Note on What Works Global Summit

“What is evidence good for? – Absolutely nothing!”

This was one of the most tweeted quotes from the opening plenary of the What Works Global Summit, which took place in London 26-28 September 2016. I would like to agree with this quote, but make an important addition: “unless it is put in policy and practice.” The inaugural conference brought together academia, policy makers, practitioners from a wide range of sectors, varying from policing & crime to health & humanitarian aid to debate strategies to promote evidence uptake.

Key lessons learned for EHPSA:

- **Partnerships between policy makers and researchers** are critical in stimulating the flow of evidence into action. This is especially relevant for demand creation in domains (like HIV prevention for vulnerable groups) where evidence if not always welcomed and when evidence synthesis shows mixed results, which are difficult to communicate to decision makers.

- It is important to know **who is supposed to take action**. Evidence cannot tell you what decisions to make; it can only tell you what the evidence says. Decision making is done by people and not by data analysis, evidence syntheses, published articles or journals. Stakeholder mapping is a widely supported tool by experts as, if conducted properly, it can reveal who the decision makers are in which context and what strategy to deploy to motivate them to take action.

- **Evidence uptake does not take place in a vacuum**. For an evidence revolution to take place, it is rather important to firstly, define the context, secondly to genuinely understand the context, including the policy cycles and windows and thirdly to promote change in the context.

- **Engagement is not a magic bullet**; it needs dedicated human resources and funding to ensure that policy makers have ongoing conversations with research and evidence and are talking about all the pieces of the evidence puzzle, which then lays down the ground work for a political business case and the science behind it.

- **Dissemination is dead**. Well, passive dissemination is dead, meaning that publication in academic journals alone does not lead to evidence uptake. Active dissemination, which includes a focus on relationships and dialogues and builds an understanding of values and power dynamics, can have a better impact. But power needs to be assembled and used. The intentional use of power to get evidence-based ideas across in a highly polarised context is often rejected by academics because of tension with the academic principles of independence and unbiased result. This opens the door to policy entrepreneurs and knowledge brokers, which should be systematically explored as options to promote evidence into action.

- **Political will and commitment** are frequently coined as factors that influence evidence uptake. The next step amongst experts is to understand how to generate political capacity and will and ensure that it is sustained, even when elections take place and administrations change. Understanding the individuals behind the decision-making and their personality profiles and the political incentives will become increasingly important in the field of evidence uptake.

- A systematic review of the science of using science\(^1\) revealed that interventions that promote **access to evidence**, combined with **opportunity and motivation** for decision makers to access the evidence are effective in promoting evidence uptake. Furthermore, the provision of **skills** combined with **capacity** and motivation is also effective, as well as fostering change in decision making structures and processes by formalising and embedding the change at institutional and systemic level. Importantly, the review also pointed out that a passive and unstructured approach to communication, dissemination, engagement and skills does not work.

- The WWGS brought together a string of programmes with similar objectives and goals. There is a clear benefit for the donors of these programmes to **harness the experiences by systematically linking the various programmes** together as it will improve efficiency, avoid duplication and speed up learning and results.

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\(^1\) The systematic review included 36 reviews of literature of Evidence Informed Decision Making and 67 reviews of Social Sciences literature
“Where there has been success in uptake, we don’t fully understand why, we can only speculate.”

The WWGS confirmed that EHPSA has positioned itself at the cutting edge of Evidence into Action. EHPSA approach to evidence uptake in the highly complex context of HIV prevention for vulnerable groups and learning are unique and lend themselves to documentation and publication. This realisation has motivated the programme to aim to a more prominent role at the next WWGS in Cape Town in September 2017. Furthermore, in terms of “what works”, EHPSA has taken note of the importance to start an evidence synthesis process, with co-production, of its different portfolios in the Regional Research and Innovation Fund and the various commissioned Critical Reviews. The synthesis process should ideally result in an EHPSA book, political factsheets and thematic factsheets for adolescents, LGBTI and prisons.

Evidence uptake is not easy and a police representative summarised the difficulties for evidence into action as “I rather kick down doors and track down and arrest drug dealers, it’s easier than leading change for evidence informed decision making.”

Josee Koch
EHPSA policy into practice lead
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