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Session Brief

A 'lived experience of food environments'
international decisionmakers panel:
Enhancing policy impact through improved
research evidence translation and
communication

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Food environments – the interface between people and the food system – play a critical role in shaping what we eat^{1,2,3,4,5}. Yet, they typically fail to make nutritious food a reality for most people. Consequently, to improve diets and nutrition-related health outcomes, there is an urgent need for policies and related actions to radically improve these food environments⁶. A critical source of research evidence to inform the design and evaluation of such policies is people's 'lived experience', or rather, how people experience the food environments around them, and the actions taken to change them, in the context of their everyday lives^{7,8}.

To enhance the policy impact of such (primarily qualitative) evidence, an international 'Community of Practice on the Lived Experience of Food Environments' (CoP) was established by the [Centre for Food Policy](#) (City, University of London) in partnership with the [UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems](#) (Montpellier, France). In February 2021, an online session was convened by the CoP and the [Environmental Policy Group](#) (Wageningen University) with an international panel of policymakers and a group of like-minded academics and practitioners, to consider approaches to better translate and communicate such evidence to policymakers and in so doing, how best to increase the chances of our desired impact/s (see Fig.1).

Decisionmakers on the session panel represented multiple levels of government from South Africa, Ghana, and Australia. Their valuable input, specifically in relation to translating and communicating evidence from lived experience of food environment research are summarised below.

Key insights regarding the role and nature of research evidence in the policy making process

The decisionmaker panellists made clear that within their everyday political reality, research evidence is only one aspect of the policy making process. However, evidence remains a critical part of the policy making, implementation, and evaluation processes. The following key points were made regarding the type of research evidence that is useful to decisionmakers and their role in its translation and communication: Evidence must be contextually relevant, timely, and actionable (i.e., reflect a practicality).

- Evidence must meet the needs of those to whom it is being communicated (decisionmakers/end-users/beneficiaries), as well as the specific policy context.
- Evidence generation benefits from engaging multiple decisionmakers and other end-users right from the research inception phase (i.e., not only bringing

Figure 1: The three overarching aims of the international decisionmakers panel*



*Created by Emily Liang, Creative Science Communicator - Environmental Policy Group, Wageningen University

them in at the communication stage), viewing them as co-owners of the research and resulting evidence, rather than as end-users. This process should be made as interactive and appealing as possible.

- Evidence that is qualitative in nature is highly valued in that it provides authentic and compelling insights into current food environment-related contexts that are often rapidly changing.
- Evidence that provides understandings of real-world dynamics can help convince different governmental departments that are often siloed in nature and practice, to collaborate more often (and more effectively) on domain-transsecting food issues.
- Evidence translation requires the consideration of target groups and wider stakeholder perspectives of policies. It is essential to be aware of and consider industry and consumer (as well as other key stakeholder) perspectives when translating and communicating evidence.
- Evidence advocacy benefits from finding ‘champion’ decisionmakers to advocate for the validity and acceptance of this type of evidence.

Key insights for improving evidence translation

Anecdotes or stories that can often result from qualitative lived-experience types of research are of high interest to politicians and decisionmakers. Real life stories can evoke relatable connections, providing an effective way to gain attention around a specific issue and communicate possible ways to address it. They have also been shown to be a valuable way of conveying the rich diversity in experiences of food environments in a succinct manner to decision makers who very often are limited by pressing time constraints. One possible approach to this end is the use of archetypes, typologies or the grouping of multiple shared experiences into a few categories of recognisable individuals. However, concerns were raised by academics in the session about making sure that this process is rigorous, while simultaneously ensuring that it is creative and engaging. This may present an opportunity to collaborate with decision makers (and end-users/beneficiaries) very early on to refine this process.

Additionally, the point was raised that relevant qualitative data can be a powerful source of evidence alongside quantitative data, which by itself does not always have the desired policy impact because it is harder for policymakers to connect with. Making compelling cases at the translation stage, by crafting relatable stories, can be a stand-alone source of evidence as it provides context and more in-depth understanding of a given situation, while also serving to complement existing quantitative data that primarily seeks to provide a broader, more representative picture. These qualitative stories, in the form of case studies, can also serve as a means of evaluating existing actions/policies by giving insights into what has and has not worked in the past.

It was also clear from decisionmakers that in the translation (and communication) phase, terms like ‘food environment’ and other jargon often only used by academics, need simplifying to be more readily accessible to decisionmakers and other end-users. Additionally, because there is a need to better understand what is happening at a local level (e.g. in communities), and what this implies for environmental-level policy actions, academics need to move away from more abstract ‘value chain’ speak, and more towards the specifics of experienced food environments (e.g., school or workplace environments); thus making evidence more relevant and actionable when translating findings into specific recommendations for policy action.

Key insights for improving evidence communication

Again, the importance of ongoing partnerships when it comes to communicating findings was made clear. Panellists recommended partnerships by academics with 1) other academics from multiple fields of study, 2) with civil society organisations, and with 3) policymakers themselves (more specifically, with academics and & civil society for message coordination, and with policymakers to effectively build the relationships needed to effectively communicate research findings).

The way in which translated evidence is packaged for communication was also considered to be important by panel members, including the language used and the way in which evidence and resulting key messages are framed. Evidence needs to be nimble in nature and communicated in a timely fashion according to the current policy agenda. This often necessitates executive summary or brief-style outputs that share insightful qualitative findings, and that can be readily generated if and when needed. On this point, the panellists recommended the sharing of findings as they emerge and not only when they have been published in academic fora and the like – this also allows for ‘reality checks’ within the research process, as decisionmakers are provided with the opportunity to be involved more in the process by providing relevant feedback at different stages. It was also noted that key messages from researchers should also include specific guidance on how evidence can be used to develop policy actions.

Panellists were unanimous in their message that who tells the story is important. Not only does a consistent message need to be communicated by multiple academics and civil society representatives, but also by those whose lived experiences are being considered (i.e. beneficiaries). Consequently, qualitative research on lived experiences of food environments may give voice to policy target populations.

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This Session Brief is published by the Centre for Food Policy on behalf of the Community of Practice on the Lived Experience of Food Environments. The CoP has also published a Research Brief ‘Understanding Lived Experience of Food Environments to Inform Policy: An Overview of Research Methods’ which aims to improve knowledge and understanding of the different methods available to study lived experiences of food environments. This Research Brief can be found [here](#).

Conclusion

Ultimately, to have our desired policy impact as (primarily) qualitative researchers in this field of study, we need to work in partnership with policymakers (and other key stakeholders) in a timely manner to identify existing needs / research questions; to develop key qualitative insights that, when translated, are relevant and clearly speak to the current policy-making agenda; and to communicate engaging stories aligned with coordinated key messages / recommendations alongside key partners (including other academics, civil society, and beneficiaries). These key messages should be accompanied by clear guidelines on how to make resulting recommendations actionable.

Additionally, further capacity building/training of researchers in strengthening their communication and translation practices related to this sort of research evidence is required so that they can contribute more towards evidence informed decision-making processes by involving various stakeholders and accounting for the context in which decision-making occurs. This sort of approach is very much in line with current thinking in public health in relation to evidence informed policy making⁹.