
Networks for Policy Engagement

Lilongwe, 25–27 February 2019

AFIDEP

African Institute for
Development Policy
Bridging Development Research,
Policy and Practice



Wellcome’s Networks for Policy Engagement meeting took place in Lilongwe on 25–27th February 2019. It was developed and hosted in collaboration with the Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme (MLW) and the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP).

Building on the momentum from our inaugural policy engagement gathering in London in June 2018, the meeting acted as a platform for knowledge exchange between people who brought diverse experience from a range of contexts in the Global South. We spent a rich few days learning from the Evidence Informed Decision-making Network for Health Policy and Practice in Malawi (EVIDENT), AFIDEP, the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA) and from Wellcome’s global research communities.

The meeting reflected the vision of Wellcome’s new research uptake strategy: an enabling, equitable and sustainable global environment in which people work together to accelerate the transformative impact of research on health. We know that policy engagement is less effective, and less sustainable, when it is left to individuals. Institutionalising cultures of research use in policy and practice is a complex, long-term endeavour that has a greater chance of success when it is underpinned by networks that share knowledge, skills, and support.

Efforts to embed cultures of evidence use are gathering pace around the world. Following our policy engagement meeting in June 2018, we have awarded Policy Engagement

Pilot Awards to projects at four of Wellcome’s Africa and Asia Programmes and strategic initiatives: the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU), the African Health Research Institute (AHRI), the KEMRI Wellcome Trust Research Programme (KWTRP) and the India Alliance. AFIDEP and the African Academy of Sciences have recently been awarded a grant from the Hewlett Foundation to develop a training programme for ‘evidence champions’ across the African continent.

It’s an exciting time and a critical moment for committed support from the funding community to ensure that research has a timely and transformative impact on health.



Our rich discussions illuminated some important themes:

Focus on systems but don't lose sight of people

Sustained, trusted individual relationships will always be important, but decisions take place within systems. Institutional capacity should enable and complement individual capacity.

If Wellcome is serious about supporting this work, we need to incorporate an understanding of the complex and unpredictable route of evidence into policy into our funding structures, so that policy engagement can be effectively embedded into all stages of the research process.

“If changing a single policy is hard, shifting an entire culture towards evidence use is even harder.”

Rosie Oronje, AFIDEP

Evidence requires stewardship

For evidence to be valued and understood we need to go beyond the supply of evidence by supporting decision-makers to know how to assess, evaluate and operationalise research evidence.

By better understanding the needs of our audiences we can curate evidence that is both high-quality and relevant to local priorities. Bridging gaps between research and decision-making increases the chances that policy and practice will be evidence-informed.

“As researchers we get obsessed with the capacity of our research to change the policy. We should focus instead on making sure that relevant evidence is readily available at any given time”

Eliya Zulu, AFIDEP

Collaboration is key

While policy environments differ around the world, networks are important everywhere. They promote collaboration and joint communication, which is key to ensuring that decision-makers are not overwhelmed by multiple approaches.

Policy is inherently political, and a network approach mitigates the risk that engagement becomes a lobbying activity on behalf of a single source of research.

Networks need long-term, flexible support to be effective.

“Establishing institutional strategies for policy engagement facilitates health impact”

Benjamin Tsoga, KWTRP



Influencing policy is only half the task

Policy engagement work should be concerned with ensuring that changes to policy inform changes in practice.

Well-intentioned policies abound, but implementation is critical to changing lives. Greater support and investment is needed for implementation research to ensure that interventions for health are appropriate, effective and accessible.



Engagement is a continuum

Pursuing policy, public and community engagement together has the potential to more effectively incorporate public voices into decision-making, increasing trust and accountability. Including communities in the co-production of research agendas further ensures that they are reflective of and responsive to local needs. When engaging the public and communities we should consider who are considered legitimate representatives and why.

Decision-making and implementation for health is not a linear, predictable process. Nor is it solely the domain of ministries of health. If we're serious about improving health and changing lives, particularly in an age of growing NCDs, we must engage early and consistently, supporting collaboration between research institutions, diverse policy agencies, communities, professional bodies, and implementation organisations.



Everyone is thinking about monitoring and evaluation

Understanding and measuring impact is complex, but not impossible. Developing a flexible and realistic framework for what "good" looks like when it comes to policy engagement is essential so that we can capture progress towards embedding cultures of evidence use.

"You know if you've done a good job, because you get invited back"

Doyin Obubanjo, INGSA

Onwards

Thank you to everyone who contributed to making Networks for Policy Engagement such a success. We will take inspiration from the meeting as we increase our research uptake activities over the next twelve months. We look forward to pursuing this work as part of a community of practice with a shared goal to ensure that research has a timely and transformative impact on the health of those who need it most.

Read more here from AFIDEP and INGSA.