

Evaluation of the impact of WHO publications

Evaluation brief

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Context

One of the constitutional responsibilities of the World Health Organization (WHO) is to provide objective and reliable information and advice in the field of human health. WHO fulfils this role in part through its information products, “the materials that are issued or made accessible to the public, or to a defined target group of the public, by the Organization for the purpose of communicating health knowledge and guidance”.

The WHO approach to managing publications has changed in recent years, starting with a significant decentralization of the publication function occurring in 2000-2001. Since that time, WHO has developed a series of mechanisms to strengthen the quality of its information products, notably in 2008 with the development of its publications policy. The policy is designed to ensure that all WHO’s information products comply with agreed standards of quality in terms of technical content, relevance and presentation; cost-effectiveness; and accessibility.

Objectives and scope the Evaluation

The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess the impact of WHO publications by considering the reach, usefulness, and use of a sample of WHO information products as estimates for their impact. Through this assessment, the evaluation reflects and draws evidence to formulate recommendations aimed at improving the impact of WHO publications.

The scope of this evaluation involved publications, either in print or electronic media, produced by WHO between 2005 and 2014. The evaluation included publications in the six WHO official languages.

Key findings and conclusions

Question 1: To what extent do WHO publications reach their intended audiences and what are their major gaps in reach and why did the latter arise?

There are mixed results in terms of the extent WHO publications reach their intended targeted audiences. There is a lack of basic monitoring information regarding the dissemination of WHO publications. There is evidence of out-dated and incomplete distribution lists when they do exist, and when quantitative information on reach does exist, it is limited in both time and scope. After consideration of

all lines of evidence and findings, the general conclusion is that WHO publication are not fully reaching their intended audience, and during planning, all segments of the audience are not fully identified. Other important conclusions in regards to reach are:

- **Dissemination:** There is room for improvement in information dissemination. Before publications are initiated, there needs to be a more upfront planning on the purpose of the product, target audience(s), matching of formats and delivery methods to target audience(s), language and translation considerations and monitoring of the reach;
- **Targeting:** WHO generally targets national programme managers in Ministries of Health with technical information. The subsequent need for that knowledge to be adapted for the needs of other levels is less consistently addressed. This is reflective of the ongoing dynamic between WHO’s “traditional” role as a technical, science-based, normative international organization, and the extensive needs of its members, including support at the implementation and operational levels. The result is that WHO products are often described as “too long, too technical” and need to be tailored to different audiences.
- **Language:** Language is a barrier to reach, although the extent to which it is a barrier is difficult to determine. It would appear that for technical publications language is less of a barrier, but language is more of a barrier for publications that are aimed at policy-makers or operational/front-line workers. That may be because many technical professionals are comfortable in the English language, whereas front-line workers are more likely to require local languages.

Question 2: What is the perceived usefulness of WHO publications?

Regarding usefulness, in general, WHO publications are perceived as being very useful. WHO is, however, facing an increasingly complex global health agenda which implies more needs, more stakeholders and more actors, without necessarily more resources. The frequent comments regarding WHO publications being either too long or too technical is an indication that there are important audiences whose needs are not being addressed by technical documents alone, and

that derivative products for other target audiences should be planned upfront and produced. There are examples of planning occurring, but it does not appear to be a systematic, programmatic approach and is not necessarily part of the upfront publication planning process. The articulation of how publications are intended to support the achievement of organizational and programme objectives has to be more explicit.

Question 3: To what extent are WHO publications used as references and as authoritative sources of information for decision-making in clinical, public health, and policy-making contexts?

Regarding use, there is evidence that some WHO publications are used by countries as authoritative sources for decision making and policy making. That is especially true of guidance documents, and authoritative publications. In general, there is room for improvement to maximize the return on investment of publications. Better publication planning around target audiences and dissemination, more active dissemination and communication, and translation were some of the common themes that were identified as a means to improve the use and maximize the impact of WHO publications.

Question 4: What is the extent of implementation of WHO's publications policy and its influence in the impact of WHO publications?

Regarding WHO publications policy, there have been significant developments in the WHO publications policy and procedure framework over the ten years of the evaluation period. Some milestone achievements include establishment of the Publishing Policy Coordination Group, the Guidelines Review Committee, and the WHO handbook for guidelines development, and most recently the guidelines on open access. One gap identified by interviewees is the need for a publication strategy that defines the role of publications in achieving organizational and programmatic goals, sets priorities, monitors compliance, and be set in a knowledge translation framework.

Overall assessment

WHO produces a number of high quality, high impact publications. There is no doubt that WHO is a credible organization and that health professionals throughout the world look to it for science-based guidance and advice. However, opportunities for improvement do exist. WHO must strive to maximize the reach and impact it can have with the significant investment it is making in publications.

There were overarching comments received throughout the evaluation that WHO publishes too much and needs to prioritize its publications. That may be true, but the number of programmes in WHO is likely to grow and with it the need to publish. The global public health landscape is growing, not shrinking. What is clear however, is that resources will remain scarce and in order to maximize impact, resource allocation decisions will need to be more effectively made.

Recommendations

The broader context in which the recommendations are placed is that resources are scarce and in order to maximize impact, resource allocation decisions will need to be made so that priority products can be adequately translated and derivative products produced as needed to meet different target audiences within a programmatic area. Those decisions should be based on a rigorous planning process conducted with the context of a publication strategy that integrates a knowledge translation framework and takes into account organizational goals and priorities as well as specific programmatic objectives.

Recommendation 1: WHO should develop a publication strategy within a broader knowledge translation framework that provides the model for programmes to properly and rigorously plan, develop, disseminate and monitor their publications.

Recommendation 2: WHO Programmes should clearly identify information needs and the target audiences for their publications.

Recommendation 3: WHO should develop a more proactive dissemination strategy.

Recommendation 4: WHO should better integrate quality assurance throughout the entire publication process, from initial planning to finalization.

Recommendation 5: WHO should develop and implement an M&E framework to provide monitoring information on the reach, uptake and impact of WHO publications.

Recommendation 6: Programme publication strategies should include translation plans that are based on programme information needs assessments

Contacts

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The evaluation report is available at the following address: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/evaluation/report-evaluation-impact-who-publications.pdf?sfvrsn=577627c5_2