

Let your research do the talking

EHP SA's approach to policy relevant research
in the context of HIV prevention

There is growing recognition in international development that research is never purely an academic exercise. We often hear that research should provide evidence that can be used to strengthen policy and programming for vulnerable populations. In other words, we are aiming for policy relevant research because this will improve the lives of citizens. Policymaking is not a straightforward process and can be a messy exercise, with domestic political agendas, norms, values, regional commitments and global movements all influencing the way policy is formulated and implemented. Evidence is often regarded as a neutral player in the game and promoted for its ability to present scientific facts and logic without favouring a specific policy outcome.

There are seven agreed principles of policy relevant research¹. We have taken these principles and tested EHP SA's research approach to see if we are producing policy relevant research on HIV prevention for MSM, prisons and adolescent girls.

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- **Research should be embedded in the policy context** – For research to be policy relevant, the choice of research methodology should be influenced by the policy context. EHP SA has learned that the policy context of HIV prevention for adolescent girls requires implementation research. It needs to show which combination of HIV prevention packages work and how they can be brought to scale. Interestingly, the policy context for MSM and prisons is different. To be relevant in this context, more formative research on size estimates, behaviour, and relative contribution to the overall HIV epidemic is needed². Embedded research means that we need to think beyond the one particular type of research, which might carry the most academic weight, and include the importance of understanding the choices and changes we wish to achieve within a certain policy context.

¹ www.politicsandideas.org/?p=3171

² Emily Hayter (2017), Policymakers, HIV and evidence; factors affecting evidence use for HIV prevention policy for key and vulnerable populations and eastern and southern Africa, commissioned and published by EHP SA



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- **Research should be internally and externally validated** – Policy relevant research needs to add value at two levels: the research organisation and the policy-makers. Adding value to the research organisation is pretty well known, but to add value to policymakers, we need to implement a process of engagement. EHPSA has learned that this engagement should start early, be carried forward continuously, and should be conducted in a responsible manner throughout the research continuum. EHPSA has encouraged researchers to develop stakeholder engagement plans and has also held technical forums that have brought policymakers and researchers together.
- **Research should respond to policy questions and objectives** – Before the research can start, there must be deliberate efforts to understand policy questions and objectives. EHPSA learned that including a policy context requirement at the proposal stage is useful. This requirement encourages research proposals to link themselves to the policy context. It also prompts researchers to express what changes are envisaged, to which the research results can contribute. This approach avoids the common mistake of including a set of “policy recommendations” at the end of the research report, thinking that this adequately covers the need for policy relevance.
- **Research should be fit for purpose and timely** – EHPSA has learned that research projects should have a robust conceptualisation phase. During this phase, the policy problem is identified and linked to the questions that the research may answer. This phase should also include a mapping of the policy opportunities (sometimes called policy windows). After this has been done, only then should the most appropriate research methods and stakeholder engagement plan be determined. Too often we have seen excellent research projects that did not take the policy cycle into account and, by the time the studies were finished, the policy cycle had moved on and the windows of opportunity shut. The message here is - be clever and invest in the conceptualisation to ensure that you avoid finding yourself banging against closed policy doors.
- **Research should be crafted with an analytical and policy perspective** – make no mistake, policy relevant research is not research that deliberately oversimplifies the intellectual content, or simply ‘dumbs down’ research. EHPSA research has been conducted by highly renowned academics, operating in well-positioned institutions, delivering high quality research. We need to understand that policy relevant research goes beyond a mere narrative description of the situation, but follows the same academic rigour and methodological excellence as any other research

Policymakers face the daunting task of considering a wide range of evidence in their policymaking processes



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project. EHPSA learned that researchers should produce policy briefs and Power-Point presentations to boost policy relevance. These knowledge products can accompany the research findings and should be short and written in plain English.

- **Research should be open to change** – policymaking is a dynamic process that changes all the time. Research operates within this space and has to be open to change as it interacts with policy processes and policymakers. EHPSA has learned that HIV prevention policymaking is particularly complex. Therefore, flexibility in research was critical for EHPSA as we had to ensure that we maintained relevance in the policy process. Due to our focus on stakeholder engagement, EHPSA has made several adaptations to its approach to ensure policy relevance and included a range of critical reviews to its main list of approved studies to fill certain knowledge gaps. Similarly, EHPSA has approved accommodations in individual studies to ensure continued and meaningful engagement with policymakers, such as adding on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) components of research when PrEP was licensed in Kenya.
- **Research should be realistic about institutional capacity and recommendations** – Let's be honest and put it out there: policymakers face a daunting task to consider a wide range of evidence in their policymaking processes. In the same way as blue-sky research is often not possible, blue-sky policymaking does not exist. In EHPSA we have received feedback that the research done by universities is seen by policymakers as "too academic and not realistic in terms of day-to-day implementation". Therefore, a policy relevant research agenda must be realistic and must produce recommendations that are feasible, doable *and* fundable.

Policy-relevant research must be realistic and produce recommendations that are feasible, doable and fundable.



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