



HIFA Project on Communicating health research to policymakers

Supported by TDR

Short edit (selected highlights)

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HIFA is collaborating with TDR/WHO (Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases) to promote sharing and learning of experience and expertise around the topic of health research communication to policymakers. Below are selected highlights of the thematic discussion September to October 2022, messages 1 to 125. See the Long edit for comprehensive content, names and profiles of contributors, citations and metrics.

For background, read online: <https://www.hifa.org/projects/new-communicating-health-research-support-evidence-informed-policy-making>

The discussion aimed to look primarily from the perspective of researchers. "From a researcher point of view, this means that their research is considered as appropriate by the relevant target audiences, including funders, academic authorities and policymakers, among others. In all cases, research communications should be visible, accessible, clear and readily understandable. Effective research communications for policymakers should be in a format that meets their perceived needs and should be seen as relevant and reliable." (Chris Zielinski, UK)

Q1. What do we mean by Effective communication of health research to policymakers? How do we measure it?

All agreed that research should be freely accessible, robust, relevant, reliable, clear, easy to understand, and in the right language.

Some contributors suggested that the aim of research communication should be to change policy and practice. Others argued that the aim should be to inform policymakers and support evidence-informed decision-making (taking into account all available evidence).

Contributors agreed that there is no single indicator of effectiveness. Effectiveness should be measured on a case-by-case basis, against agreed communication objectives. Outcomes are more important than outputs.

Q2. What are the different approaches to communicating research (e.g. academic journals, policy briefs, interaction with policymakers, press releases, social media, infographics, use of video)? What is your experience with these approaches? What works and what doesn't?

Contributors noted the paper by Chapman et al (2021) which concluded 'There is limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions targeting health managers and policy-makers, as well as the mechanisms required for achieving impact.'

Published papers and policy briefs were seen as important but not sufficient. Direct interaction with policymakers and the role of mass media were emphasised.

Mark Storey, USA. 1. What is the operational level of the change you are seeking? ... 2. What are the political and personality factors among the individuals and organizations that have the authority to approve the change or not?... 3. Who are you? Are you an insider...?...our approach was to (a) identify and promote individual champions within the institution and (b) learn about existing quality review processes and try to find ways to engage within them to promote change.

Samuel Sieber, Switzerland: Simply ask “who needs to know” about your research findings and list names, contact details etc... Craft your message: Translate your findings and recommendations into an actionable message targeted at your main stakeholders.

Moderator: In the case of Cochrane reviews, it is clear that 'effective research communication' is about providing information and not about recommending a particular course of action. [Should] primary research studies make recommendations?

Richard Fitton, UK. [Quoting UN Assembly President]; 'We are not asking scientists to tell us what to do. We are asking scientists to show us the options and to show us what might be the consequences of our actions or inaction.'

Ama Fenny, Ghana: What made the impact was making the information less technical and more accessible to those who needed it the most - policymakers... 3 basic steps, stating the facts (results), stating the implications (effect on individuals, families, businesses and economy) and finally the call to action (advocating for policy change to curb productivity loss).

Q3. What is the role of researchers in research communication, beyond publication of their paper? What is the role of other stakeholders (e.g. communication professionals, editors, media, public health professionals and critical thinkers)?

The role of other stakeholders was seen to be important in research communication and includes public figures such as faith leaders. The mass media is important but can also distort research communication, for example through exaggerated claims by journalists or researchers themselves.

Meena Cherian, Switzerland: Researchers will have to expand their role beyond ‘academic goals’ by involving themselves in communicating their research to community level.

Chris Zielinski, UK: If new health research is to be taken up by policy makers, there needs to be a strong and conscious effort for the research community to interact with the media.

Q4. What are the needs and preferences of policymakers?

Moderator: Arguably, what policymakers need most is not the results of single primary research studies (although these can be paramount in selected situations), and not even the results of systematic reviews. Most often, they need a synthesis of global (secondary) evidence and local evidence...

Chris Zielinski, UK: It is nice to imagine that health policy makers spend their Sundays reading academic biomedical journals - or even the policy briefs laboriously prepared for them by intermediaries - nice, but completely unlikely... To them, whatever health issue is making the headlines is clearly the most important one...

Geoff Royston, UK - Be aware - understand the policymakers' business, their needs and appreciate their environment... Be relevant - find out health policymakers' and managers' "hot topics" and consider how research can identify and inform "high impact changes" in these areas... Be timely - fit with the "zeitgeist" matters... Be visible - publish and publicise in the right way in the right places... Be compelling - ensure messages are as robust and as simple as possible... Be a facilitator - make it easier for policymakers and managers to use research findings...

Q5. What can be done to better support researchers in the communication of health research?

Joseph Ana, Nigeria: Most researchers in LLMICs wake up every day wishing that they ... have more practical support on the ground from their governments and partners from elsewhere... functional information resource centres with regular reliable connectivity, hard and soft copy reference texts, regular scheduled on-hands training and retraining on how to read, write and publish... free open access.

Jackeline Alger, Honduras: The [PAHO Policy on Research for Health document <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/54411?locale-attribute=es>] declares: 'Researchers, policy makers, health practitioners, and the public require timely and equitable access to research evidence. Strategies to bolster understanding of the essential links between research, policy, and action need to be developed, implemented, and evaluated.'

Moderator: I would argue that [financial and political support] should be directed more to improve balanced information and understanding (especially through research synthesis), and relatively less to strengthen researchers' ability to affect policy change (especially from a single primary study).

Jacklyne Ashubwe-Jalemba, Kenya: As a knowledge management mentor on the TDR SORT IT course, I know that hands-on capacity-building initiatives such as this one are very effective in supporting researchers in communicating their research findings to relevant stakeholders.

Moderator: INASP runs the AuthorAID platform, which provides support and services for over 20,000 developing country researchers, including mentoring... In 2021 INASP published Context Matters: A Framework to support knowledge into policy, 'a participatory tool to help detect and understand the best entry points to improve the use of knowledge in a public agency'. <https://www.inasp.info/contextmatters>

Irina Ibraghimova, Croatia: Helpful hints for sharing research with people in policy (the UK) <https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/opinion-and-blog/helpful-hints-sharing-research-people->

[policy ...](#) Research Engagement with Policy Makers: a practical guide to writing policy briefs (the UK, NIHR Policy Research Unit in Behavioural Science) <https://osf.io/m25qp>

Case studies

Martin Ndinakie Yakum, Cameroon: Policymakers were engaged at the planning stage of the study... I was designated by our team to represent the project team at the national surveillance meeting in the MoH (held every week) ... Results dissemination seminars were organized 2 times per year... Because the study team was constantly in contact with the health authorities, the team was always invited by the MoH anytime a seminar was organized...

Khin Thet Wai, Myanmar: Communicating the favourable risks and benefits ratio of intended research through advocacy... Press release through public media... We have conducted the dissemination of research results at different levels (local/subnational, national and global levels) ... Policy briefs... Scientific publications...

Irina Ibraghimova, Croatia: I can share my experience in global evidence synthesis (as an information professional) ... The problem from my part was that I was asked to review the search strategy after it has been already executed

For profiles of contributors and citations, see long edit.

Unanswered questions that may require further exploration

1. **Informing versus persuading.** Effective research communication is primarily about providing the information policymakers need on which to make specific decisions. In what circumstances is it also about persuading policymakers to make specific decisions?
2. **Different methods.** What are the pros and cons of different methods (e.g. academic journals, policy briefs, interaction with policymakers, press releases, social media, television, radio...)? When and how can they be most effectively used by researchers to inform and/or persuade?
3. **Case studies.** What other case studies can we identify that demonstrate effective and ineffective research communication of primary and secondary research?
4. **Global/local synthesis:** Can we learn from examples where WHO guidance was adapted to inform national policy? What actually happens when global evidence (for example from WHO guidance) is synthesized with local evidence? Can we describe situations where this has worked (or not)?
5. **Guidance:** What practical guidance exists on effective communication for health research?