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Translating evidence into better sexual and reproductive health

How can we assess, improve and institutionalise research use?

Translating knowledge on sexual and reproductive health into better policies and practices remains a challenge. The use of knowledge translation approaches, such as (research) priority-setting workshops, policy briefs, and deliberative dialogues, may help to overcome this ‘know-do’ gap, and studies have shown that such activities often result in ‘intentions to act’ upon new information. While such intentions could be important stepping stones in the use of research, it remains unclear to what extent evidence is actually translated into action and contributes to change in policies and practice. A related challenge is that the use of knowledge is often indirect and diffuse, which makes it difficult to assess the ‘use’ of evidence.

The project sought to investigate these issues with a focus on the institutionalisation of such efforts – how can we make knowledge translation approaches more robust and responsive? In a unique consortium, we organized our own knowledge-to-action cycles in Jordan, Cameroon, and Nigeria. These cycles focused on increasing the use of evidence on sexual and reproductive health in policy and practice. These activities were carefully studied using qualitative research approaches. Key to these investigations was the use – and continued development – of a method called ‘contribution mapping’. This approach allows for mapping of the actual and concrete contributions that research makes to policy and practice, moving away from generic ‘impact’ notions.

Key messages

To research funders and researchers

The contribution mapping approach makes it possible to map the impact of research, and increases the likelihood that research findings are actually used. The approach allows researchers to better align their studies with potential key users.

To policymakers

Research findings need to be contextualized before they can contribute to policy and practice, which can be supported by deliberative dialogues. This work is generally not acknowledged by knowledge producers and users.

To everyone involved in knowledge translation

Knowledge translation as strategy works, but requires a contextualised and responsive approach in order to be sustainable. This is important to consider for organizations trying to create their knowledge translation strategies.

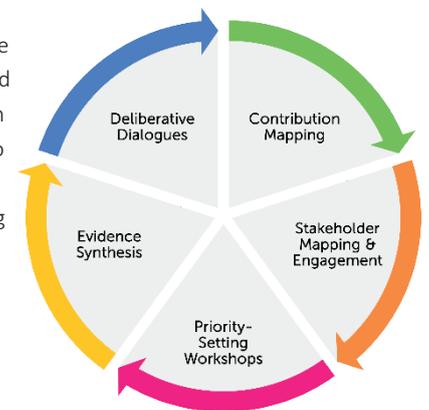
Research findings and project highlights

- **Contribution mapping** | The study shows that it is possible to map relevant indications of the use of research in specific situations. However, the use of knowledge is a diverse and ongoing process that cannot be easily measured. When mapping the use of research with the aim to enhance its impact, it seems useful to focus on direct, or 'linked', use as well as indirect, or 'unlinked', use. Linked use concerns the application of knowledge by those who were involved in, or interacted with, the research process, and those with whom they interacted. In most cases, it seems possible to construct a convincing narrative of this as linked use. Other use processes start with unknown users who pick up results from a knowledge reservoir. An additional reason for focusing on linked use is that it is more directly shaped by how research is organized and by what those involved do to promote the use of results.
- **Supporting contextualisation** | While the use of research is clearly influenced by context, our case studies illustrate that it is too simplistic to view 'context' as a list of factors that have some sort of mechanical influence on the use of knowledge. What the context of a specific translation process is, which aspects of the context matter and how the context has an impact is partly determined by those who lay out what results mean and try to mobilize knowledge claims in concrete actions. While trying to stay away from a mechanical perspective of context, it seems possible to identify some more general aspects of

context that in many cases seem to influence the translation of research results into action: 1) the alignment between the research and the aims of influential decision makers, 2) the presence of persons in relevant positions, who consider it part of their job to use research results and have the required translation skills, 3) the local pressure or urgency to improve action and to use research-based knowledge for this, 4) the presence of resources that could be mobilized to realize intended translation-in-action processes. Together, these insights and observations lead to a different picture of the role of context, which can be further elaborated on in concrete approaches and future analyses.

- **Responsive knowledge translation** | The central premise of a responsive approach to knowledge translation is that knowledge-practices-for-better-health always need to be tailored to the subject of study and the setting in which the knowledge is to be produced and used. Using existing methods may be efficient, but also results in mismatches and frustrations.

Therefore, we propose combining existing methods for knowledge translation with a responsive pragmatic approach where one constantly seeks what works best, for whom, and in which specific situation. That includes shifting between looking backward and forward in order to understand how knowledge contributes to certain practices.



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