

The utilization of systematic review evidence in formulating India's National Health Programme guidelines between 2007 and 2021

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Abstract

Evidence-informed policymaking integrates the best available evidence on programme outcomes to guide decisions at all stages of the policy process and its importance becomes more pronounced in resource-constrained settings. In this paper, we have reviewed the use of systematic review evidence in framing National Health Programme (NHP) guidelines in India. We searched official websites of the different NHPs, linked to the main website of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), in December 2020 and January 2021. NHP guideline documents with systematic review evidence were identified and information on the use of this evidence was extracted. We classified the identified systematic review evidence according to its use in the guideline documents and analysed the data to provide information on the different factors and patterns linked to the use of systematic review evidence in these documents. Systematic reviews were mostly visible in guideline documents addressing maternal and newborn health, communicable diseases and immunization. These systematic reviews were cited in the guidelines to justify the need for action, to justify recommendations for action and opportunities for local adaptation, and to highlight implementation challenges and justify implementation strategies. Guideline documents addressing implementation cited systematic reviews about the problems and policy options more often than citing systematic reviews about implementation. Systematic reviews were linked directly to support statements in few guideline documents, and sometimes the reviews were not appropriately cited. Most of the systematic reviews providing information on the nature and scale of the policy problem included Indian data. It was seen that since 2014, India has been increasingly using systematic review evidence for public health policymaking, particularly for some of its high-priority NHPs. This complements the increasing investment in research synthesis centres and procedures to support evidence-informed decision making, demonstrating the continued evolution of India's evidence policy system.

Keywords: Evidence synthesis, national health programmes, policymaking, public health, India, evidence-informed policymaking

Introduction

Evidence-informed policymaking is an approach to policy-making that involves the use of systematic and transparent research evidence (Oxman *et al.*, 2009a,b). Additionally, the use of views and opinions of stakeholders, policymakers, managers, experts and other groups providing information on contextual factors is an important component of this approach (Lomas, 2005). Evidence-informed policy-making provides clarity and gives information on the nature and extent of the problem, involves clear methods to find

and assess research evidence available on policy options, and supports implementation (Oxman *et al.*, 2009a,b).

This approach to policymaking often uses the evidence synthesized via 'systematic reviews' to answer policy relevant questions (Oxman *et al.*, 2009b). As an evidence synthesis method, systematic reviews collate all the empirical evidence available to answer a pre-specified research question by using explicit, systematic and reproducible methods (Higgins *et al.*, 2022). These reviews are summaries of the available research evidence that can be used to answer questions about 'what