

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THAT “EVIDENCE” IS USED IN FAMILY PLANNING/REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH POLICY, PROGRAM AND PRACTICE DECISIONMAKING?

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BACKGROUND

The renewed global focus on family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) has increased attention on implementing and scaling up programs based on scientific evidence. Although there is a rich FP/RH evidence base, there has been little analysis of whether and how evidence is used in decisionmaking for FP/RH policies, programs, and practices.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a realist literature review of databases, websites and hand searches for relevant documents from 1990 to the present on FP/RH and research utilization. We identified major insights from the literature as well as strategies to increase use of evidence in FP/RH decisionmaking.



WHAT IS “EVIDENCE” AND IS IT USED IN DECISIONMAKING?

The scientific community considers research as evidence, while decisionmakers include M&E data, program reports, policy documents, community input, and professional experience, in addition to research.

Research evidence is used in FP/RH decisionmaking, but it is only one factor. Evidence is filtered through people’s values, beliefs, and political, economic, and social considerations. Rarely are policy and program decisions based on a single study, but rather a body of evidence.

RESULTS

5 Strategies to Enhance the Contribution of Research to FP/RH Decisionmaking

1 Build Cultures of Evidence Use by:

Engaging Decisionmakers and Researchers in Evidence Generation and Use

- Strengthen mutual understanding that both decisionmaking and research are processes—each has different time frames, requirements, and incentives.
- Engage decisionmakers from all levels of the health system where decisions are made about policies, programs, or practices.
- Create a more active role for decisionmakers by involving them in study design.

Strengthening Decisionmakers’ Capacity in Using Research Evidence

- Equip decisionmakers and/or their advisors with the tools and skills to use research.

CAPACITY-BUILDING INITIATIVE

DFID supports the BCure initiative in Africa and South Asia to build policymakers’ and practitioners’ capacity to assess and use research evidence in their decisionmaking.

Using Intermediaries – Knowledge Brokers or Policy Champions – as Research Messengers

- Credibility is often based on whom decisionmakers perceive as “trustworthy,” rather than who may be the most knowledgeable about the research.

Supporting Rapid Response Mechanisms to Provide Evidence to Decisionmakers in a Timely Way

- One in Uganda, supported by a national and global network of researchers, was coordinated by hired staff in regular contact with policymakers about their evidence needs. The mechanism gave them more options and they were very satisfied with the service.

Making Research Directly Available

- Open access journals and databases make papers and data sets more accessible.

Building Knowledge Translation Platforms

- These platforms can facilitate partnerships among health stakeholders (policymakers, researchers, civil society, and media) and promote evidence use through research syntheses, deliberative dialogues, and capacity building.

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION PLATFORMS

- K4Health (K4H) website provides a platform for evidence-informed FP/RH programming.
- IBP initiative “is dedicated to strengthening the capacity of the FP community to identify, implement, and scale-up effective practices through sharing knowledge and resources.”
- Family Planning High Impact Practices (HIP) initiative provides evidence through HIP briefs on “...interventions that when scaled up and institutionalized, will maximize investments in a comprehensive FP strategy.”

Better Packaging and Communication of Findings

- Take into account timing, policy, and budget context
- Provide evidence to different stakeholder groups in understandable technical and national languages and in tailored formats.

2 Ground Research in an Understanding of Health Systems

- Health systems are complex; countries have multiple ministries and departments that implement policies and programs.
- Make sure research is timed to be useful for program planning and budgeting cycles.
- Frame recommendations so that they are clear to non-researchers and address existing MOH priorities.

3 Build Utilization into Study Protocols

- Define how stakeholders will be included in the study, what decisions it will address, and how the study team will promote utilization, including who they will link with to enhance use.

4 Expand the Range of Research Methodologies for Studying Complex Health Systems

- There is demand for multifaceted approaches and research designs beyond RCTs that examine interventions in real-world health systems.
- Studies that include information on costs and other resource needs along with evidence of positive change compared to current programming, are useful for decisionmaking.
- Health policy and systems research and implementation science are well suited for improving health programs.

5 Studying Interventions on Research Utilization

- Researchers should evaluate and share their research utilization efforts, as documentation of the process of using evidence is scarce.

CONCLUSION

This review found 5 key strategies that can increase the use of research evidence in FP/RH decisionmaking. These strategies promote increased accessibility of research evidence by making it more clear, relevant, and available to decisionmakers. The strategies foster early and ongoing engagement between researchers and decisionmakers, which builds relationships and promotes a foundational shift toward evidence use.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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