

Bridging the worlds of research and policy in European health systems



Chapter 10

Conclusion: next steps for knowledge brokering in Europe

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European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies

The European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies supports and promotes evidence-based health policy-making through comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the dynamics of health-care systems in Europe.

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Key messages

Using a multifaceted approach

- Key features of the study team's approach include:
 - using an iterative process to develop the BRIDGE framework for knowledge brokering and three sets of BRIDGE criteria (one set each for information-packaging mechanisms, interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and organizational models for knowledge brokering);
 - updating a systematic review of the factors that influence the use of health systems information in policy-making (which included 124 eligible studies);
 - conducting website reviews of 404 potential knowledge-brokering organizations and then in-depth website reviews of the knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models being used by the 163 organizations that met our eligibility criteria in the 31 countries in Europe;
 - conducting site visits of 28 particularly interesting knowledge-brokering organizations to describe their experiences with matching knowledge brokering to national and regional contexts; and
 - undertaking multi-method case studies of how knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models intersect with national policy-making processes in each of four countries.

Findings and outputs from the BRIDGE study

- The BRIDGE framework and criteria (described in Chapter 2) can be used at the regional, national and subnational levels to explain knowledge brokering to those unfamiliar with it; to assess current mechanisms and models; and to identify opportunities to advance them. Two companion policy briefs can be used to support such reflection – one at the national level, the other at the European level.
- The systematic review (described in Chapter 3) identified the factors that need to be taken into account when advancing knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models.
- The website reviews (described in Chapter 4) identified the use of many traditional information products and interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and many organizational models that were not well described, but many promising mechanisms and models as well.

- The site visits (described in Chapter 5) identified a common lack of reflection on, and programmatic orientation towards, knowledge brokering, even in many organizations using particularly interesting knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models.
- The case studies (described in Chapters 6–9) provide compelling stories that illustrate how knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models need to be matched to their local contexts.
- Three companion BRIDGE summaries draw on this rich material to encourage debate and innovation about information-packaging and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, as well as organizational models.

Strengths and weaknesses of the approach

- The key strength of our multifaceted approach is that the shortfalls in any one set of methods (e.g. website reviews, which did not yield much information about organizational models) were typically offset by the strengths of another set of methods (e.g. site visits and case studies). The key strength of our many complementary products is that they present our findings in different ways and for different target audiences. For example, policy-makers will likely be most interested in our policy briefs; knowledge-brokering organizations may be most interested in the BRIDGE summaries.
- The weaknesses of our approach are that we did not examine the explanatory capacity of the BRIDGE framework or the validity and reliability of the BRIDGE criteria, and that our eligibility criteria may have led us to miss some types of knowledge-brokering organizations.

Lessons learned: next steps for knowledge brokering in Europe

- Four possible next steps for funders, knowledge brokers, policy-makers and stakeholders include:
 - brokering knowledge about knowledge brokering (i.e. increasing awareness about concepts and tools, including the BRIDGE summaries) among policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers;
 - supporting the adoption/adaptation of promising information-packaging and interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms and promising organizational models for knowledge brokering;
 - championing further innovation in knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models, using the BRIDGE criteria as a guide; and
 - evaluating current and new mechanisms and models.

Conclusions

We began this book by describing three scenarios that motivated the BRIDGE study.

1. Policy-makers are faced daily with making decisions and need access to good-quality health systems information. Stakeholders may seek to influence health policy as well as make decisions in their own spheres of responsibility. Both groups want information products that they can easily understand and that are clearly based on systematically conducted and transparently reported research. And researchers want to know how to communicate their findings effectively so that health systems policy-making can make use of the best available health systems information.

2. Policy-makers, stakeholders and knowledge brokers (including researchers) all have a great deal they can learn from one another. As noted in scenario 1, policy-makers need access to good-quality health systems information that they can apply to a local issue. And stakeholders may seek to influence health policy as well as make decisions in their own spheres of responsibility. Knowledge brokers need information about policy priorities and the policy context in order to produce, package and share health systems information that will be genuinely useful to decision-makers.

3. Knowledge-brokering organizations need to match form to function when designing organizational models that will best support well-informed health systems decision-making. Their functions can include a range of information-packaging mechanisms (such as policy briefs) and interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms (such as policy dialogues), as well as activities that are not knowledge brokering per se (such as the collection and analysis of health systems information). Maintaining a good grasp of the relevant policy-making context and matching knowledge-brokering mechanisms to this context should be considered a key function for any knowledge-brokering organization.

We also noted at the beginning of the book that dramatic differences within and across European countries complicated the BRIDGE study, as well as the writing of this book. However, this complexity compelled us to craft a book (and a set of companion products) that could be used to:

- assess current knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models, both to reflect on what is going well and to identify what could be improved;
- identify promising mechanisms and models, as well as concrete examples of their uses in particular contexts;
- encourage the adoption or adaptation of these promising mechanisms and models and participation in their rigorous evaluation; and

- spark the creation of new mechanisms that meet some of the same or even different criteria.

What makes sense as a knowledge-brokering mechanism or model in one European country at one period of time will not necessarily make sense in another country or period of time. The field of knowledge brokering is young. We still have a great deal to learn.

Using a multifaceted approach

We used a multifaceted approach in the BRIDGE study, the key features of which include:

- using an iterative process to develop the BRIDGE framework for knowledge brokering and three sets of BRIDGE criteria (one set each for information-packaging mechanisms, interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and organizational models for knowledge brokering);
- updating a systematic review of the factors that influence the use of health systems information in policy-making (which included 124 eligible studies, 41 of which were newly identified and assessed during the updating process);
- conducting website reviews of 404 potential knowledge-brokering organizations and then in-depth website reviews of the knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models being used by the 163 organizations that met our eligibility criteria in the 31 countries of the European Union (EU) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA);
- conducting site visits of 28 particularly interesting knowledge-brokering organizations to describe their experiences with matching knowledge brokering to national and regional contexts; and
- undertaking multi-method case studies of how knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models intersect with national policy-making processes in each of four countries.

We believed at the outset of the BRIDGE study, and we continue to believe now, that the field of knowledge brokering will be advanced farther and faster with a multi-method approach to its study. Currently this field is at an early stage where research continues to serve some fundamental functions: defining key concepts and ways to approach knowledge brokering; identifying factors that seem to influence whether health systems information is being used and what might constitute promising mechanisms and models to address these factors; and describing what is being done in what contexts, with what influence, and why. In future the field will likely move to evaluations of the acceptability, use

and effectiveness of particular mechanisms and models in particular contexts and to a better understanding about how to match mechanisms and models to particular contexts. Hopefully, this evolution will coincide with ongoing growth in the size and capacity of the community of health policy and system researchers in European countries. The range of methods used in the BRIDGE study was quite new to many of our collaborators and consequently the study required a great deal of hands-on coordination.

Findings and outputs from the BRIDGE study

The key findings and outputs from the BRIDGE study include the following.

- The BRIDGE framework (described in Chapter 2) can be used at the regional, national and subnational levels to explain knowledge brokering to those unfamiliar with it.
- The three sets of BRIDGE criteria (also described in Chapter 2) can be used to assess current knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models and identify opportunities to advance them, also at the regional, national and subnational levels. The three sets of criteria are each explored further in a dedicated companion BRIDGE summary (Lavis, Catallo, Jessani et al., 2013; Lavis, Catallo, Permanand et al., 2013; Lavis, Jessani et al., 2013). Two companion policy briefs can be used to support such reflection – one at the national level (Lavis, Permanand et al., 2013a), the other at the European level (Lavis, Permanand et al., 2013b).
- The systematic review (described in Chapter 3) identified the factors that need to be taken into account when advancing knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models (namely ongoing linkages between policy-makers and researchers, and the timing/timeliness of the information being made available). The systematic review also suggested the need for primary research on the effectiveness of particular mechanisms and models.
- The website reviews (described in Chapter 4) identified the use of many traditional information products and interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and many organizational models that were not well described, but also many promising mechanisms and models.
- The site visits (described in Chapter 5) identified a common lack of reflection on, and programmatic orientation towards, knowledge brokering, even in many organizations engaged in particularly interesting knowledge-brokering activities.
- The case studies (described in Chapters 6–9) illustrate how health systems information is just one input among many in policy-making processes

(institutional constraints, interest group pressure, values and external events also figure prominently). The case studies also provide compelling stories that illustrate how knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models can intersect with, and support, policy-making processes in the context of these many influences.

So is the glass half full or half empty? We see the glass as half full. First, we identified 163 knowledge-brokering organizations in 31 European countries (Appendix E). While the website reviews did not by any means constitute an accreditation-type activity, the organizations that met our eligibility criteria do appear to be functioning as knowledge-brokering entities. This nascent community of knowledge-brokering organizations has pioneered many promising information products, interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms and organizational models. There is significant potential for shared learning. Second, we developed the BRIDGE framework and three sets of BRIDGE criteria to spur reflection among these organizations, as well as among policy-makers, stakeholders, researchers and research funding agencies. The BRIDGE summaries can aid these reflections, as can the two companion policy briefs. Third, we iteratively developed the BRIDGE framework and criteria by applying draft versions of them in our website reviews, site visits and case studies, and discussing draft versions with our target audiences at a workshop and a policy dialogue. The resulting descriptions provide, in some sense, a baseline against which progress can be measured.

Strengths and weaknesses of the approach

The key strength of our multifaceted approach is that the shortfalls of one set of methods were typically offset by the strengths of another set of methods. For example, the website reviews did not yield much information about organizational models for knowledge brokering, but the site visits yielded a great deal of information about organizational models and why particular features of these models emerged from, or made sense in, the local context. Moreover, our approach focused on different units of analysis in different phases of the study. For the website reviews, the unit of analysis was the organization; in the site visits, we examined both the country and the organization; and in the case studies, the policy-making process was the focal point. Also, the website reviews were designed to provide information about breadth of coverage (i.e. identifying and briefly describing the entire population of knowledge-brokering organizations in Europe), whereas the site visits and case studies told us about depth of coverage (i.e. understanding which knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models are used in what contexts, and why, and understanding how these mechanisms and models intersected with national policy-making processes).

The key strength of our many complementary products is that they present our findings in different ways and for different target audiences. For example, policy-makers at the national level will likely be most interested in our policy briefs about advancing knowledge brokering at that level; knowledge-brokering organizations will be most interested in the BRIDGE summaries.

One weakness of our approach is that we did not examine the explanatory capacity of the BRIDGE framework or the validity and reliability of the BRIDGE criteria. As we describe in Chapter 2, we began to identify hypotheses based on the BRIDGE framework, but we did not have the data to allow us to test these hypotheses. A second weakness of our approach is that our eligibility criteria may have led us to miss some types of knowledge-brokering organizations, particularly those located in government (e.g. strategy units, analytical support units) or in large academic institutions, because they did not meet our criterion about having some degree of autonomy (as reflected, for example, in having an external advisory council). A targeted review of these types of organizations, particularly those located in government, may yield additional promising knowledge-brokering mechanisms.

Lessons learned: next steps for knowledge brokering in Europe

Four possible next steps include:

1. brokering knowledge about knowledge brokering (i.e. increasing awareness about concepts and tools) among policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers;
2. supporting the adoption/adaptation of promising information-packaging and interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms and promising organizational models for knowledge brokering;
3. championing further innovation in knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models, using the BRIDGE criteria as a guide; and
4. undertaking evaluation to assess current and new mechanisms and models.

The first of these steps – brokering knowledge about knowledge brokering – is necessary because this nascent field is poorly understood or in many cases not even recognized as a field. Part of the problem is terminology. Very few people or organizations identify themselves as knowledge brokers. They may say that they provide policy support or that they engage in evidence synthesis and analysis, but they are unlikely to say that they are knowledge brokers. We need to raise awareness about knowledge-brokering concepts (such as those provided in Appendix A) and about knowledge-brokering tools (such as the BRIDGE summaries) among policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers. Even the concept of a systematic review was new to a great many of our collaborators.

We suggest the second of these steps – supporting the adoption/adaptation of promising mechanisms and models – because there are exciting things being done in many European contexts that warrant trying, or adapting locally, in other settings. In the BRIDGE summaries, we point to specific examples of information-packaging mechanisms, interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms and organizational models that we identified as promising by applying the BRIDGE criteria. Some, such as preparing summaries of research studies, may translate easily from one setting to another. Others, such as organizing policy dialogues that engage policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers, may require significant adaptation to local policy-making contexts.

The third possible next step – championing further innovation in knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models, using the BRIDGE criteria as a guide – would be helpful because we should not be limited by what is already out there. The current array of promising mechanisms and models would not have come into existence had creative individuals not dared to try something new. Many of these promising mechanisms and models draw on only some BRIDGE criteria and only in particular combinations. Other innovative mechanisms and models could be designed using different combinations of the BRIDGE criteria or other criteria.

The fourth possible next step – undertaking evaluation to assess current and new mechanisms and models – is critical because there is a dearth of primary research on mechanisms and models. The evaluations could include formative evaluations whereby knowledge-brokering organizations create, adopt or adapt information products or interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms; solicit feedback about them from policy-makers and stakeholders; monitor their use of the products; and continually improve them. Research could also take the form of summative evaluations, whereby knowledge-brokering organizations examine the impact that information products are having (Boyko et al., 2011). As well, research could helpfully address the individual, organizational and system-level factors that might be preventing the uptake of promising knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models. Insights from the field of psychology or organizational behaviour (e.g. diffusion of innovations) may be helpful here.

Funders, knowledge brokers, policy-makers and stakeholders can all contribute to these next steps.

- Funders can fund or directly undertake translation of information products; fund or create learning/sharing opportunities for knowledge-brokering organizations (e.g. conferences, workshops, mentoring and networking);

innovate in their own knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models; and fund both formative and summative evaluations.

- Knowledge-brokering organizations can contribute to translation activities (possibly through a distributed model such as the one used by EvidenceUpdates);¹ participate in learning/sharing opportunities; innovate in their own knowledge-brokering mechanisms and models; and participate in evaluations of information products.
- Researchers can assist these knowledge-brokering organizations by permitting their work to be the focus of information products and by participating in the creation of these information products and in interactive knowledge-sharing opportunities. A subset of researchers with particular interests in knowledge brokering could lead evaluations of information products and interactive knowledge-brokering mechanisms.
- Policy-makers can use learning/sharing opportunities to learn about what expectations to set for knowledge-brokering mechanisms; communicate their expectations about information products (including the need for translation), interactive knowledge-sharing mechanisms and organizational models; and participate in evaluations.

Additional thoughts about possible next steps can be found in the three BRIDGE summaries and the two BRIDGE policy briefs.

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