draft draws from: Mendoza, R.U. 2023. "Political Economy of Data- and Evidence-Based Policymaking". IDInsight and Ateneo Policy Center, Ateneo de Manila University.

Mainstream and social media help to translate and amplify the reach of these studies, so that citizens are better informed. Ultimately, academic institutions are also key partners in promoting citizens' appreciation for data and evidence (and the sensitivity to the risks of dis-/mis-information) within the broader education system.

Throughout all of this, citizens are expected to engage in expressing their preferences through participatory actions that demonstrate their agency in the process. Political leadership is then expected to engage in this process, in order to arrive at scientifically credible and politically acceptable arrangements that are cost-effective and further support over-all collective action both within and across countries.

An evidence ecosystem lens acknowledges how all of these parts are mutually supporting elements; and it is critical to understand how weakness in one or some parts may eventually weaken the whole system. Recent studies emphasize some useful recommendations for strengthening the evidence ecosystem.

First, policy research and evaluations could begin by engaging the policy question and decision space to make use of this evidence base. Evaluations are then part of a range of complementary inquiries (including cost-effectiveness and value-for-money analyses) that better equip decisionmakers in government, the private sector and civil society among others, to better tailor the research for practical decisionmaking for the greatest social impact.

Second, digital transformation and the use of new technologies to capture data (e.g. big data, administrative data, low-cost remote surveys) could also help enhance the cost-effectiveness of evaluation research, providing options to study more aspects of policies and programs, providing data and actionable findings in a more timely and cost-effective manner.

Third, and further to the challenge of boosting the evidence ecosystem, locally grounded evidence-to-policy partnerships can also help to enhance the practical impact of evaluations. These partnerships can also help shape the political economy of reforms in favor of widely understood data and evidence priors, helping to bridge divides. Simply put, greater data and evidence

generation, combined with widespread access to this by the general public, is expected to create a more level playing field for policymaking, with greater focus on public goods.

This level playing field is also quite critical to begin to leverage these studies in the first place. For instance, in a study of possible factors driving randomized control trial (RCT) experiments there is evidence to suggest that RCTs are more likely commissioned in politically competitive jurisdictions.[2]

Fourth, evidence use and evidence based policymaking can also be strengthened by institutionalizing the generation of evaluations, including by creating new incentives for generating and using these types of research, such as by treating them as economic safeguards on program and policy effectiveness and resource use.

The above evidence ecosystem lens can also help emphasize how citizens' general susceptibility to dis-/mis-information should be cause for concern for all who support evidence-based policymaking as a governance approach. Fake news could eventually upend the data and evidence based policymaking process. Without basic appreciation for facts, and when the appreciation of the risks of fake news is weak, then it is straightforward to imagine how discussions of policy trade-offs can become more confusing, and opportunistic political tactics to obfuscate and confuse citizens can become much more debilitating. Building trust in the data and research generation process will be key.

To conclude, communicating data and evidence to non-technical audiences for their broader appreciation could also help break traditional small non-inclusive circles of discussion and debate. Ultimately, expertise and scientific rigor is not enough—this must be channeled effectively to drive more cost-effective policy decisions and strike fairer policy trade-offs and decisions. Data and evidence, when wielded effectively, could produce high impact outcomes in policymaking that ultimately support the broader public good.

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[2] Corduneanu-Huci, C., .Dorsch and P.Maarek. 2021. "The politics of experimentation: Political competition and randomized controlled trials." Journal of Comparative Economics 49(1):1-21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2020.09.002.