EVIPNet Europe

Evidence-informed policy-making: lessons learned

EVIPNet Europe at the multicountry meeting in Trakai, Lithuania

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As part of an evaluation of the first five years of the Evidence-informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) Europe, the WHO Secretariat shares top tips from stakeholders and current member countries for those seeking to develop evidence-informed policy-making (EIP) at country level, using EVIPNet Europe approaches.

In recognition of the need to scale up national efforts to close the gap between research and policy, the WHO Regional Office for Europe launched EVIPNet Europe in October 2012 under the umbrella of the WHO European Health Information Initiative (EHII).[1] EVIPNet Europe's mandate is to increase member countries' capacity to develop EIP around health system priorities. Through its focus on strengthening EIP, the network further contributes to the implementation of the European policy framework Health 2020[2] and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[3].

The illustrative list below presents an overview of **11 top tips** for those seeking to develop EIP, supported by more detailed country experiences in the breakdown that follows.

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1   WHO EHII. European Health Information Initiative. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2012 (http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/european-health-information-initiative-ehii/european-health-information-initiative, accessed 28 April 2019).

2   Health 2020: a European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2013 (http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/199532/Health2020-Long.pdf?ua=1, accessed 28 April 2019).

3   United Nations General Assembly. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/Res/70/1). New York (NY): United Nations; 2015 (http://undocs.org/A/RES/70/1, accessed 28 April 2019).

11 top tips

#1. Secure top-level buy-in – seek support early and work to keep it

#2. Start with a situation analysis – but be flexible in your approach

#3. Put a sustainable team in place – with (protected) dedicated time

#4. Build the team's knowledge, skills and experience – for the benefit of all

#5. Allow plenty of time – everything takes longer than expected, but it's worth the effort

#6. Choose your evidence brief for policy (EBP) topic wisely

#7. For policy dialogues, preparation is key

#8. Timing is crucial – map out windows of opportunity

#9. Build relationships within and beyond your country

#10. Demonstrate the added value of EVIPNet and EIP

#11. Share learning and challenges regionally and internationally for mutual support

#1. Secure top-level buy-in – seek support early and work to keep it

Gaining high-level engagement and support, particularly from ministers, is vital for the success of the EVIPNet team and its activities. To achieve this, you might want to:

· identify a high-level supporter(s) who can champion EIP and demonstrate the added value of the EVIPNet approach, to help you gather commitment and make progress;
· continuously raise awareness around the importance of EIP and EVIPNet at international and national fora;
· emphasize how EVIPNet links to and supports the SDGs, Health 2020, the EIP action plan and other strategic initiatives;
· in the event of changing governments and officials, ensure, where possible, that advocacy continues and remains a high priority.

The successes relied heavily on the support of our current director and our previous director… some people from the Ministry of Health [who] are very supportive of EVIPNet and I think this is key and we wouldn't have gone so far without that.

EVIPNet Europe member

High-level stakeholder consultation to deliberate the EVIPNet situation analysis of Kazakhstan

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#2. Start with a situation analysis – but be flexible in your approach

Developing a situation analysis (analysing the EIP landscape in a country) is an important part of the EVIPNet Europe process. While it requires time and resources, it is a key tool to providing knowledge about the EIP environment, and about where a knowledge translation platform (KTP) (an organization with an official mandate to lead national knowledge translation activities) might be best placed. However, being flexible in your approach to the process is important, keeping in mind the following points.

- For some countries the situation analysis is the best place to start. For others, this may not be possible, and you may need to take a different approach initially to raise awareness of EIP. It could be that initially providing a proof of concept, and starting with EBPs on specific priority topics, may be a better first step towards demonstrating the value of EVIPNet and securing ministerial buy-in.
- Whatever your approach, you should still aim to conduct a situation analysis within the first few years of the process, as it's a key tool for institutionalizing EIP.

The assessment helps to understand where to find the political will and key actors, both of which are required for acceptance and integration of the KTP.

> *We started with a situation analysis and for me at least, [and] for my colleagues, it was very useful. We understand who the stakeholders are, what they do, what kind of communication exists between them, how they work, when they share or do not share something, or nothing. So for us it was very, very useful.*
>
> **EVIPNet Europe member**

> *One approach is to start with a summary of the situation analysis; another is to go directly into an area which is already considered problematic and a priority, like for example alcohol, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), soft drink issues, and I think that this context sensitivity which EVIPNet has shown is important here.*
>
> **EVIPNet Europe stakeholder**

#3. Put a sustainable team in place – with (protected) dedicated time

Another crucial lesson relates to how important it is to ensure that the EVIPNet team is established early on in the process. This involves working very closely with the WHO Country Office, the EVIPNet Europe Secretariat, and the Ministry of Health, among others. It is important to keep in mind the following points.

- Your team members should have expertise, and be a recognized authority, in both the worlds of research and policy.
- Your team should consist of at least two EVIPNet "champions" to help to mitigate the risks of high turnover rate.
- Contractual arrangements that support the development and sustainability of the team should ideally put in place. For example:
  - include the work in staff terms of reference (ToR) to ensure that dedicated time is allocated to EIP activities, and that this is not expected on top of regular job responsibilities;
  - where possible, include the work of EVIPNet in the **country** cooperation **strategy, country support plans** and biennial agreements of work, to ensure some funding and political commitment.
- Good collaboration and continuous information exchange, both across the network and among the national stakeholder community, are key factors in enabling engagement and cooperation.
- When establishing a temporary team to develop an EBP, it is valuable to think widely and across disciplines to ensure you have the right mix of content and technical expertise.

To create this connection, this strong connection with the EVIPNet Secretariat and WHO Country Office, and the team, is very important. Two or three people, it depends, but dedicated people, it is important, and at least for [our country] it works.

EVIPNet Europe member

#4. Build the team's knowledge, skills and experience – for the benefit of all

Once your team is in place, building the team's knowledge, skills and experience is vital. This includes:

- participating in training workshops run by the WHO Secretariat; for example, to learn about what EIP means, or how to develop EIP tools;
- cementing the newly acquired EIP skills and knowledge through learning-by-doing; for example, when your team develops and implements knowledge translation tools with guidance from the WHO Secretariat and its partners;
- serving, after being trained by the WHO Secretariat, as EIP agents within your country, so that EIP knowledge and skills can be multiplied among other stakeholders (within the health sector and beyond);
- working towards building EIP knowledge and skills among the next generation of health policy-makers and researchers, to create a society more favourable to EIP.

I think first of all they have to start with capacity-building and to spread information as widely as possible about the importance of KTP and EIP.

EVIPNet Europe member

Working together to build knowledge and share experiences:
the WHO Secretariat preparing the next EVIPNet Europe training session

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#5. Allow plenty of time – everything takes longer than expected, but it is worth the effort

Formally establishing a KTP is recognized as being a complex and lengthy process. Equally, developing technical knowledge translation tools, such as the EBP or situation analysis, takes time to ensure rigour. However, high-quality work is essential to ensuring EIPs relevance and credibility and promoting its use in health policy-making. In facing the challenges of these activities, it is important to remember the following points.

- Working to keep each other motivated and to continue pushing forward will allow changes to occur. Some of them may initially be smaller, such as changes in attitudes, mindsets and rhetoric, but these are already remarkable achievements. Policy change may, at times, take longer, as it is often an incremental process.
- Once a systematic process for developing EIP products is established in your country, the routine and experience gained will allow for economies of scale, including developing knowledge translation products in shorter timeframes.

Being a member of EVIPNet Europe provides us with visibility and a good reputation on this path to build the necessary ecosystem in the country.

EVIPNet Europe member

Collaborating on EBP at a workshop at an EVIPNet Europe multicountry meeting in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

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#6. Choose your EBP topic wisely

Selecting a topic for your first EBP (synthesizing evidence on a specific problem to inform policy) is important; to do so, think about something that is of high priority and requires urgent action, as this may make it easier to demonstrate value and gain the interest of the Ministry of Health. You may also want to consider the following questions.

- Is synthesizing all the available evidence on this topic achievable? If that is unlikely, a narrower topic may be more suitable for your first EBP.
- Are any other EVIPNet Europe member countries conducting (or have already conducted) an EBP on a similar topic? If so you may want to reach out to them for advice or mentoring about any challenges they may have encountered. It may also be possible to use published EBPs to inform yours (e.g. to compare global evidence identified).

#7. For policy dialogues, preparation is key

When preparing for a policy dialogue (a discussion of EBP findings among researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders to inform policy-making), consider the range of possible scenarios in advance, so you are aware how to proceed and have thought through how to manage the session. For example, consider the following points.

- Think about who should moderate the policy dialogue and if it might be beneficial to have two people perform this role, as it is not an easy activity.
- Bring together as comprehensive a group of participants as possible to gain the insight of all people influencing or being affected by the topic – even if potentially differing views are not always easy to handle!
- Solicit the knowledge of the stakeholders that attend the policy dialogue, and create new relationships and links, which can continue in the longer term.

> *One lesson I learned during the policy dialogue was preparation; so, the biggest and most important thing for a successful policy dialogue is preparation… I think 70% of the success of policy dialogues is preparation.*
> **EVIPNet Europe member**

> *…but if a Policy Dialogue works well and you have tangible results I think this works well because they see we have been offering support to the Minister, the Minister has a problem which has been solved, and we have been tackling it with an EIP approach and this can create a positive buzz around EIP.*
> **EVIPNet Europe stakeholder**

#8. Timing is crucial – map out windows of opportunity

Whilst harder to predict and influence, timing can play a big role in the extent to which an EBP or policy dialogue are used in policy-making. It is important to be aware of timings and look ahead for windows of opportunity. Keep an eye on when key strategies are being developed whereby you could influence policy, or when it might be better to wait.

> *So, you know you when have been working on something for some time with the expectation that in 6 months a policy proposal will be tabled, but then in 6 months a policy proposal is not tabled, or it is tabled one week after you got the idea for the task.*
>
> **EVIPNet Europe member**

#9. Build relationships within and beyond your country

An underlying premise of a knowledge network is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Developing and nurturing personal relationships is an important part of establishing a culture of EIP, creating synergetic effects and making the best use of available resources and capacities. With that in mind, it is important to:

- take time to build your network with the Ministry of Health, national institutes, academia, and other stakeholders further afield;
- use the EBP, situation analysis and policy dialogues to bring these stakeholders and experts from many different fields together – building relationships across Europe (e.g. EVIPNet country mentoring) and globally is also beneficial (e.g. learning from EVIPNet in Chile and the Lebanon K2P Center);
- see membership in EVIPNet Europe as an opportunity to make connections to like-minded people beyond your country, to learn from peers and engage in collective problem-solving across the EBP cohort, through multicountry meetings, workshops, webinars, and using Yammer.

> *EIP cannot just happen if one person is committed to it; it's about relationships and engagement so I think that is a very important impact.*
>
> **EVIPNet Europe stakeholder**

> *You need the interaction of people with each other. This is not a network where you can just sit through teaching; you have to acquire skills and use them and this is really something where you need the human interaction.*
>
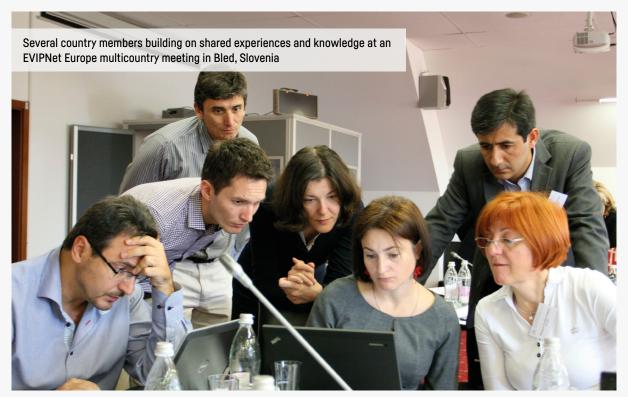> **EVIPNet Europe stakeholder**

#10. Demonstrate the added value of EVIPNet and EIP

To many people, EVIPNet, EIP and knowledge translation are complex. Often unclear terminologies and jargon can make the concept of EIP seem abstract, making it challenging to ensure high-level buy-in (see Tip #1). Demonstrating the impact and potential benefits can therefore be very useful. You can do this by:

· sharing success stories of your own and from other EVIPNet countries, from across Europe and globally;
· making widely available the tools that you've created, such as the EBP and policy dialogue report, which are great for showcasing the value of the EVIPNet approach;
· using the policy dialogue as an opportunity to increase the visibility of EVIPNet Europe to a range of high-level stakeholders.

I do think once these tools, mechanisms and platform take a hold in countries and they are seeing a benefit (and some are already seeing it) I think they will continue to do this.

EVIPNet Europe stakeholder

Several country members building on shared experiences and knowledge at an EVIPNet Europe multicountry meeting in Bled, Slovenia

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#11. Share learning and challenges regionally and internationally for mutual support

Many members have expressed that sharing knowledge and exchanging experiences with other countries is very valuable. It can be helpful to hear how other countries have struggled with the same challenges and how they have overcome them. Members have shared that:

- the EVIPNet Europe multicountry meetings are a great way for network members to regularly meet and share learning face to face;
- there are additional ways you can learn from each other and share challenges and strategies across EBP cohorts, including webinars, using Yammer, and mentoring in all directions, to help to facilitate sharing across EVIPNet Europe and globally.

Take advantage of the opportunity to proactively reach out to other countries, as everyone knows that EIP is not always an easy journey.

I think these face to face meetings, and even the webinars are very important because they give people the opportunity to exchange experience and even for people to approach and talk to the EVIPNet Secretariat.

EVIPNet Europe stakeholder

…very illuminating for me, getting perspective from other countries, in-depth experience, insight into how people (champions) from these countries see the situation, where they see the challenges and how they understand [the situation].

EVIPNet Europe member

Further reading

For more information about EVIPNet Europe visit the website or contact Tanja Kuchenmüller [kuchenmullert@who.int]

Facilitator's guide. Using research in the EVIPNet framework (2018)
→ http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2018/facilitators-guide-using-research-in-the-evipnet-framework-2018

Conceptual background and case studies. Introduction to EVIPNet Europe (2017)
→ http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2017/conceptual-background-and-case-studies-introduction-to-evipnet-europe-2017

EVIPNet Europe Situation analysis manual (2017)
→ http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2017/evipnet-europe-situation-analysis-manual-2017

EVIPNet Europe Policy dialogue preparation and facilitation checklist (2016)
→ http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2016/evipnet-europe-policy-dialogue-preparation-and-facilitation-checklist-2016

EVIPNet Europe Strategic Plan 2013–2017 (2015)
→ http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2015/evipnet-europe-strategic-plan-20132017-2015

EVIPNet Europe evaluation report
[available on request from the WHO Secretariat [euevipnet@who.int]]