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Virtual Policy Engagement Workshop

29th-30th September 2020

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Introduction and purpose of workshop

On 29-30th September, the Wellcome Trust Global Policy team convened a two-day policy engagement workshop for delegates from [Wellcome's Africa and Asia Programmes \(AAPs\)](#), the India Alliance, and internal and external stakeholders with an interest in policy engagement.

Organised in collaboration with the AAPs, the workshop brought together programme staff and researchers to share learning from work to increase the use of evidence in policy and practice through engaging policymakers, as well as look ahead to the future of this work in a COVID-19 environment. This was the 3rd policy engagement workshop in 3 years, following successful in-person meetings in London in June 2018, and Lilongwe, Malawi in February 2019.

The workshop had the following objectives:

- To share learnings from the pilot projects and wider policy engagement work through presentations and a review of progress so far.
- To share learnings from the experience of responding to COVID-19 and supporting the policy response to the outbreak.
- To identify how to successfully embed policy engagement work and highlight opportunities for future collaboration as a group.

The workshop was designed as part of Wellcome's work to increase the use of research evidence by strengthening capacity of research institutions to engage policymakers. The Network is a forum for sharing learning from policy engagement and promoting shared interests and opportunities for collaboration.

Day 1 Summary

On day 1, participants heard short presentations from the teams working on policy engagement at each of the AAPs and the India Alliance. The presentations gave participants an overview of the progress that each of the programmes had made on their policy engagement work, and highlighted lessons learned. The slides are enclosed with this report for reference.

We heard presentations from:

- **Katrina Lawson**, Principal Investigator, Grants and Communications Manager, Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU), Vietnam
- **Dr. Marlen Stacey Chawani**, Health Systems and Policy Research Fellow, Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Trust (MLW) Clinical Research programme, Malawi
- **Alex Njeru**, Policy Engagement Officer, KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme (KWTRP), Kenya
- **Dr. Devaki Nambiar**, Principal Investigator (PI) of AdEquate, India Alliance
- **Professor Nceba Gqaleni**, Science engagement Fellow and Faculty Member, Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI), South Africa
- **Dr. Nantasit Luangsanatip**, Mahidol-Oxford Tropical Medicine Research Unit (MORU), Thailand

The subsequent panel discussions provided opportunities to ask questions of presenters. There was significant engagement in the conversation from attendees, emphasising the considerable interest in learning lessons

from the work being carried out in a wide range of contexts across Africa and Asia. The presentations and rich discussion highlighted the following key themes:

- **Significant progress has been made in challenging circumstances** – Despite the pandemic, presenters reported on impressive progress being made in their policy engagement efforts. We heard of growing and varied collaboration with policymakers through embedding researchers on government technical working groups, providing evidence synthesis and hosting policy dialogues with policymakers. It was also great to hear of early evidence of culture change within the programmes as the role of policy engagement in enabling impact gains increased recognition.
- **Different locations, some familiar learnings** – In reflecting on lessons learned, presenters from OUCRU and MLW specifically emphasised the value of early and continuous engagement with policymakers, a point which was echoed by all participants. The importance of understanding audience needs, building sustainable relationships, and gaining support from programme leadership to ensure a successful approach to policy engagement, were all also emphasised.
- **COVID-19 has been a learning experience** – The AAPs and the India Alliance highlighted their role in working with policymakers to support national and local responses to COVID-19. Some of this crucial work included providing urgent policy briefs, partnering with policymakers to engage local communities and providing modelling on transmission. Working so closely with policymakers has boosted understanding of how to engage effectively, as well as cemented relationships which can be developed for the long term.
- **Relationships as a key enabler** – Across each of the programmes, participants highlighted the importance of finding effective forums to build relationships with policymakers. AHRI mentioned their research to action forum with the Department of Health as a successful mechanism, while others highlighted that some contact has been virtual and less formal given the ongoing pandemic. This early and continued investment in relationships was a key enabler to impactful policy engagement.
- **Measuring impact** – Many participants were also grappling with how to effectively monitor and evaluate their work, be this via log frames, theories of change and identifying key indicators of progress. This was agreed as an important element of the work, though it was acknowledged that attribution remains challenging, with the primary objective being to ensure policymakers are engaging with evidence in their decision making.

Day 2 Summary

The second day of the workshop, facilitated by Trang Nghiem Nguyen Minh, Policy Engagement Researcher at OUCRU, allowed for a more focused discussion with staff from each of the AAPs and India Alliance who have specifically been working on policy engagement. Participants were brought together in smaller breakout groups to workshop the following key questions and related issues:

1. How will the COVID-19 environment impact policy engagement work?
2. What opportunities are there for further collaboration as a group?

How will the COVID-19 environment impact policy engagement work?

Participants highlighted a range of opportunities and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues were rooted in the experiences of the teams at each of the AAPs in the last 8 months. While the following list is not exhaustive, these were the key themes that emerged from the discussion:

Opportunities –

- **Increased policymaker demand and appreciation of evidence** – Participants reflected on the “*environmental shift*” of a renewed focus on science and evidence-informed policy as governments look to effectively respond to COVID-19. It was noted that policymakers are more appreciative of evidence and the role research plays in decision making and are increasingly inviting researchers into the process. MORU highlighted their researchers being asked to support the Thai Government’s modelling work, while researchers from across the network have been crucial partners of national and regional policymakers looking to control the pandemic. It was highlighted that demand for local evidence will also be greater, as it becomes clear how COVID-19 affects communities and health services in different ways.
- **Relationships** - Increased interaction through collaborating on COVID-19 has allowed new relationships to be built and provides improved access to decision makers. With the AAPs having contributed significantly to the COVID-19 response, trust has been built with policymakers and this can be leveraged moving forward. Representatives from the AdEquate, India Alliance programme, described the importance of being a “*sustained and reliable presence on the ringside*”. Maintaining and developing these relationships will be a major opportunity for the programmes to play a role in agenda setting, and ensure evidence informs national and local policy.
- **Increased understanding of how to influence government** - Due to COVID-19, there is an improved understanding of policymakers and government institutions – an opportunity that otherwise would not have occurred. The AAPs have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of health systems, and better knowledge of the motivations and interests of policy makers. This significant insight will allow researchers to tailor their engagement more effectively moving forward.
- **Researchers seeing the value of engaging** - Researchers that were previously not part of decision making processes have seen their expertise being relied upon by policymakers in responding to COVID-19. Breakout Group 1 noted that “*researchers now have a better appreciation of solution-focused work*”. This can have a transformative effect as researchers understand how they can influence change, and now have greater belief that their research will be considered.

Challenges –

- **Flexible funding and ways of working required** – The pandemic has highlighted the need for flexibility from the research institutes in terms of responding to demand for specific COVID-19-related projects – such as urgent evidence synthesis. Managing policymakers’ expectations is challenging as there is now a level of expectation that evidence can be synthesized and shared quickly; but this may not be sustainable. Funding which is project-based means it is difficult to be adaptable and respond to such requests. Donor flexibility in these cases was highlighted as being particularly important.
- **Non-COVID-19 work being ignored** – Priorities have changed significantly since the pandemic, with policymakers generally having limited interest in projects or work not linked to COVID-19. It has been very difficult to share non-COVID-19 work and get feedback, and the opportunities to collaborate have therefore become limited. Breakout Group 2 described engagement not related to the pandemic as being “*in limbo*”.
- **Postponement of policy engagement activities** – All of the programmes highlighted activities they have had to postpone due to the pandemic. These include in-person meetings, policy dialogues, secondments and larger projects of work. While there is hope that this work can be completed at a later date, delays can harm the development of relationships and momentum of policy engagement. Participants noted that they needed to consider new ways of keeping contact up, be that through virtual calls or sharing interim findings from research.
- **Lack of in-person contact** – There was an appreciation that given the importance of relationships and communication, the lack of in-person contact caused by COVID-19 restrictions is a key challenge. KWTRP described a “*mismatch in operating style*” – with policymakers working as normal while KWTRP research staff are working from home. While there is hope that this challenge will be temporary, there are difficulties incentivising stakeholders to meet virtually which can set policy engagement work back.

What opportunities are there for further collaboration as a group?

As the group looked ahead to future opportunities, it was great to see such clear interest in continued collaboration, with a significant number of ideas generated at the workshop. The ideas generally broke down into the following three categories:

Maintaining a sustainable network – There was widespread support for facilitating ongoing communication across the network. Ideas centred on organising more regular virtual meetings, providing an online forum to maintain contact and share resources, and forming smaller ‘topic’ groups to share learnings on a regular basis. An online resource hub for policy engagement was also suggested, along with seminars on chosen themes.

“Creating a practice group or community that can reflect upon challenges for policy engagement in the research community is an important opportunity.” Breakout Group 4

Skills and knowledge exchange – Participants continue to value the opportunity to learn from each other’s experiences in different contexts and suggested how this could be taken a step further. Ideas ranged from co-development of tools to support policy engagement work, specific training and webinars on policy engagement for those within the network and inviting external speakers, including policymakers, to present to support learning and development. There was specific interest in sharing knowledge and skills on:

- Culture change and internal advocacy to ensure greater focus on policy engagement
- Monitoring & Evaluation frameworks for policy engagement
- Approaches to evidence synthesis and policy briefs
- Communication with policymakers
- Best practices for policy stakeholder advisory boards
- How public engagement can complement policy engagement

“How can we use consistent experiences to advocate at our own institutes?” Breakout Group 3

Collaboration on specific external projects – There was discussion of some external facing projects, including producing journal articles to contribute to the field of policy engagement, shared blogs and bulletins, and a ‘dos and don’ts of policy engagement’. Global or regional influencing was also mentioned, with the potential to engage organisations such as the WHO on specific issues of policy overlap.

“We could also work to position analytical pieces where researcher-policymaker duos reflect on an ongoing policy engagement process” Breakout Group 4

Overall, this discussion highlighted the wide range of opportunities for further collaboration. These ideas gave us plenty of food for thought about the future of the network and we will be working closely with participants to narrow down which ideas should be prioritised and explored further.

Conclusions

The two-day workshop, and the valuable discussions that took place, provided us with the following key reflections:

We have lots to learn from each other – The discussions across the two days highlighted the depth and range of experiences of policy engagement work across the network. We gained valuable insights from participants, which can help to shape future policy engagement work. The workshop highlighted the value of taking the time to share learnings across different contexts, and it is important to facilitate this moving forward.

Successes in difficult circumstances – The programmes continue to build and develop their approaches to policy engagement despite the challenging circumstances associated with COVID-19. Participants in the workshop have worked closely with policymakers to support national and local responses to the pandemic, and this has provided valuable new relationships and experiences to learn from.

Opportunities for collaboration - As we saw from the insights gathered from the discussions on both days, there was an excellent level of engagement and shared enthusiasm for continued collaboration. It is now crucial we work together to agree a plan of action moving forward which allows the network to be as valuable as possible for all members.

Virtual workshops - a way forward – While not being able to meet in-person was not ideal for the network, successfully meeting virtually for the first time highlighted the value of maintaining contact across the group. We were able to welcome representatives from across the AAPs on both days, and on day 1, had valuable contributions from Wellcome staff and external stakeholders who were able to join the discussion. The experience provided us with lots to reflect on in terms of the benefits and shortcomings of meeting virtually, and the feedback will help us ensure future virtual workshops are as inclusive as possible.

Next Steps

Thank you to everyone who contributed to making the virtual policy engagement workshop so productive. We would also like to extend special thanks to our organising committee of Katrina Lawson (OUCRU), Alex Njeru (KWTRP), Dr. Marlen Chawani (MLW) and Dr. Nantasit Luangasanatip (MORU), who were instrumental in designing the workshop. The workshop provided us with some excellent insights from the work being carried out across each of the AAPs and the India Alliance, and our attention will now turn to how we build on this moving forward.

Given the wide range of ideas proposed, as a first step we will establish a small working group with representatives from each of the programmes. The purpose of this group will be to define how the network will continue to work together and decide on which opportunities for further collaboration should be prioritised.

We will look to establish this working group before the end of the year, with a view to an initial meeting in the early part of 2021. We will ensure representatives from across the network are consulted and decisions made collaboratively.

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