

# Lessons from the Health Evidence Network

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Lessons learned about delivering an evidence synthesis service for policy-makers



**World Health  
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR

**Europe**

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# THE HEALTH EVIDENCE NETWORK (HEN)

HEN is an information service for public health decision-makers in the WHO European Region, in action since 2003 and initiated and coordinated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe. HEN supports public health decision-makers to use the best available evidence in policy-making and aims to ensure links between evidence, health policies and improvements in public health.

HEN functions as a collaboration between teams and across offices in the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The HEN secretariat sits in the Knowledge Management, Evidence and Research for Policy-making (KER) unit at the Regional Office. KER supports Member States in strengthening capacities and systems for engaging in health research, following globally accepted health research ethics and principles, and in accessing scientific knowledge for generation and translation of evidence for the formulation of health policies and the dissemination of good policy and practice. A HEN synthesis report is jointly developed by the HEN secretariat and collaborators from WHO technical units, who seek to address a particular policy synthesis question. In this way, HEN brings together different perspectives and expertise in evidence synthesis, knowledge translation and various technical areas of work to produce award-winning policy-relevant research. A HEN report examining the role of arts in promoting health won the **Global Aesthetic Achievement of the Year** award from the Finish Society for Aesthetics and was the most downloaded publication from the website of the WHO Regional Office for Europe in 2019.<sup>1</sup> HEN also received a Highly Commended recognition in the public health category of the prestigious **British Medical Association Medical Book Awards in 2017 for a report examining the use of narrative research to examine the cultural context in the health sector.**<sup>2</sup>

HEN also falls under the umbrella of the **European Health Information Initiative (EHII).**<sup>3</sup>

In the Action plan to strengthen the use of evidence, information and research for policy-making in the WHO European Region, the publication and dissemination of HEN synthesis reports are highlighted as one of the Regional Office's actions towards "establishing and promoting national health research institutes and systems to support the setting of public health priorities".<sup>4</sup>

The HEN synthesis report series provides summaries of what is known about a policy issue, the gaps in the evidence and the areas of debate. Based on the synthesized evidence, a HEN report proposes

<sup>1</sup> Fancourt D, Finn S. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 ([https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329834?search-result=true&query=arts+and+health+HEN&scope=&rpp=10&sort\\_by=score&order=desc](https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329834?search-result=true&query=arts+and+health+HEN&scope=&rpp=10&sort_by=score&order=desc)).

<sup>2</sup> Greenhalgh T. Cultural contexts of health: the use of narrative research in the health sector. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (<https://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/2016/cultural-contexts-of-health-the-use-of-narrative-research-in-the-health-sector-2016>).

<sup>3</sup> European Health Information Initiative (EHII). Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (<https://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/european-health-information-initiative-ehii>).

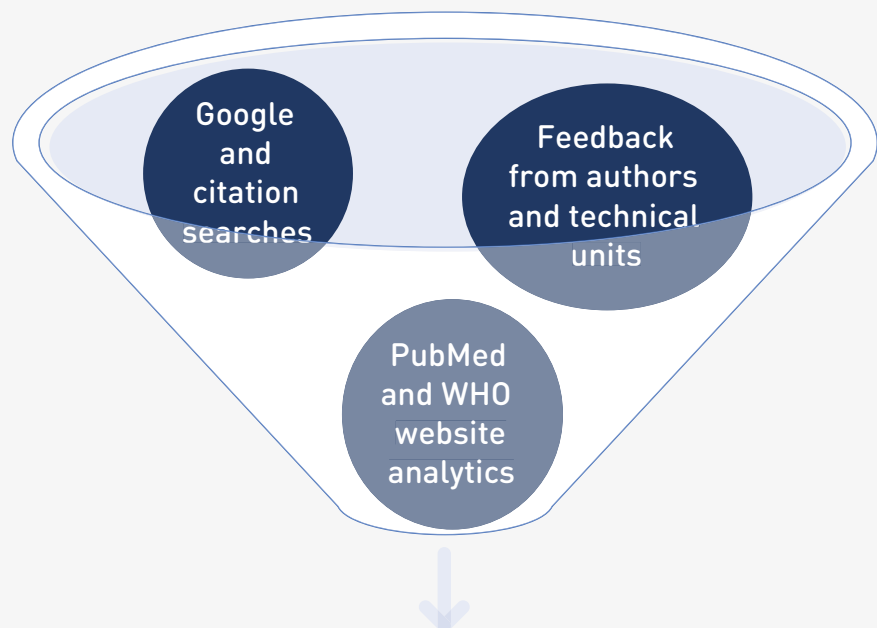
<sup>4</sup> WHO Regional Committee for Europe resolution EUR/RC66/12 on the action plan to strengthen the use of evidence, information and research for policy-making in the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (<https://www.euro.who.int/en/about-us/governance/regional-committee-for-europe/past-sessions/66th-session/documentation/working-documents/eurrc6612-action-plan-to-strengthen-the-use-of-evidence-information-and-research-for-policy-making-in-the-who-european-region>).

policy considerations for decision-makers to formulate their own recommendations and policies within their national context.

## MONITORING HEN

By early 2020, HEN had published 69 reports covering high-priority topics in the WHO European Region.<sup>5</sup> To better understand their impact on policy-making, the use and uptake of HEN syntheses published from 2016 have been monitored using a standardized mixed-method qualitative approach. The methodology draws on Google searches, citation searches and website analytics to track how HEN synthesis reports have been used and shared over the year following publication on the WHO website and in the National Center for Biotechnology Information's PubMed (NCBI Bookshelf<sup>6</sup>). The approach also involves asking authors and technical units standardized feedback questions after report publication. Both groups are asked about the HEN process and technical units are also asked about how HEN synthesis reports met their expectations and were used in policy-making. So far HEN uptake summaries have been published for 10 evidence synthesis reports (HEN 45–49 and 51–54) and these can be found on the Evidence reports home page (see footnote 5) (Fig. 1).

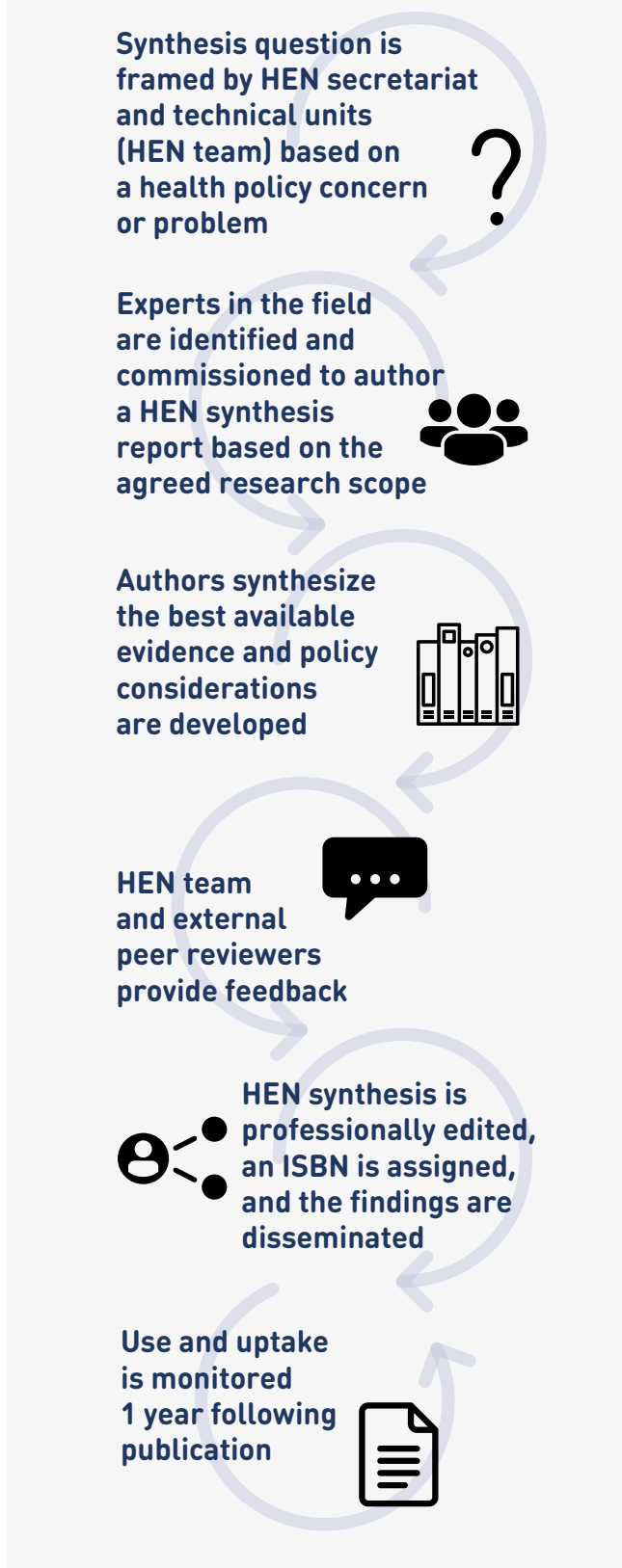
**Fig. 1. HEN uptake tracking process**



<sup>5</sup> Evidence reports. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020 (<https://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/evidence-informed-policy-making/publications/evidence-reports/evidence-reports>).

<sup>6</sup> WHO Health Evidence Network Synthesis Reports. NCBI Bookshelf (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK379477/>).

**Fig. 2. Stages of HEN synthesis development**



This document draws on findings from the HEN monitoring processes, including detailed feedback from 10 authors and eight technical unit collaborators on 16 reports, to identify valuable lessons for carrying out evidence syntheses effectively and efficiently in order to meet the needs of policy-makers and promote evidence uptake.

## LESSONS LEARNED RELATING TO EACH STAGE OF HEN SYNTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

HEN synthesis reports have contributed to the development of technical guidelines, strategies and research agendas; they have served as a foundation for technical assistance and capacity-building, and they have contributed to relationship building and opportunities for collaboration with other stakeholders.

HEN evidence syntheses follow a standardized process from concept note development to evaluating the published report's uptake. A HEN report should take nine months to produce from the initial development of the concept note through to publication. HEN's standard operating procedure outlines each stage of the evidence synthesis process for members of the HEN secretariat and dedicated members of the technical unit teams who support HEN coordination. These stages are outlined in Fig. 2 and discussed below, together with information about how many months prior to publication each activity generally takes place. Valuable lessons learned are linked to the relevant stages of the HEN process to support the design and delivery of a completed report to facilitate evidence-informed policy-making.

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### Nine months prior to publication

#### HEN synthesis conceptualization

- Identification of evidence synthesis opportunities by HEN secretariat and technical unit collaborators and refinement of the policy question
- Joint concept note development (synthesis question, scope, timeline and dissemination plan) and terms of reference
- Identification of experts in the field who can act as authors or peer reviewers

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### Eight months prior to publication

#### Contract and project scope establishment

- Agreements of performance of work for authors, peer reviewers, editors, designer and translator
- Initiation meeting with technical units and authors coordinated by the HEN secretariat to share initial technical guidance and resources for writing evidence synthesis reports with authors



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#### **Lesson 1. Consensus between authors and HEN team about the project scope, methods and limitations should occur early in the process**

Technical units and the authors of an evidence synthesis should come to a clear understanding early on about the project scope, question, methods and limitations. Expectations and roles should also be mutually agreed from the start, ensuring that the commitment of the author team aligns with the technical unit's expectations. For example, this can be achieved by requesting an outline of how the research will be approached prior to contracting authors. Key aspects of a dissemination plan should also be agreed from the start, including a publication date and intended audience for the research.

The HEN secretariat, technical units and author teams should meet early in the report development process. Reading the documents that informed and motivated the technical units to commission the report could also allow authors to link the report to key policy milestones.

An additional component for ensuring consensus is to involve any team members from the start in order to ensure that everyone involved is fully briefed on the process and expectations.



## Lesson 2. A comprehensive and appropriate methodology, incorporating grey literature, is required for a scientifically rigorous evidence synthesis

An evidence synthesis should use the methods and evidence most relevant to the topic at hand. HEN report 50 offers guidance for choosing these and for creating the report.<sup>7</sup>

The HEN team ensures that methods are suitable to the topic being researched and offer flexibility for research design. For example, most HEN authors use a traditional scoping or systematic review methodology, including a comprehensive search strategy, iterative coding and a data validation process. HEN syntheses also include grey literature, which is valuable for ensuring comprehensiveness. However, according to one author, rigour in a topic such as narrative research is “not primarily about accuracy of measurement but about carefully capturing, sensitively interpreting and faithfully summarizing the perspectives of particular people and groups”.

When little evidence is available, requesting feedback and recommendations for literature from researchers and policy-makers in the field can also ensure a comprehensive methodology. For example, a HEN synthesis report on the topic of health literacy in the WHO European Region included feedback from a WHO EHII health literacy measurement group, attended by researchers and policy-makers from 19 Member States, discussing accuracy, usefulness and user-friendliness.

### Four to seven months prior to publication

#### Internal WHO reviews of research methods and first draft

- HEN team reviews the author-developed search strategy and data extraction plan, then the first HEN synthesis draft to ensure sound research methods and consistency with HEN standards
- Technical unit team reviews and contributes subject-specific expertise
- A HEN writing workshop is held, if possible, after the first draft is developed, or virtual training and support is provided to shape the findings and policy considerations

<sup>7</sup>Eklund Karlsson L, Takahashi R. A resource for developing an evidence synthesis report for policy-making. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2017 ([https://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/347930/HEN50-Web.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/347930/HEN50-Web.pdf)).

<sup>8</sup>Rowlands G, Trezona A, Russell S, Lopatina M, Pelikan J, Paasche-Orlow M et al. What is the evidence on the methods, frameworks and indicators used to evaluate health literacy policies,

programmes and interventions at the regional, national and organizational levels? Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 ([\[the-evidence-on-the-methods,-frameworks-and-indicators-used-to-evaluate-health-literacy-policies,-programmes-and-interventions-at-the-regional-national-and-organizational-levels-2019\]\(https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/what-is-the-evidence-on-the-methods,-frameworks-and-indicators-used-to-evaluate-health-literacy-policies,-programmes-and-interventions-at-the-regional-national-and-organizational-levels-2019\)\).](https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/what-is-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)





### **Lesson 3. Policy considerations should be relevant and derived from the evidence**

Policy considerations should be concise and programme relevant, while clearly derived from the evidence. Authors, technical units and the HEN secretariat should jointly determine which policy considerations are supported by the evidence, and which are most relevant to policy-makers' needs and the WHO European Region context.



### **Lesson 4. Capacity-building early on can ensure that authors can write for a policy-maker audience and derive policy considerations from the research**

Feedback from HEN authors and technical unit members indicated that additional guidance and training for writing an evidence synthesis for policy-makers and developing policy considerations could improve the HEN synthesis process and output. This could include technical guidance with concrete examples of how to turn research findings into policy considerations.

Input from the technical units, who best represent the needs of the end-user, is also valuable in ensuring that the findings and policy considerations are relevant to policy-makers' needs (and the work of the technical unit).

According to authors of completed HEN synthesis reports, the evidence synthesis development process is an opportunity for capacity-building. Some authors recommended having a HEN synthesis writing workshop early in the drafting process.



Launch event of HEN 67 on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being, in Helsinki, Finland, November 2019

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### Three to four months prior to publication

#### Revisions and external review

- Authors submit a second draft of the HEN synthesis
- Second draft reviewed again internally
- Second draft reviewed by external peer reviewers (academic content experts and policy-oriented end-users) in a double-blind peer review process identified by the HEN secretariat
- A HEN writing workshop is held, if possible, after the first draft is developed, or virtual training and support is provided to shape the findings and policy considerations



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### Lesson 5. A team approach contributes to a scientifically rigorous publication process

A team approach (authors, technical units, HEN coordinating team and external reviewers) promotes scientific rigour by ensuring reviews from several actors with different perspectives. Feedback processes can be streamlined by briefing reviewers of the limitations of the research and reconciling conflicting comments.

Author team diversity (expertise, country of origin and language) also contributes to a better grasp of the evidence. However, it may pose difficulties for working cohesively, particularly for authors who have not previously worked together. In these cases, additional involvement from the coordinating team is valued.

HEN synthesis authors have also sought out a platform to stay updated about HEN activities and contribute to other reports or WHO initiatives. To meet this request, and further the value of past authors to future HEN teams, HEN could coordinate a digital platform for authors and peer reviewers to provide input on upcoming HEN syntheses. This would strengthen the team approach to developing evidence syntheses by relying on one of HEN's greatest resources – the experts it engages.

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### One to two months prior to publication

#### Final internal reviews, editing and publication processes

- HEN secretariat and technical units review the final drafts and reconcile any additional feedback
- A dissemination plan is revisited and finalized with the technical units
- Technical editing of the report is carried out, followed by proofreading and layout design
- Following WHO clearances and ISBN assignment, the report is published on the WHO website, the NCBI Bookshelf (see footnote 6) and in print
- Dissemination helps to ensure that policy-makers and other potential users know about the report and use it
- HEN syntheses may be translated in time for initial report publication or after
- A HEN writing workshop is held, if possible, after the first draft is developed, or virtual training and support is provided to shape the findings and policy considerations



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### **Lesson 6. Evidence syntheses need to be written in a policy-friendly manner**

The document structure, style and language should help the reader to understand the topic and cross-reference points. According to a HEN technical unit collaborator, if a report is written in a way that does not effectively communicate to a policy-making audience, it creates “a disconnect between the document and people in the field who will be using it”.

Internal and external reviews and technical editing are key components for condensing large amounts of fragmented research into a short, digestible form. Adherence to guidance about word counts and author training for writing for policy-makers is also helpful for this aim.



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### **Lesson 7. Consistency is key to delivering HEN syntheses as a series**

Consistency between HEN reports allows for a well-known brand and reputation, which gives the publications weight. A coordinating team was seen to facilitate the production of evidence synthesis reports that follow a similar format, level of detail and depth of analysis. Technical editing and proofreading were also valuable aspects of the HEN process that helped to ensure consistency between reports.

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## **Immediately following publication and up to one year later**

### **HEN monitoring process**

- Authors and technical unit collaborators are asked for feedback on the HEN process shortly after publication
- One year following publication, feedback is requested from technical unit collaborators about how the HEN synthesis contributed to evidence-informed policy-making
- Citation tracking takes place one year after publication



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### **Lesson 8. Dissemination extends the reach of a HEN synthesis report**

Dissemination is a crucial component of ensuring that an evidence synthesis report is used by policy-makers. This requires advance planning and discussion between the HEN secretariat and technical units.

Tracking the use and uptake of 17 HEN syntheses has shown that those with a more involved dissemination process, for example where a launch event has been held or a press release has been developed, have been cited more times and by a wider variety of sources. While this does not in itself directly indicate that reports which were shared more widely had a greater policy impact, it highlights that dissemination is key to increasing engagement with the research.



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### **Lesson 9. Assessing publication take-up can be used to begin identifying the impact of the HEN report**

The process of monitoring the use and uptake of HEN synthesis reports has facilitated tracking of how they have been disseminated, who has picked them up and cited them, and how they have contributed to evidence-informed policy-making, for example by contributing to regional action plans.

Although HEN currently monitors use and uptake of evidence syntheses up to one-year post-publication, it has been recommended that this process be extended to two years to account for the delay between publication and evidence take-up.



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### **Lesson 10. A coordinating team is important for facilitating communication, adhering to timelines and ensuring consistency in HEN synthesis development**

Feedback from authors and technical unit collaborators valued the dedicated resources and technical expertise of the HEN secretariat, for example guidance in developing the research methodology and maintaining consistency across the HEN series.

Authors and technical unit collaborators reported that the HEN secretariat's responsiveness in coordinating processes among actors, keeping everyone to strict timelines and organizing revisions and comments contributed to a smooth process at every step of HEN synthesis development.

## **The WHO Regional Office for Europe**

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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