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POLICY BRIEF

A Political Economy Analysis Framework for EdTech Evidence Uptake

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DFID	Department of International Development
EMIS	Education Management Information System
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LMIC	Low- and middle-income countries
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PEA	Political economy analysis

1. Introduction

As of February 2021, Covid-19 has led to over 108 million confirmed cases and over 2.4 million recorded deaths worldwide ([↑World Health Organization, 2021](#)). The pandemic has had a system-wide impact on society, bringing economies to a halt. By April 2020, nearly 1.6 billion learners were out of school across 194 countries ([↑UNESCO, 2020](#)). As of October 2020, UNESCO ([2020](#)) estimates that 990 million learners remain affected by full or partial school or university closures.

Worldwide, access to education technologies — EdTech — to enable distance learning during school closures has varied hugely. By mid-April 2020, less than 25% of low-income countries were providing any form of remote learning, whereas over 90% of high-income countries were ([↑Vegas, 2020](#)). Similarly, the evidence and national experience of effective EdTech interventions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) remains limited and fragmented, with decision-making often based on immediate opportunities and relationships rather than a considered approach based on effectiveness. In recent months, there have been significant efforts through EdTech Hub and others to synthesise effective EdTech practices and provide support and guidance to affected countries (see [↑Webb, et al., 2020](#), [↑Ashlee, et al., 2020](#) and [↑EdTech Hub, 2020](#)). A research challenge remains, however, to find out if and how these resources are actively being used to inform EdTech choices on the ground.

1.1. The politics of evidence-informed policy decisions

Previously, producing and making available high-quality open access research was thought to be enough to inform and shape policy and practice towards the most effective responses ([↑Booth, 2012](#)). Yet experience over decades of research and experience in this area shows that the production and communication of quality research and other types of evidence on their own do not always result in informed policy decisions (see [↑Court & Young \(2004\)](#), [↑Nutley, et al. \(2007\)](#), [↑Carden \(2009\)](#), [↑Maxwell & Court \(2006\)](#), [↑Pellini, et al. \(2011\)](#), [↑Pellini, et al. \(2012\)](#), [↑Young, et al. \(2014\)](#), [↑Cairney \(2016\)](#), [↑Boaz, et al. \(2019\)](#)).

The complex reality of EdTech evidence production and uptake is evident in feedback from users of EdTech Hub — a programme that aims to increase the use of evidence in decision-making about technology. Interviews with 14 education decision-makers in August 2020 from Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Lebanon, and Vietnam have highlighted that policymakers and other government officials need access to a range of types of evidence linked to specific objectives and purposes. For example, some respondents mentioned

the need for evidence to help solve specific educational policy problems while others mentioned the need for evidence to help identify educational and EdTech policy solutions aligned with the government's strategic goals.

The variety of needs captured by the Hub user research shows that there are context-specific evidence needs and demands and that it is important not only to generate evidence that responds to those needs, but which also helps to understand the specific blockages that determine why those evidence needs exist and why they persist in specific contexts. Political economy analysis recognises that as evidence enters the messy reality of policy, politics and an 'evidence ecosystem' ([↑Stewart, et al., 2019](#)), the interests, incentives, strategies, contexts, and exercise of power of key stakeholders regulates which, if any, evidence is utilised.

The political economy framework we propose in this paper provides a means of understanding that complex and messy reality of evidence uptake. This will not only inform the knowledge production and engagement activities of the Hub but also identify entry points to strengthen the evidence investment capabilities of the policy institutions with whom the Hub collaborates and partners.

EdTech evidence, in particular, provides its own unique challenges as an emerging field competing with larger more established discourses within a wary sector thought to be late to technology uptake ([↑Education Commission, 2020](#)). Covid-19 has added yet further complexity to this already complex ecosystem. Governments in general, and Ministries of Education (MoE) in particular, have been stretched over multiple areas of response, often forced to work remotely, disrupting traditional face-to-face decision-making processes ([↑Rogers & Sabarwal, 2020](#)). The education sector has also been inundated with Covid-19 and EdTech research and guidance, in different shapes and forms, saturating policymakers with evidence beyond what many could reasonably be expected to absorb or deploy.

“Data [and evidence] does not automatically translate into better policy-making processes, but when it is interpreted, analysed and critically discussed, it can help make decisions smarter, more transparent and more open.”

– Varun Banka, [↑Pulse Lab Jakarta \(2014\)](#)

1.2. Aims and content of this paper

This paper sets out an approach to analysing evidence uptake in relation to EdTech, relevant to the Covid-19 response and also more broadly. It sets out a political economy analysis framework that can be applied to increase understanding of the extent to which different types of EdTech evidence shape policy decisions on EdTech. It is linked to EdTech Hub's research theme of "using technology to improve governance, data management, equity, and accountability within education systems."¹

This brief sets out a framework for future political economy research in relation to EdTech evidence uptake and can be used to inform engagement with policymakers. The description of the political economy framework introduces the concept of an evidence ecosystem and its role in policymaking processes. In doing so it recognises the importance of mapping out and understanding the characteristics of the system in which knowledge production and knowledge uptake interact.

In particular, this paper is designed to inform both EdTech Hub's own research and engagement work, as well as the wider community of researchers and practitioners interested in the applied political economy analysis of evidence-informed policy processes for the sector.

It is structured as follows: first, it defines and conceptualises the evidence ecosystem and sets out how this applies to EdTech. Second, it outlines the evolution and utility of political economy analysis and explores its application to education more generally. Third, it outlines a framework for understanding evidence uptake as related to EdTech and alongside this presents snapshots from three country case studies exploring their Covid-19 responses.

¹ *EdTech Hub Results Framework*, June 2020 (internal document).

2. The EdTech evidence ecosystem

In this section we turn to introducing the concept of the ‘evidence ecosystem’ before applying it specifically to EdTech.

2.1. What is an ‘evidence ecosystem’?

An evidence ecosystem can be defined as the landscape of an array of actors including government, the private sector, and civil society organisations that provide and / or demand evidence to support the development and implementation of public policies ([↑Stewart, et al., 2019](#)). The concept was developed in 2012 by a team led by Diastika Rahwidiati and Scott Guggenheim at AusAID in Jakarta, which designed the Australia–Indonesia Partnership for Pro-Poor Policy: The Knowledge Sector Initiative (see [↑Australian Agency for International Development, 2012](#), [↑Guggenheim, 2012](#), [↑Pellini, et al., 2018](#)). The programme adopted a systems perspective to the evidence-to-policy processes that was inspired by the literature on complexity and policies and power in knowledge-to-policy systems ([↑Jones, et al., 2013](#), [↑Jones, 2009](#), [↑Hummelbrunner & Jones, 2013](#), [↑Jones, 2011](#), [↑Jones, 2011](#), [↑Datta, et al., 2011](#)).

The actors in an evidence ecosystem can be roughly grouped under the following three categories (see also Figure 1):

1. **Evidence producers:** individuals and / or organisations that produce evidence to inform policies.
2. **Evidence intermediaries:** individuals and / or organisations that communicate different types of evidence.
3. **Evidence users:** individuals and / or organisations that demand and utilise evidence to inform policy and programming decisions.²

The interaction between the actors within the ecosystem occurs within an operating environment comprising the policies, regulations, and procedures that govern how evidence production, intermediation, and use operate. Key to

² ‘Utilise’ can involve mentions in a government policy paper, as a reference to a new regulation, or statement to the media and in government websites ([↑Hovland \(2007\)](#), [↑Pasanen & Shaxson \(2016\)](#)). It is therefore not limited to a change in policy content but also in statements that show a shift in the attitudes and perception by policymakers about certain social or economic problems (see [↑Keck & Sikkink, 1998](#) and [↑Taylor, 2005](#)).

working with these actors is clarity on evidence needs: “Showing what evidence is needed to address individual policy priorities will help engage a wide range of people in discussions about how to fulfil those needs” ([Wills, et al., 2014](#)).

This is a general description of the elements of the evidence ecosystem and can apply to different policy sectors. These are categories that help identify the actors in the system. These groups will look different in different sectors and in different countries and contexts. In each context-specific actors are involved with specific capabilities, linkage and interconnections (or lack thereof) between them.

“Showing what evidence is needed to address individual policy priorities will help engage a wide range of people in discussions about how to fulfil those needs.” — [Wills, et al. \(2014\)](#)

2.2. The EdTech evidence ecosystem

Table 1. (below) further identifies some of the groups one would expect to see in each of these categories in the EdTech space. It should be noted that some actors can fall within different categories: for example, Ministries of Education can be both producers and users; non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations can be producers and intermediaries.

Table 1. *Examples of key evidence actors in the EdTech evidence ecosystem.*

Evidence producers	National and international organisations
	Academic institutions, research organisations, policy analysts
	Private sector, including EdTech providers such as Google, Microsoft, or Vodafone
	EMIS centres or ministerial policy analysis units
Evidence users	Ministries of Education
	Education line agencies (sub-national)
	National and international organisations
	Private sector, including tech entrepreneurs
Evidence intermediaries	INGOs and NGOs
	Policy research organisations

Civil society actors

Operating environment

Rules and regulations on procuring evidence from knowledge producers to inform policy decisions

Regulations about evaluating investments in EdTech

Regulations on deploying EdTech at scale

We are currently witnessing significant shifts due to the Covid-19 pandemic that are influencing the elements and the linkages in the EdTech evidence ecosystem across countries. In particular:

- Recognition of the centrality of technology to learning in the 21st century and its role in either widening or potentially reducing education inequalities has led to a rapid scale-up of investments in EdTech research, implementation and policy development.
- Despite the rapid growth in EdTech interest over the past decade, as a sector, it is still evolving, new actors are emerging as credible, and the types of actors are shifting, with private companies such as Google and Microsoft increasingly establishing a role in evidence generation and use.
- Covid-19 has demanded the scale-up of distance learning EdTech solutions with an urgency beyond what was previously foreseen.

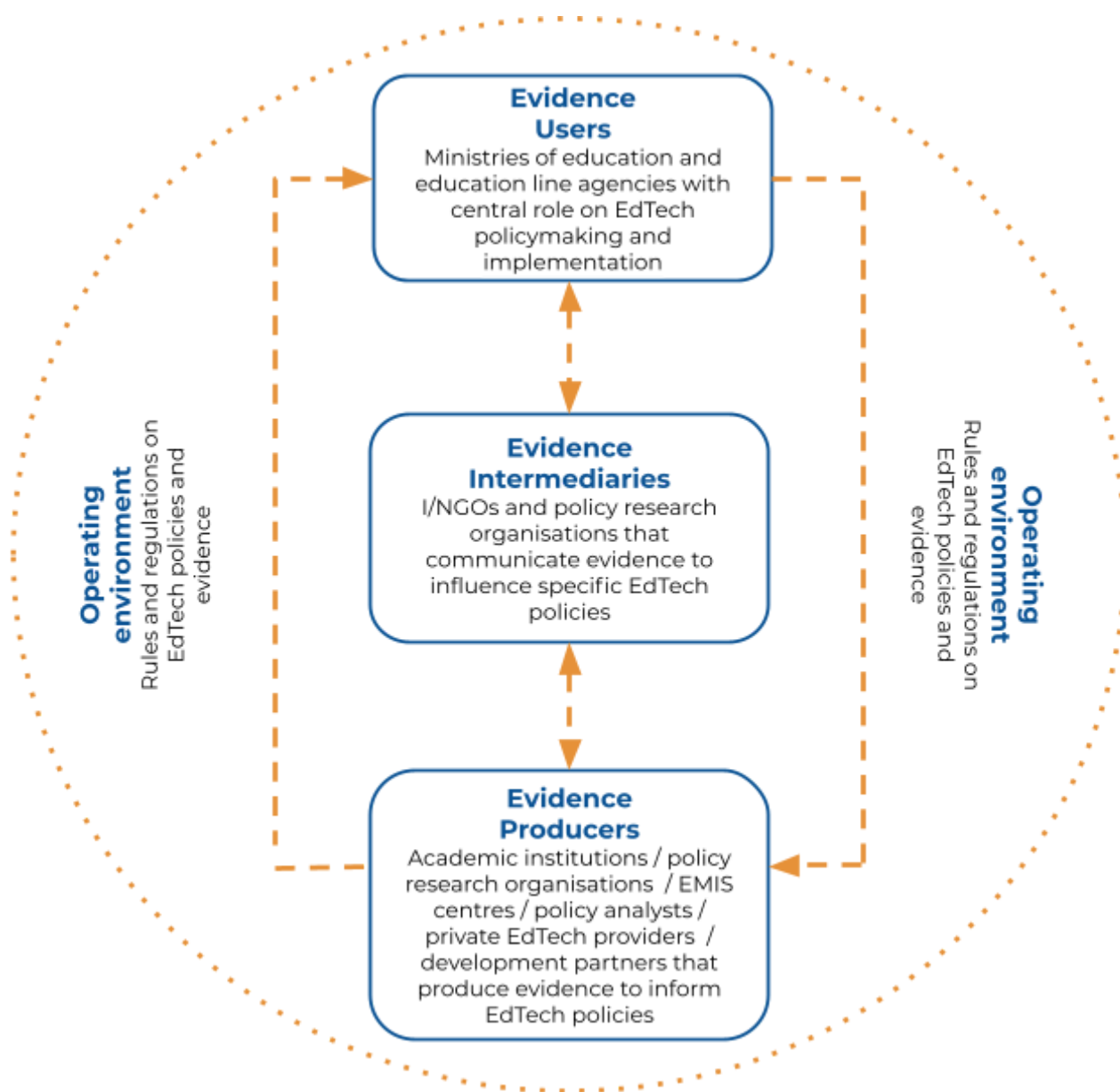


Figure 1. *Actors and linkages within the EdTech evidence ecosystem. Source: authors' own*

A sense of this evidence ecosystem is essential to understanding the extent to which evidence is actually used within any given context. Building on this, in the next section, we introduce a framework that can enable a systematic exploration of evidence uptake in EdTech.

3. Political economy analysis of evidence uptake: an EdTech framework

This section describes the key elements of political economy analysis (PEA) before suggesting a framework to apply PEA to EdTech evidence demand and use. Finally it suggests ways to apply this framework to EdTech evidence ecosystems.

3.1. What is political economy analysis?

Political economy is a discipline with a long tradition in the social sciences, yet it is relatively new in international development, having been pioneered by the Department for International Development (DFID) in the mid-2000s ([↑Menocal, 2014](#)). It has emerged in response to the growing recognition that technical analysis needs to be complemented by a better understanding of the politics and the context behind it (see [↑Faustino & Fabella, 2011](#), [↑Fritz, et al., 2014](#), [↑Andrews, et al., 2015](#), [↑Andrews, et al., 2017](#) and [↑Pellini, et al., 2019](#)).

Political economy studies can vary in scope. DFID ([2009](#)) has identified three types of study:

1. Country-level analysis, which can help enhance general knowledge of country contexts and can inform the country programming.
2. Sector-level analysis, which is helpful in identifying specific barriers and opportunities across an entire sector.
3. Issue-specific analysis, which focuses on a specific policy challenge and can help understand the political factors, forces and incentives that shape that specific challenge ([↑Fritz, et al., \(2014\)](#), [↑Menocal, et al., \(2018\)](#)).

Each type of political economy analysis has a specific purpose and value. However, the distinction between the three types is not always clear cut. This paper describes an issue-specific political economy analysis to research the factors, forces, and incentives that drive or hinder EdTech evidence uptake.

The framework that we suggest below is informed by the work of [↑Fritz, et al., \(2014\)](#), [↑Menocal \(2014\)](#), and [↑Menocal, et al., \(2018\)](#). This issue-specific political economy analysis can, and usually does, include elements of sectoral political economy such as mapping the key actors and their relationships within a given sector, such as education, and the power and interests of different groups in a sector.

3.2. A framework for EdTech evidence uptake

Our suggested framework consists of **five core elements** (see Figure 2 below):

1. **Issue** refers to the specific problem or question that the political economy analysis seeks to address — the factors that enable or hinder evidence uptake on EdTech, in particular during the Covid-19 response.
2. **Structural factors** refer to the country-level structures for policy decision-making and evidence uptake. These structures influence the demand for evidence and the policy environment in which government actors and decision-makers operate. In the context of Covid-19, these drivers are not only related to historic legacies, but also to the emerging EdTech response to Covid-19, including task forces and working groups. They influence the extent to which evidence is a factor in education policymaking and if it is a feature, the type of evidence sought.
3. **Rules of the game** refer to the formal and informal rules and norms that influence the behaviours of the actors in the evidence ecosystems. It refers to formal legal frameworks as well as incentives, relationships, capacity, and power dynamics. It influences, among other things, which evidence producers and which types of evidence are seen as most credible by policymakers and the receptiveness of the education system and individuals to EdTech solutions. Education agencies having to make quick decisions during the Covid-19 response may, for example, favour a network of trusted, familiar sources due to existing relationships.
4. **Stakeholder interests and power** refers to the different interests that the stakeholders' in the evidence ecosystem have in terms of influencing EdTech policies, their power to pursue those interests and the consequences of those interests on the EdTech evidence ecosystem.
5. **Opportunities** refer to the findings from the analysis conducted above to try to identify opportunities to strengthen evidence uptake processes systems.

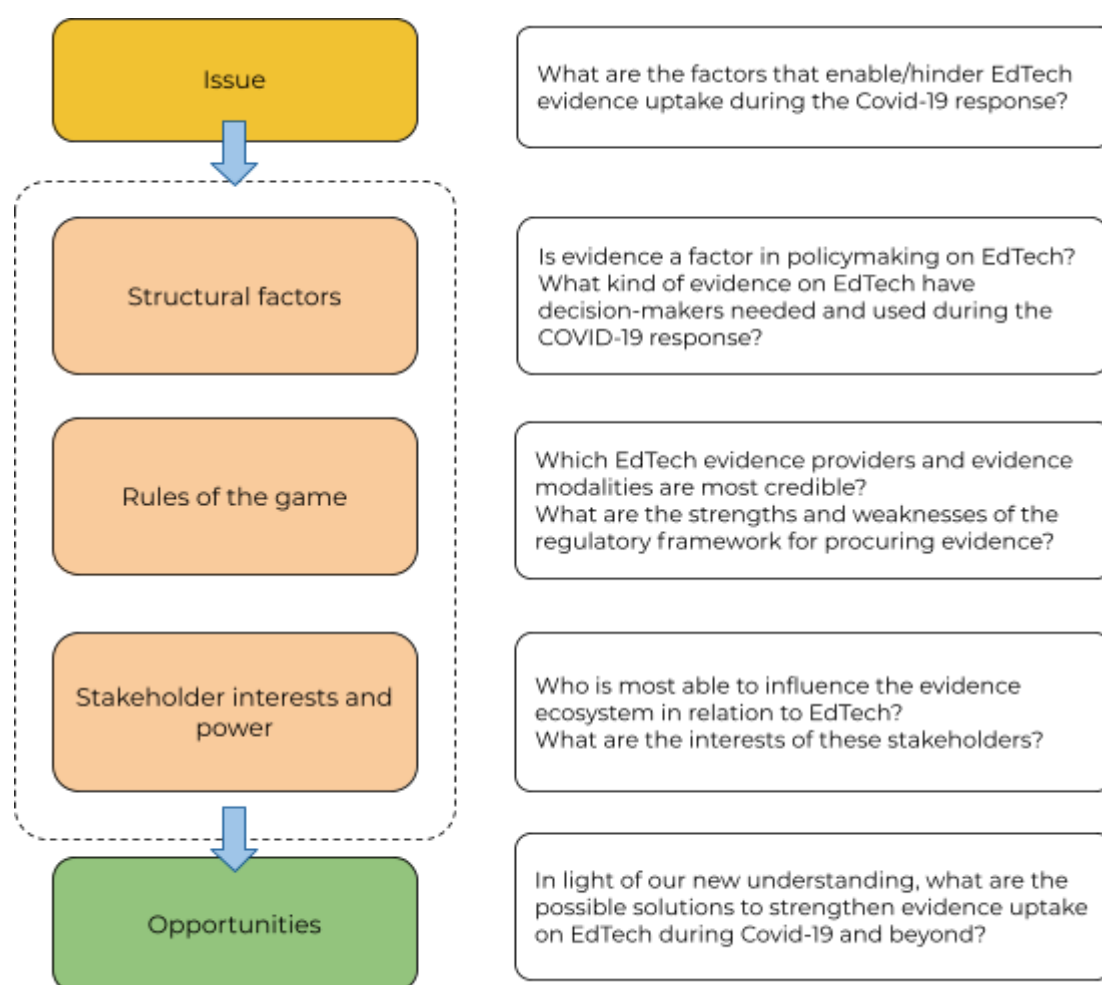


Figure 2. Political economy analysis conceptual framework as applied to EdTech evidence ecosystems and the Covid-19 response. Source: authors own.

3.3. Applying the framework to EdTech evidence ecosystems

Each political economy analysis assessment benefits from the development of its own contextual and issue-specific questions. After identifying these questions, the framework can be utilised in a number of ways, including the following.

1. To frame dedicated, rigorous, political economy analysis research centred on either evidence producers, intermediaries or users and the ecosystem in which they operate.
2. As a sub-component of an ongoing policy-influencing project, which is reviewed and updated regularly to support the adaptation of the project to changes in context and circumstances.
3. As a tool for reflection and learning, enabling stakeholders in the evidence ecosystem to ask critical questions of their own evidence

production, intermediation, and evidence use in order to maximise evidence uptake in policy.

All three approaches can be drawn upon to inform better understanding of EdTech evidence. In the next section, we provide a snapshot of initial insights from applying this framework as a component of a broader effort aimed at synthesising knowledge around country-level, Covid-19 EdTech responses.

4. Country snapshots on the political economy of EdTech evidence

The following three ‘country snapshots’ begin to explore how the above framework can be applied and used in different contexts. While time and resources have not yet allowed for full political economy studies, here we share insights drawn from interviews and building on information gathered through country cases studies conducted in Rwanda ([↑Ngabonzima, et al., 2020](#)), India ([↑Doraiswamy, et al., 2020](#)), and Jordan ([↑Al-Hindawi & Hashem, 2020](#)).

4.1. EdTech evidence in Rwanda

Issue. In March 2020, Rwanda announced an immediate country-wide school closure locking 2.5 million primary-school and 660,000 secondary-school learners out of school. During the government’s rapid educational response in April 2020, which included expanding educational TV and Radio and revamping two existing (but not much used) e-learning platforms — [elearning.reb.rw](#) for pre-primary, primary and secondary learners and [elarning.rp.ac.rw](#) for vocational learners at all levels ([↑Rwanda Polytechnic, 2020](#)) — there was little time for policy decisions to be influenced by evidence. Key policy decisions were made behind closed doors by the cabinet.

Structural factors. Historically, Rwanda has had a relatively transparent process for evidence uptake in education. The National Institute for Statistics, for example, publishes annual data on the education system, and policy proposals from the NGO sector have been able to influence change. Interview participants noted the importance of evidence producers developing sustained engagement with the Rwandan government in order to have influence.

Rules of the game. Typically, the Rwandan government has gathered evidence by contracting a consultant to coordinate evidence producers and internal government bodies and produce policy recommendations. These consultants are often key intermediaries. During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, this process has been too slow to inform pandemic policy planning.

Stakeholder interests and power. Notably, long-established inter-governmental and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) partners of the government have remained influential in the Covid pandemic, particularly UNICEF, and the use of EdTech looks set to grow given the EdTech emphasis of the government’s Covid-19 education response plan, and

increasing interest from NGOs (for example Save the Children) and the private sector (for example BAG Innovation) ([↑Kimenyi, et al., 2020](#)).

Opportunities. Interviews suggest that future EdTech evidence uptake opportunities in Rwanda may develop in at least two key areas. First, as existing policies are adapted there will be a need to identify gaps in government policy. Second, due to a strong interest in EdTech from the Rwanda government as well as the established evidence ecosystem involving longstanding development partners and consultants, there may be opportunities to use these historic channels for increased evidence uptake in EdTech.

4.2. EdTech evidence in India

Issue. Over 320 million children have been affected by ongoing Indian school closures ([↑UNESCO, 2020](#)). Despite limited connectivity, capacity, and a lack of content state governments have demonstrated commitment, resourcefulness, and a sense of urgency in responding to the ensuing learning crisis. Policy decisions have been made with limited access to evidence given how quickly the crisis unfolded. In May 2020, the Indian central government announced the [↑Pradhan Mantri e-Vidya Initiative for Digital Education \(2020\)](#), a website that pulls together the available online learning options.

Structural factors. Education in India is a devolved, state-level responsibility. In India, state-level decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic has been top-down and has consolidated the already considerable responsibility held by senior state officials such as the state principal secretary and state education minister. Although highly-educated and trained these officials only stay in post for around three years — rarely long enough to develop long-term evidence uptake strategies.

Rules of the game. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Indian state officials often sought evidence about the extent of access to online learning (such as the numbers of computers in Indian schools) and about the suitability of online platforms (such as [↑ePathshala](#) for ebooks content or [↑DIKSHA](#) for learning content). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted the focus. The pandemic has exposed India's vast 'digital divide' and state officials have come to demand much more evidence about those children excluded from online learning and about the high-tech or low-tech solutions that could help them to keep learning.

Stakeholder interests and power. Education authorities at central and at state level have recognised that distance learning is likely to last longer than initially planned and are thinking about the budget implications for the education sector of a protracted crisis. As the pandemic continues to unfold,

they have expressed the need for access to up-to-date data and analysis about a range of impacts:

- the impact of distance learning on marginalised learners and learners with disabilities
- the reach of EdTech
- the impact of EdTech on learning outcomes
- the effectiveness of different Edtech solutions such as the distribution of tablets to students.

Additionally, as Covid-19 continues, evidence is particularly sought about what works within and between Indian states (notably, evidence from overseas is less influential unless it comes from countries with a similar education system and large population such as India).

Opportunities. There are opportunities to test at state level how to integrate existing communication channels between schools and education authorities (e.g. Whatsapp) into more systematic feedback and data analysis systems to provide the ongoing, up-to-date evidence that state education authorities need. A second area of opportunity is related to the assessment and strengthening of the operational and regulatory environments needed to improve emergency data collection and analysis on EdTech during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is also a need to enable quicker sharing and access to this evidence and experiences between different state education authorities.

4.3. EdTech evidence in Jordan

Issue. On 15 March 2020 Jordan closed all educational institutions, affecting over 2.3 million learners, as part of one of the world's strictest lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic ([↑UNESCO, 2020](#)). The Jordanian MoE rapidly utilised pre-existing education technologies including TV, e-learning and e-training for Jordanian teachers. In addition to these, the MoE launched two websites: [Darsak.gov.jo](#) ([↑Ministry of Education \(Jordan\), 2020](#)), which provides distance learning resources for learners, and [Teachers.gov.jo](#) ([↑Ministry of Education \(Jordan\), 2020](#)), which provides distance learning resources for teachers.

Structural factors. According to interview participants, evidence has always played a significant role in shaping Jordanian policy, particularly evidence produced by the MoE. Significantly, the MoE has an established department dedicated to monitoring and evaluating educational needs, outcomes and impacts. This department is supported by local actors.

Rules of the game. During the Covid-19 lockdown, therefore, these trusted sources were favoured to inform rapid policy decisions. Notably, these

evidence bases were supplemented by the institutional knowledge of education officials who have responded to multiple emergencies over many decades.

Stakeholder interests and power. External sources of evidence also played a role in Jordanian Covid-19 policy formation, including the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, various telecom providers, and, in particular, the Education Donor Group which includes education authorities and multilateral and bilateral development partners. This group is a longstanding, trusted partner of the MoE and was considered a useful intermediary to bring evidence to the attention of the MoE.

Opportunities. Notable avenues for exploring future EdTech evidence uptake include the linking exploring possible collaborations with the Donor Working Group and the MoE officials who often possess considerable institutional experience of education in emergencies.

5. Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis poses not just an unprecedented challenge to education systems but also to overall state capabilities to respond and adapt to a pandemic. It appears likely that we will have to live with Covid-19 for some time. Improved use of EdTech evidence in decision-making is paramount.

The current crisis has resulted in a huge production of EdTech evidence and analysis ostensibly to help inform education response. While this evidence production is important in itself, its value in informing policy debate and decision-making relies firstly on the capabilities of decision-makers to communicate their evidence needs and absorb and utilise the knowledge and evidence available. Beyond capabilities, it also depends on the political economy of the evidence ecosystem — the structures that shape the role of evidence; the formal and informal rules of the game around education policymaking; and the interests and power dynamics of key stakeholders.

This brief sets out both an overview of the EdTech evidence ecosystem and a political economy analysis framework that can be used to analyse it. Applying this analysis through the lens of experience in Rwanda, India, and Jordan finds that:

- The speed of the Covid-19 pandemic and necessary changes to school systems has meant that decisions regarding EdTech-related platforms and tools are largely based on pre-existing contacts and experience, although they take place at different levels depending on the degree of decentralisation in the country.
- Historic experience within these countries shows evidence uptake can be stronger i) when produced within the MoE itself, and ii) when evidence producers have sustained engagement with the decision-makers at the MoE and other key country institutions.
- Typical evidence gathering processes were interrupted by Covid-19 due to increased political and public attention to EdTech, with these processes being too slow to credibly inform pandemic policy planning and new information initially being sparse.
- With the growing recognition that distance learning is likely to be extended for the foreseeable future in many cases, there is increasing interest in EdTech evidence on the effectiveness of different solutions in terms of learning outcomes, equity and inclusion, and cost implications.

- There are opportunities to bring emerging EdTech evidence to the table and influence decision-making through cultivating relationships and sharing information with:
 - Senior education officials at various levels responsible for EdTech-related decisions
 - Development partners and donor working groups involved in the education sector
 - Consultant firms and individual consultants working in the EdTech space.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of government agencies and decision-makers being able to find a way of working at scale while simultaneously experimenting with localising and adapting technological and non-tech solutions to local contexts. It also shows the importance of enabling distance learning for as many learners as possible while exploring other uses for technology in education. In their rapid responses, education agencies and authorities have had to test new ways to access and use different types of evidence to inform experimentation as the pandemic unfolds. This experimentation is a key feature of educational responses during the Covid-19 pandemic. While EdTech can support remote learning, its effectiveness varies according to contexts and circumstances (see [↑Tauson & Stannard, 2018](#) and [↑World Bank, 2020](#)).

“No matter how brilliant the EdTech research, unless it considers the unique political economy factors that drive evidence uptake in the country concerned, it will likely not reach the eyes and ears of decision-makers.”

When and why evidence is taken into account to inform policy decisions on EdTech is not straightforward. Policymaking is always messy and contested, but perhaps even more so during a pandemic. Therefore, this brief proposes a political economy framework that can structure deeper, context-specific analysis to understand the factors that enable or hinder the uptake of evidence on EdTech during the response to Covid-19 and beyond it.

No matter how brilliant the EdTech research, unless it considers the unique political economy factors that drive evidence uptake in the country concerned, it will likely not reach the eyes and ears of decision-makers. For those seeking to produce evidence with the ability to influence education responses, further understanding of all of the above is vital. The political

economy framework of EdTech evidence uptake set out in this brief can provide a starting point to help with this.

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