

Technical report: executive summary

There is an increasing amount of evidence in the area of diet shift, including many academic studies on the problems caused by current diets, and on interventions which could provide solutions. Yet a significant proportion of this evidence is not reflected in policy or practice. This project investigates the current evidence on evidence use (including evidence generation, translation and adoption) in policy and practice, in order to understand how it happens, and how the process can be improved, in order to ensure the available evidence is reflected in action.

This was accomplished using a combination of qualitative research methods, including scoping and rapid evidence literature reviews, interviews, workshops, follow-up interviews and feedback sessions. The project included participation from 30 individuals who work as either food policymakers in national or local government, or decision-making practitioners in a food retail, small and medium enterprise (SME), nonprofit, third sector or nongovernmental (NGO) organisation.

The research process was as follows:

1. Scoping review of evidence use literature to determine project context and boundaries while developing a conceptual framework for the project;
2. Application of general evidence use literature to diet shift evidence ecosystem;
3. Definition of project scope, assumptions and boundaries;
4. Rapid review of evidence use literature to identify general boundaries to and enablers for evidence use in policy and practice;
5. Primary research recruitment and planning;
6. Elite interviews with food policymakers and retailers;
7. Workshops with decision-making food policymakers and practitioners;
8. Follow-up interviews with additional decision-making food policymakers and practitioners;
9. Feedback sessions to collaboratively revise the primary output of the Optimising Evidence project, the practitioner toolkit 'Guiding Principles, Promoting healthy and sustainable diets: How to effectively generate and translate evidence', referred to as 'Guiding Principles'

As a result of this process, the researchers identified a series of barriers to and enablers for evidence use, tailored to address better evidence generation and better evidence translation for policy and practice. These key enablers include:

- practice of interdisciplinary food systems approaches;
- greater co-creative and inclusive approaches to develop genuine partnerships with stakeholders;
- greater understanding of the policy process, actors and politics;
- credibility of research design and data;
- enhancement of evidence presentation and communication; and
- enhanced skills development for both evidence generators and users

These enablers are further broken down into eight different strategies in the Guiding Principles document. Most existing literature on evidence use applies to policy only; there is little evidence for evidence optimisation for on-the-ground practitioners, especially food practitioners specifically.

This project provides insight, through the primary research, into evidence use needs and preferences for commercial and third sector practitioners actively working in the food system. There is opportunity for future research in the area of effective diet shift evidence use to determine the effectiveness of these different enablers and understanding the impact of evidence use on shifting toward healthy and sustainable diets.