

COVID-19 SERIES

The Global Evidence Commission's report provided a wake-up call for the evidence community

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been a remarkable trigger for change in research planning, conduct and synthesis. Policymakers, physicians, patients, citizens and other stakeholders felt and expressed the urgent need for high quality evidence and trustfully up-to-date evidence synthesis to guide their decisions. Further, new approaches and new methods rapidly emerged to facilitate the production, synthesis and use of evidence [1].

The Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges was convened to synthesise these developments and propose recommendations to favor the use of evidence to overcome other societal challenges. The Global Evidence Commission published its report in January 2022 in six languages (Arabic, Chinese [simplified], French, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish) [2]. The Commission was made up of 25 commissioners bringing various perspectives and experiences. They represented the various world regions and the most populous countries.

The Commission's recommends 'ways to better meet the evidence needs of decision-makers in routine times and in

future global crises.' The report takes into account the diversity of decision-makers and considers all forms of evidence. The report offers 24 recommendations, 8 of which were labeled as the 'most-important' (see Box 1). The full report is publicly available at <https://www.mcmasterforum.org/networks/evidence-commission>.

We represent some of the potential users of this report. We have reflected individually and together on the value of the report and what we see as the next steps for the evidence community.

1. Strengths of the report

The Commission identified five desirable attributes of global commissions (see Box 2). Not only does this provide a framework for the Commission's own work, but also set standards for the work of future global commissions.

The recommendations consider the various stakeholders involved in producing, synthesizing, disseminating, and using evidence. These include patients, citizens, multilateral organizations, government policymakers, evidence intermediaries, and funders. The report organization allow these different stakeholders to identify what is most relevant to them.

The aim of the Commission's report goes beyond preparing for future pandemics to address all types of societal challenges. While much of the guidance is heavily grounded in the health sector, it takes a cross-sector perspective.

The report is pragmatic and rooted in real life experiences, acknowledging the complexity of decision making, as well as the challenges of production and synthesis of evidence to inform decisions. The type of research questions considered are complex: from a single intervention to the synergic combination of several interventions. Also, the report highlights the need for systems thinking approaches, moving beyond one-off approaches.

The Commission's report emphasizes the importance of matching decision-related questions to forms of evidence.

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Box 1 The eight ‘most-important’ recommendations by the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges

- Wake-up call—Decision-makers, evidence intermediaries and impact-oriented evidence producers should recognize the scale and nature of the problem.
- Resolution by multilateral organizations—The UN, the G20 and other multilateral organizations should endorse a resolution that commits these multilateral organizations and their member states to broaden their conception of evidence, and to support evidence-related global public goods and equitably distributed capacities to produce, share and use evidence.
- Landmark report—The World Bank should dedicate an upcoming World Development Report to providing the design of the evidence architecture needed globally, regionally and nationally, including the required investments in evidence-related global public goods and in equitably distributed capacities to produce, share and use evidence.
- National (and sub-national) evidence-support systems—Every national (and sub-national) government should review their existing evidence-support system (and broader evidence infrastructure), fill the gaps both internally and through partnerships, and report publicly on their progress.
- Evidence in everyday life—Citizens should consider making decisions about their and their families’ well-being based on best evidence; spending their money on products and services that are backed by best evidence; volunteering their time and donating money to initiatives that use evidence to make decisions about what they do and how they do it; and supporting politicians who commit to using best evidence to address societal challenges and who commit (along with others) to supporting the use of evidence in everyday life.
- Dedicated evidence intermediaries—Dedicated evidence intermediaries should step forward to fill gaps left by government, provide continuity if staff turn-over in government is frequent, and leverage strong connections to global networks.
- News and social-media platforms—News and social-media platforms should build relationships with dedicated evidence intermediaries who can help leverage sources of best evidence, and with evidence producers who can help communicate evidence effectively, as well as ensure their algorithms present best evidence and combat misinformation.
- Funding—Governments, foundations and other funders should spend ‘smarter,’ and ideally more, on evidence support.

What is new?

Key findings

- The Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges was convened to propose recommendations to favor the use of evidence to overcome societal challenges similar to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What this adds to what was known?

- The Global Evidence Commission report considered a wide range of audiences, and provided clear recommendations for each.

What is the implication and what should change now?

- The report is a useful starting point to improve the use of evidence, both in routine times and in future global crises.

Box 2 Desirable attributes for global commissions

- Convened and/or funded by a formal body with the authority to act on the recommendations and/or justified by a strong rationale for the topic’s priority and timeliness for decision makers who can act on the recommendations.
- Comprised of commissioners who have been explicitly chosen to capture many elements of the diversity required to ensure that the recommendations speak to and are likely to be used by the types of decision-makers who could take action based on the recommendations.
- Enabled by systematic and transparent methods.
- Culminated in recommendations that are actionable and likely acceptable to decision-makers, and that promote equity.
- Included plans for dissemination to ensure decision-makers are reached and for monitoring and evaluation to ensure continuity of the work and the accountability of players involved.

It also suggests an interesting classification of forms of evidence considering the vantage point of decision makers (e.g., local vs. global) (expanded in section 4.4 of the report). The report then highlights four of the forms of evidence that are now available as ‘living’ evidence products (refer to section 4.7 of the report). It also suggests an interesting classification of forms of evidence considering the vantage point of decision makers (e.g., local vs. global) (see section 4.4 of the report). They distinguish local evidence i.e., knowledge arising from a given setting and global evidence i.e., knowledge arising from the world. Local evidence includes data analytics, modeling, evaluation, behavioral implementation research and qualitative research, while global evidence relies on evidence synthesis.

The report then highlights four of the forms of evidence that are now available as ‘living’ evidence products i.e., data analytics, modeling, evidence syntheses and guidelines (refer to section 4.7 of the report).

The report includes a focus on the ‘ideal’ national evidence infrastructure. In the broad social and economic policy environment in which some of us work, there is still a misconception that the research system equates only to the research impact and/or societal impact system. The report is very clear that this is not the case and lays out what infrastructure is needed to go beyond the production of academic outputs. This broader infrastructure is perhaps one of the most useful outputs in the report.

The wake-up call that evidence is not used for decision making is important because if stakeholders do not recognize the problem, recommendations for change will never be implemented. The report provides 24 such recommendations dedicated to various stakeholders. All recommendations are high-level statements, allowing for a necessary flexibility in their implementation. The recommendations focus not only on investing in and supporting an efficient evidence system, but also on the need for stakeholders to rely on evidence for their decision at all levels, and on structural changes to facilitate the use of evidence. Each recommendation is backed by descriptions of the context, concepts and/or vocabulary that underpin it.

2. Limitations of the report

Although the Commission’s report discusses best evidence, its process is expert-based to a large extent. The report does include a detailed description of the Commissioners and their work which helps us to see how this was no ordinary panel.

The report seems to consider that the research system produces only primary research, and that systematic review teams are part of ‘intermediary’ organizations. We see evidence synthesis as part of the research system [3].

Whilst the report emphasises the links between evidence synthesis and evidence users, it does not adequately

consider the possible role of evidence synthesis in primary evidence production. It is not clear, for example, how funders or producers of primary research should inform their work using existing evidence syntheses, nor feed their work into new syntheses (e.g., through sharing data, contributing to living reviews, and collaborating with synthesists and others in the evidence-use system [4]).

The report could have better emphasised building collaborations between different actors (evidence generators, evidence synthesizers and evidence translators). We know there is a major problem with trialists not sharing data with evidence synthesis teams, and synthesis teams being reluctant to share data with others [5]. Similarly, the report could have emphasised a global approach inclusive of the untapped capacity in low- and middle-income countries [6].

3. Suggested next steps

The report is a useful starting point to improve the use of evidence, both in routine times and in future global crises. The coming months and years will show to what extent the report was useful. As with all similar outputs, the report is a means to an end but not an end in itself: investment is needed to ensure it is easily accessible, used, adopted, adapted, integrated, enhanced, and complemented across the board. All of us in the evidence ecosystem need to be careful not to think the report is itself a final output.

There is a need for in-country engagement with the report, to enable local interpretation and integration of content of relevance to the immediate and longer-term needs. For this reason, some specific content might need to be adapted, perhaps in substance, but more likely in language and terminology. Having noted that the copyright prevents alteration without permission of the publisher, we encourage the Commission to ensure easy processes are in place for obtaining permission for this.

There are lessons for the evidence ecosystem—a need for greater investment and effort in production of evidence syntheses beyond health, and clearer pathways between primary research producers and research impact to answer the question for all researchers as to how their research can make a difference. We need to remain critical about the way evidence is generated and synthesised and highlight the ongoing need to question and improve the methods used. We should continue toward aspirational models of evidence synthesis that address its current shortfalls [7]. In addition, those of us who are leading evidence centers in the global south [RS and EA], are particularly keen to see more and sustained inclusion of southern partners ‘at the table’ in discussions about the future of our evidence ecosystem. The Commission has set a high bar in this regard and one we now need to maintain.

Last but not least as this important report is disseminated to various stakeholders, we need to start to see a clear

set of actions to implement the recommendations, and to monitor implementation of these recommendations. We look forward to seeing what happens next, and to playing an active role in the future of the global evidence movement.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

All authors contributed to conceptualisation, drafting, review and editing.

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