

Summary of EMCR Workshop

2023 INHSU Conference
Geneva, Switzerland
18 October 2023

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Workshop title

Extending your research impact as an EMCR: The intersections of academia, policy and implementation

Structure of the workshop

The INHSU EMCR SIG ran a workshop for other EMCR's attending the conference, with the aim of providing an opportunity for EMCRs to meet and exchange conversations with experts working in public health and policy domains (including government and non-government humanitarian organisations).

A panel of four global experts working in the areas of drug policy, harm reduction and the human rights of people who use drugs were invited to share their experience, knowledge and expertise via an informal discussion and Q+A session chaired by Aïssata Sako (INHSU EMCR Exec Committee) and Joshua Dawe (INHSU EMCR SIG member). The purpose of the workshop was to provide an informal space to stimulate discussion between the panel and the audience, on a range of topics of interest to EMCRs.

1.1 Workshop panellists

- **Naomi Burke Shyne (Executive Director, Harm Reduction International)**. She has 2 decades of international experience in HIV, human rights and public health, including working in partnership with organisations in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and PNG. Her work involves improving justice for people who use drugs and advancing the rights of populations vulnerable to HIV.
- **Ernst Wisse (Medicines du Monde [MDM])**: Ernst is Harm Reduction Advisor at MDM and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (University of London). He has a background in nursing, and extensive experience as a fieldworker and manager in multiple harm reduction programs in several countries globally. He is a representative on several global expert panels and advocacy platforms.
- **Monica Ciupagea (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC])**: Monica is a medical doctor with 25 years' experience in HIV prevention/treatment and care for people who inject drugs. She provides technical/policy advice to governments and civil society on HIV/AIDS prevention/care and supports disadvantaged communities including prisoners and women working in the sex industry.
- **Andrew Scheibe (TB HIV Care, South Africa)**: Andrew is a medical doctor by training who works in harm reduction research and policy in South Africa and the region. His work focuses on the intersections between infectious diseases, determinants of health and human rights. Andrew is a technical advisor for TB HIV Care and a researcher at the University of Pretoria. Andrew is also on the board of INHSU.

1.2 Topics for discussion

To help ensure the workshop met the needs of EMCRs attending, EMCR SIG members shared topics of interest or questions for the panel, prior to the workshop. These suggestions were incorporated into a broad semi-structured interview guide that facilitators used to guide conversations. The workshop was purposely held around a large table—with panellists and the EMCR audience sharing the space together—an approach that helped break down barriers and opened opportunities for more open dialogue and discussion.

To open the workshop, panellists were invited to share three things about themselves that they saw as relevant to their current position, which was followed by a focus on the following broad topics:

- **Experiences of collaborations or partnerships with researchers:** What made them work, what jeopardized success, what is needed to increase and improve collaborations and partnerships.
- **Emerging concerns for people who use drugs:** Views on emerging trends, topics and concerns that need prioritising and research gaps that need to be filled.
- **Academic pathways into the non-academic sector:** Views on research skills and expertise needed to address emerging concerns for people who use drugs (e.g., clinical, public health, harm reduction, policy, implementation, advocacy, qualitative vs. quantitative, etc.). Tips for EMCRs to transition into not-for-profit or government organizations in the non-academic sector.

The workshop was attended by around 25 individuals in a variety of roles, including PhD and master's students, EMCRs working in research institutes and NGOs, and individuals working in non-academic roles in community and health settings. Individuals came from a broad cross-section of low-, middle- and high-income countries, including Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Egypt, Russia, the UK, and the USA.

1. Overview of workshop discussion

The workshop stimulated discussion on strategies for EMCRs to initiate and sustain collaborations with NGOs, community organisations and policy makers; mechanisms for researchers to ensure they are meeting the needs of the communities their research is for and about; effective ways to communicate research findings to NGOs/community organisations/policy makers; tips do if wanting to transition out of an academic setting into an NGO or community organisation; and ethical issues for consideration as researchers.

2.1 *How can we ensure the research questions we're asking are helpful for NGOs?*

As researchers in the harm reduction and drug use/policy space, we are doing the work we do because we want to make a difference in the lives of people who use drugs – which are often the same reasons those who are working in NGOs/community organisations are doing the work they do. Being able to articulate these core priorities of each other's work, which can come from “recognising that whether we're NGOs or researchers, we're all here for the same purpose – to improve the health of people who use drugs”, can help to bridge gaps that exist, and help build more trusting productive collaborations and partnerships. Several examples were shared of successful partnership projects in LMICs, that involved NGOs and academics coming together in ways that resulted in positive harm reduction policy and practice changes.

The importance of partnerships and collaborations with NGOs and communities

- Because NGOs/community organisations are the ones providing programs and services “on the ground” they have integral “insider” knowledge/understandings about key “hard-to-reach” population groups that researchers often don't have access to if they're not working in the field or out in the community.
- Connecting with NGOs/community organisations is a way to learn about these needs s.

Ask NGOs and community organisations what they want, or need know more about

- Through good partnerships and collaborations, opportunities can be opened up for finding out what's most important to the communities our research is aiming to serve. It provides opportunities for finding out what communities need and want, including how research could help achieve these things.
- Having good relationships with NGOs/community organisations provides openings to “ask what questions they want answered”, or “what they see as the most pressing issues for their communities”, or what new programs they believe are needed for their population groups, or what programs could be expanded or adapted for other key population groups.
- Discussed how tensions can exist between those doing the research and community organisations working with the people the research is about and for – due to different priorities, expectations, goals, and ways of working. When working with NGOs/community organisations it's therefore, important to

create a “shared agenda”. For example, asking NGOs and community organisations, “what do you want to achieve, and why?” and “How do you think we can get there?”

2.2 How can we be of benefit to NGOs and community organisations?

NGOs/community organisations “collect lots of data on the services and programs they provide” in their communities”, which they need for; 1) convincing policy makers and funders to sustain or expand their programs; 2) monitoring and evaluating their program successes; 3) determining program gaps or challenges; and 4) determining opportunities for improving or growing programs. However, NGOs/community organisations often lack the capacity, in terms of knowledge, skills, worker time, or data management systems, to organise, make sense of and write up this data they collect. There are lots of ways researchers can help and support NGOs/community organisations with these issues, as described below.

Provide research and evaluation support when they don’t have it

- Researchers can work with NGOs/community organisations to help them make sense of the data they collect or through helping with data management systems, data analysis, or “offering support to write up findings” – whether for an academic paper or a simple report to share with policy makers or funders.
- Researchers can help NGOs/community organisations find research organisations to partner with, who might have potential PhD, honours, or master’s students that can take on research or evaluation projects (as part of their study) that the organisation does not have the capacity to undertake.

Help build the research capacity of NGOs, community organisations and communities

Helping to build the research and evaluation skills and capacity of NGOs/community organisations and communities is an important responsibility for researchers.

- Sharing knowledge with healthcare workers, harm reduction workers, community workers and peer workers, about “why research and evaluation is important” (i.e., for monitoring program successes; for finding out what can be improved to better meet the needs of those the programs or services are serving; for exploring through research, under-examined issues that NGOs/community organisations know exist in the community, but that are not being addressed – as a way to convince governments or funders to fund programs to address these unmet needs.
- If good relationships and collaborations exist between researchers and NGOs/community organisations, opportunities for informal educating about research and evaluation are more likely to exist.
- Researchers can help workers providing programs and services (“they are usually the ones collecting the data”) understand the importance of research rigour and having data that is robust and trustworthy, in order “to gain the credibility of policy makers and funders” to fund services and programs.
- Participatory action research methods that involve building the capacity of people with lived/living experience to be involved in research are often really valued by NGOs/community organisations. This can include people with lived/living experience being involved in determining the research questions or focus of the study, designing the research tools, collecting the data, analysing the findings and writing it up. Participatory action research projects have been shown to be very effective because study participants are often more trusting of those who’ve been through similar experiences, and people with lived/living experience often have important expertise and knowledge that researchers don’t have – all factors that can bring more meaning, credibility, and rigour to the research process and outcomes.

“Learn to talk about research in laymans terms”

We often use academic jargon and forget that its “jargon”, and that those not working in academic spaces might not understand what we’re saying. Therefore, being able “speak the same language” of NGOs, community organisations and communities is therefore important.

2.3 How can we better communicate our research findings to policymakers?

Policy makers want to see high quality data, that is rigorous and trustworthy.

- If the data isn't as high quality as you know it could be, being able to acknowledge the limitations that exist is important, for gaining credibility and trust.
- Discussed the tension that sometimes exists in finding a balance between what is considered high quality research from an academic point of view, and what is useful for NGOs and community organisations in terms of making a difference. There was an acknowledgement that policy makers are often more likely to see the value in quantitative data (i.e., tables, graphs, numbers), but that qualitative data is very important and often under-valued.

Qualitative research

- Qualitative research has real value for influencing policy, given its ability to delve deeper into identified issues, and “answer questions that quantitative research cannot”, and because “stories” that emerge via the use of these methods have the potential to “change minds and hearts” because they often “resonate on an emotional level”.
- There was acknowledgement however, that qualitative research is still sometimes under-valued within policy and academic settings – highlighting the need for advocacy efforts to increase understandings of the importance of qualitative research.

2.4 What areas of research do you think are not prioritized enough?

Ask NGOs/community organisations what issues they think need prioritising is a great way to find this out.

- Criminalisation of drugs in LMICs in particular – it's difficult to get funding for this kind of work.
- Harm reduction research with disadvantaged and hard-to-reach populations such as those who identify as LGBTQI, women working in the sex industry, homeless people, cultural or religious minority groups, incarcerated people, youth.

2.5 What can I do if I want to transition from an academic institution into an NGO?

Identify research that you respect or admire outside academia and build partnerships and collaborations with NGOs and community organisations. Doing all the things described above will help create these partnerships and collaborations. Also discussed the importance of finding mentors outside academic settings – to guide and provide advice.

2.6 Ethical issues related to working with NGOs and affected communities

A number of issues were discussed throughout the workshop, that related to ethical considerations for EMCRs to be thinking about, in relation to their research.

Involving people with lived/living experience in research about them

- It is not only respectful and ethical to involve people who the research is about and for, in the research processes, but it can bring more meaningful outcomes to the process and the findings that are produced.

Sharing findings back to/with communities and NGOs

- Being able to share academic findings back to affected communities and NGOs in ways that make sense to them (using non-academic jargon) was described as an ethical obligation, that we often forget about.
- Sharing findings to those most affected by the research is useful for building trust, increasing knowledge exchanges, and bridging gaps between academia and NGOs/community organisations and affected communities.

Publishing in academic journals is not always the most important thing

- It's important to understand that whilst getting the results of studies or evaluations published is important, it's not the most important thing. That is, remembering that the primary purpose of our

research is to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged population groups – and that if findings are not able to be academically published that can actually be okay.

- Discussed the unethicity of research studies in LMICs conducted by “privileged researchers from wealthy countries” that involved “extracting knowledge” via surveys without meaningful collaboration, and using the knowledge to publish papers that could help progress their own academic careers.