
planning, resource coordination and performance monitoring department
general management
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Executive Summary

A review of WHO’s external expert advisory bodies was conducted in coordination with the Core Functions Monitoring Plan. The objectives of the review were threefold:

- Determine the utility of WHO Expert Advisory Panels beyond meeting in formal committees;
- Identify to the extent possible the breadth of Study and Scientific Groups and other advisory bodies commissioned by WHO Headquarters; and
- Develop recommendations for further inquiry and methods to improve the legitimacy, quality and efficiency of all such groups and their products.

Information concerning the existence, utility, recruitment of experts and publications was sought from the secretariats of the various bodies through email inquiries, face-to-face meetings, department website searches, meeting calendars and records maintained by the Office of the Legal Counsel (LEG).

WHO has two formal advisory body mechanisms as described in the WHO Basic Documents: Expert Advisory Panels and Scientific and Study Groups. The former is the highest ranking in terms of credibility to the Organizations. In practice, there is a third category of ‘other’ advisory bodies which by far out number that of the formal Expert Advisory Panels. Although these bodies are not defined within the Basic Documents, they provide valuable input to the technical departments of the Organization and along with the more formal mechanisms, account for a significant number of WHO publications.

Documents stemming from or contributing to the meetings of these advisory bodies are often published with the WHO logo, yet there is no systematic quality assurance mechanism in place to ensure that the work is consistent with the high standards expected of and by WHO. Only documents that have been approved by the World Health Assembly are considered to be official positions of the Organization. All others should carry a disclaimer stating that WHO does not necessarily endorse the content of the document, yet it is not always easily discernable to the reader that this is the case.

In accordance with the objectives of this review and its findings, the following recommendations are being made to the administration:

- Develop and ensure consistent use of guidelines and protocols for the development of evidence-based policies.
- Develop a protocol for the recruitment, selection and tenure of external experts.
- Ensure that staff responsible for publishing WHO documents receive appropriate publishing-related training.
- Develop templates and/or guidelines for tools and/or products common to all advisory groups.
- Disestablish inactive Expert Advisory Panels.
- Develop a database of all advisory bodies and planned publications.
- Encourage departments to frequently review the validity, quality and efficiency of their specific advisory bodies.
A. Background

Purpose of Review

WHO counts on advice from external experts as a way of maintaining the credibility of reports and guidelines, and ensuring consistency with current research and academic thinking. External expert advice is obtained primarily in three ways: i) Expert Advisory Panels and their Expert Committees; ii) Study and Scientific Groups; and, iii) other scientific and technical meetings. The former are defined formally in the WHO Basic documents, while the latter category includes advisory groups, committees, task forces, working groups, etc. and may be standing or ad hoc.

The Director-General (DG) is required to submit a report summarizing meetings of expert committees, inclusive of their conclusions and recommendations to the Executive Board, annexing the respective committee reports. The DG has the authority to deliver reports of Expert Committees directly to the Health Assembly if s/he feels there is information requiring immediate attention of the Assembly. The DG is required to submit reports of Study and Scientific Groups to the Advisory Committee on Health Research (an Expert Committee).

The DG may publish or authorize the publication of any:

- a. document prepared for an Expert Committee, Study or Scientific Group, and/or other expert advisory bodies
- b. report of an Expert Committee, Study or Scientific group, and/or other expert advisory bodies
- c. policies or reports developed by the secretariat

While there are recommendations for regional and geographical balance of experts for Expert Advisory Panels/Expert Committees and Study/Scientific Groups, there is no formal guidance on the selection of individual experts nor on ensuring or evaluating quality of work. This has consequently brought into question the credibility of the advice WHO relies on for development of policy.

The goal of this review is to maximize the quality of advice received and ensure the highest legitimacy (e.g. who are the experts, what is/is not WHO policy, are they the 'right' policies), quality (e.g. process of development, use of evidence, peer review) and efficiency (e.g., production costs, timeliness) of publications, including clarity on what is and what is not an official WHO policy.

A mapping of WHO advisory bodies was undertaken in September 2006 to meet three objectives:

- Determine the full utility of WHO Expert Advisory Panels;
- Identify to the extent possible the range of subjects covered by Study and Scientific Groups and other advisory bodies commissioned by WHO Headquarters; and
- Develop recommendations for further inquiry and methods to improve the legitimacy, quality and efficiency of all such groups and their products.

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www.who.int/governance
WHO’s formal expert advisory structures
The 4th WHA created Expert Advisory Panels, which are essentially reserves of experts intended to provide expertise to the entire Organization as called upon. There is no requirement for WHO to convene an Expert Committee from an Expert Advisory Panel; it is done as needed. Experts are appointed by the DG and approved by Member States. Experts serve as individuals, not as representatives of their employer and/or government. The DG annually submits to the Executive Board a summary report of convened Expert Committees. All reports of Expert Committees and the membership statistics of Expert Advisory Panels are annexed.

Study and Scientific Groups were approved by the 62nd Executive Board to allow for the convening of external experts under circumstances or timing that make the creation or use of an Expert Advisory Panel unfeasible. Like the Expert Advisory Panels, experts are appointed by the DG but reports are submitted to the Advisory Committee on Health Research (ACHR) in lieu of the Executive Board.

Conducting the Review
To accomplish a general mapping of the breadth of mechanisms used to secure external advice, several steps were taken:

- The secretariats of Expert Advisory Panels were contacted to assess the status of their panels and ways in which the experts provide support to technical units in addition to a formally convened Expert Committees.
- WHO Headquarters’ directors were contacted requesting information on any external groups/committees.
- Administrative assistants were contacted to inquire on travel schedules pertinent to meetings.
- Meeting and travel calendars, department websites, and documents submitted to LEG for clearance were all reviewed to identify advisory bodies.
- Interviews with the responsible staff of both Expert Advisory Panels and other groups were conducted, as feasible, to learn more information about the workings of the groups.

B. Findings
This review of WHO’s various expert advisory bodies revealed that outside of the regulations set out in the WHO Basic Documents, there is no standardization in the organizing or utilization of such groups. Even with the Expert Advisory Panels, for which regulations exist to ensure the regional representation and gender balance of experts, there is a wide variety in how experts are used, from serving on formal Expert Committees to individual consultations on technical matters by e-mail. Across all groups, experts are most typically identified through professional networks, including consultation with regional offices. Occasionally open calls for experts occur as well as groups nominating new members themselves.

Expert Advisory Panels and Expert Committees
Secretariats of twenty of the fifty-three Expert Advisory Panels responded to our request for information. Of those who responded, it was remarked that five panels could be

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2 Consent is sought from the government of the citizenry of the proposed expert, which has the right to deny a nomination. Active approval is not necessary, non-response is considered implied consent.

3 Annex 1: List of WHO Expert Advisory Panels, with comments
disestablished without consequence and one other is only renewing membership out of respect to the elder experts, but has no plans for future activity. Of the remainder, all use their experts at least in informal manners, such as individual consultation, manuscript review, or meeting attendance. Five remarked on the expense involved with holding Committee meetings, including the difficulties associated with greater reliance on voluntary contributions and the potential conflict of interest in convening an Expert Committee with specified funds. It was stated, however, that the expertise and support gained through the pro bono work of the experts could not be afforded by departments otherwise.

**Study and Scientific Groups and others**

There is no precise definition of a Study and Scientific Group in the WHO Basic Documents. Consequently, it is not easily discernable which groups fall under the category of Study or Scientific Group. Over 100 expert groups were identified during this exercise; typically, the secretariat of the group did not know whether or not it was officially a Study or Scientific Group. The groups ranged from being ad hoc meetings to regularly organized affairs. As a whole, these groups advise departments in both technical matters, such as development of guidelines, protocols or other technical publications, and in administrative matters such as operational and strategic planning for the department. Sometimes members of Expert Advisory Panels also serve on these groups, but they are not exclusively organized from Expert Advisory Panels.

**Publications**

These expert advisory bodies as a whole are the primary source for WHO guidelines and technical policies, but there is limited protocol, guidance or oversight for their operations or the quality of the products produced. A study conducted earlier this year revealed that the majority of guidelines produced did not follow the procedures set forth in the Guidelines for WHO Guidelines nor were they heavily reliant on systematic reviews of evidence.

Endorsement by the Organization is not always apparent in documents carrying the WHO logo. While most any advisory group document published through the Secretariat bears the WHO logo, only the World Health Assembly has the authority to issue official positions or policies of the Organization. All other reports or documents should carry a disclaimer stating the contrary, yet this does not always happen. By nature of documents being published with the WHO logo and the ease of electronic publishing via the WHO website, the unofficial have the perception of being official. This potentially limits WHO’s credibility as a technical authority, particularly in instances where contradictory documents carry the WHO logo.

**C. Conclusions**

External expert advisory bodies, regardless of their formality, serve an important and ongoing function to the Organization. For a respective department, the groups provide

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4 Acute Diarrhoeal Diseases and Other Enteric Infections; Development of Human Resources for Health; Human Reproduction; Maternal and Child Health; and, Respiratory Infections

5 Acute Bacterial Diseases

6 Annex 2: List of WHO Study and Scientific Groups

7 Annex 3: Guidelines for WHO Guidelines

8 Annex 4: Oxman A. The Use of Evidence in WHO Recommendations.

9 WHO Constitution, Articles 18, 19 and 21.
needed advice and direction. As a whole, however, the lack of a tracking mechanism for the convening and activity of non-Expert Advisory Panel groups, the absence of protocol for the selection of experts, the lack of independent review processes for publications and a general gap in any standard criterion on which to measure success all risk the credibility of the Organization. This is not to say that WHO should not rely on external expert advice or that the advice it is currently receiving is unsatisfactory. To the contrary, external and independent expert advice is critical to maintaining WHO’s knowledge base. Putting in place quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that the advice is garnered, synthesized and published in the most appropriate ways promotes evidence-based decision making and will enhance the credibility of WHO as technical leader in global public health.

Recommendations

- **Develop and ensure consistent use of guidelines and protocols for the development of evidence-based policies.** WHO should base all of its technical recommendations and policies on the latest available evidence. Three internal working groups, the Guidelines Review Committee (GRC), the Research Strategy Working Group (RSWG) and the Publishing Policy Review Group (PPRG) (all described below) should work together to develop mechanisms and/or protocols to assist groups developing policies on WHO’s behalf. Options could include systematic WHO peer review and/or a central clearance system for all publications.

- **Develop a protocol for the recruitment, selection and tenure of external experts.** This action will better ensure that the experts recruited are of the highest caliber. Any such protocol must be flexible enough to meet the needs of both standing and ad hoc committees, yet robust enough to ensure quality and diverse representation, geographically and ideologically. Options may include open call for experts, term-limits, reserved space for young experts, etc.

- **Conduct staff training in WHO publishing protocol.** Adequate planning for document production could bring down the time and money spent on publishing. Training should be mandatory for staff responsible for WHO publications. Options could include lunch-time seminars, computer-based modules and department-specific trainings.

- **Develop templates and/or guidelines common to all advisory groups.** Templates for common elements would help ensure advisory bodies meet minimum criterion for success. Examples include preliminary pages of publications, Terms of References, conflict of interest declarations.

- **Dissolve inactive Expert Advisory Panels.** Although panel experts are unpaid, there are administrative and human resource costs associated with maintaining inactive Expert Advisory Panels. Criteria and guidelines for disestablishing a Panel should be developed and implemented to save these costs and reveal the current needs of the Organization.

- **Develop a database of all advisory bodies and planned publications.** A mechanism to track the various advisory bodies is the first step in quality assurance of the advice received by WHO. The current WHO Executive Clearance Form and the Document Planning Clearance Form, used to secure senior management approval

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10 Acute Bacterial Diseases; Acute Diarrhoeal Diseases and Other Enteric Infections; Development of Human Resources for Health; Human Reproduction; Maternal and Child Health; and, Respiratory Infections

11 Annex 5: WHO Executive Clearance Form

12 Annex 6: WHO Planning Clearance Form - Health Information Product
of external meetings and publications, respectively, already provides a basis for such a database.

**Opportunities to act on the recommendations**

There are several opportunities to capitalize on in implementing the above recommendations. The GRC, the RSWG, and the PPRG each have their own role in contributing to the legitimacy, quality and efficiency of WHO’s work; between them there are synergies that should be capitalized upon.

- **Guidelines Review Committee (GRC).**[^13] This internal committee is being developed in response to the Executive Board’s call for the DG to "review the use of research evidence for major policy decisions and recommendations within WHO" and "to establish standard procedures and mechanisms for the conduct of research and use of findings by the Organization…". In commencing the work of the GRC, attention should be paid to role of external experts and synergies made based upon the findings and recommendations of this review.

- **WHO Research Strategy Working Group.** As a follow-up to the Position Paper on WHO’s Role and Responsibilities in Health Research,[^15] the Secretariat is developing the first WHO Research Strategy. It is planned be presented to the 62nd WHA with endorsement from the ACHR. Beyond WHO’s role in conducting and supporting research, the strategy will address WHO’s practices in guideline development, setting norms and standards, performing systematic reviews, etc. WHO’s experts should be tapped during the development of the strategy and included in it should be the role of experts and expert advisory bodies.

- **WHO Publishing Policy Review Group (PPRG).**[^16] The PPRG was established in December 2004 at the request of the late DG to review the effectiveness of WHO’s current publishing policies and to develop Organization-wide policies for publishing in all media (print, electronic, web and audiovisual). Proposed policies covering copyright, authorship, minimum criteria for health information products have been presented to the Acting DG.

- **FAO/WHO Framework for the Provision of Scientific Advice on Food Safety and Nutrition.**[^17] This document is a response to a request raised in the Codex Alimentarius Commission for "a review of the status and procedures of the expert bodies in order to improve the quality, quantity and timeliness of scientific advice." The purpose of the framework is to enhance the outcomes and transparency of scientific advice generated by FAO and WHO. In its current form it is not applicable across the Organization, but could serve as a useful tool in the development of an Organization-wide framework.

- **Review of Publication Policies and Procedures.**[^18] This 1999 review includes guidance on the steps in the production cycle of published material. While the WHO structure the document refers to is outdated, these steps maintain relevance and could be used as a basis from which to develop an in-house training course.

[^13]: Annex 7: WHO Guidelines Review Committee - Concept Note
[^14]: EB117.R6
[^15]: Annex 8: A Position Paper on WHO's Role and Responsibilities in Health Research (ACHR45/05.16Rev.1)
[^16]: https://intranet.who.int/homes/whp/pprg/index.shtml
[^18]: Annex 10: Review of Publication Policies and Procedures at WHO Headquarters
D. List of Annexes

- Annex 1: List of WHO Expert Advisory Panels, with comments
- Annex 2: List of WHO Study and Scientific Groups
- Annex 3: Guidelines for WHO Guidelines (available only on CD ROM)
- Annex 4: Oxman A. The Use of Evidence in WHO Recommendations (available only on CD ROM)
- Annex 5: WHO Executive Clearance Form
- Annex 6: WHO Planning Clearance Form - Health Information Product
- Annex 7: WHO Guidelines Review Committee - Concept Note
- Annex 8: A Position Paper on WHO's Role and Responsibilities in Health Research (ACHR45/05.16Rev.1) (available only on CD ROM)
- Annex 9: FAO/WHO Framework for the Provision of Scientific Advice on Food Safety and Nutrition (available only on CD ROM)
- Annex 10: Review of Publication Policies and Procedures at WHO Headquarters (available only on CD ROM)