Guide to Conducting a Literature Review

African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions

INTRODUCTION

A literature review is the process by which several articles or scientific contents are gathered, analyzed and organized in order to provide an overview of the scientific advances on a given topic. Common criticisms of literature reviews include length, jargon language that limits comprehension by non-researchers, and presentation that is not user-friendly for policy dialogue organizers and facilitators. This guide was developed to address the above pitfalls. It is designed to provide practical guidance on how to conduct literature reviews and rapid reviews in particular and uses examples drawn from the realities of the sub-Saharan African context to facilitate its assimilation and use by stakeholders in health policy dialogues.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This guide is specifically intended for members of policy dialogue platforms who often need to quickly synthesize existing scientific knowledge on a given topic or assess the quality of a received knowledge. It is also intended for policy dialogue facilitators and technical working groups focused on resolving health system issues. This guide supports deepening anyone's skills in conducting a literature review, developing an evidence-based persuasive approach, or simply initiating a policy action informed by research findings.

Here are five essential steps for conducting a quick review of scientific literature.

Step 1: Formulate the bibliographic research question

Several frameworks allow for the formulation of the investigative question:

- PESTLE (Political – Economic – Sociological – Technological – Legal – Environmental) is used for the analysis of the different factors that influence an observed phenomenon
- PICO (Population – Intervention – Comparison - Outcome or Effect) is appropriate for a comparative evaluation of the effectiveness of multiple interventions.
- SPIDER (Sample – Phenomenon of Interest – Design – Evaluation – Research type) can be an alternative to the PICO
- SPICE (Setting or Context – Perspective – Intervention – Comparison - Evaluation) helps to evaluate services.

Step 2: Search for publications

At this stage, the aim is to identify the evidence-based articles that help to answer the investigation question. These articles, published or not, are extracted from electronic databases, bibliographic references, and the institutions' official websites. Several databases exist such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and Cochrane Library. Using the identified articles, a series of triages based on an inclusion and exclusion criteria make it possible to refine the investigation while maintaining the relevance of the selected articles with respect to the purpose of the review. First, sorting is completed by scanning the titles and abstracts and then the entire content of the selected articles. Focusing the search on a specific time period is a strategy to limit the number of articles highlighted. This selection process must be replicable and reported in sufficient detail so that whoever follows the same approach arrives at the same result.

Step 3: Appraise the publications

This is the systematic review of the data collected to assess its validity and relevance and checks the methodological approach used to ensure it is free of bias. Information presented must be reliable, based on proven facts or evidence. Note that the information is verifiable from several reliable sources. Data objectivity is crucial; there is a need to understand the purpose of the information and to verify that it is not based on opinions. Secondly, it is necessary to verify whether the information published is current or outdated. In this respect, it is necessary to ask whether the recent nature of it is important for the subject treated. Finally, the information presented should address the needs arising from the issue. Several frameworks have been proposed in the literature to assess the quality of a publication, depending on the type of publication.

Step 4: Combine the publications

The selected articles' content should be extracted using a collection table for note taking and data organization. This table may contain several headers depending on the intended purpose, e.g.,Title, Authors, Year of publication, Place of study, Objectives, Type of paper/design, Key information. The extracted data is analyzed, synthesized, and organized to answer the posed question. The references of the selected publications must be imported and organized. They are used in the synthesis to attribute the extracted data to their authors. It is recommended to use a software for the management of bibliographic references. Some no-cost examples are Mendeley, EndnoteBasic, Zotero, Papers, Cite This For Me.

Step 5: Contextualize and synthesize

The results should be reported in a style that is coherent and easily understood. New knowledge derived from the combination of different and scattered sources will have to be adapted by putting it in perspective with the contextual realities. This may involve adapting the policy recommendations to the realities of a country. Finally, the results of the literature review are presented in an appropriate format and shared with those who need to use them. This can be done, in the form of a policy brief for which a guide is available.

BEST PRACTICES

In order to complete the rapid literature review process, the following points should be considered:

- At the beginning of the literature review process, it is important to clarify the objective to be achieved, to determine the scope, and to be as precise as possible about the investigation question to limit the time and resources required. To this end, it is important to involve the users of the knowledge to be produced by the review in the formulation of that question.
- The publication search is done in at least two databases. The selection of the databases must be adapted to their expertise and the link with the subject.
- Methods for reviewing and selecting articles vary considerably. A reasonable approach is to have one experienced reviewer apply the inclusion criteria and two reviewers apply the exclusion criteria. Another approach is to have one person do the selection, with another person checking a subset of recordings. In all cases, the approach to review and the selection of the studies should be defined by the resources available.
- For the data extraction, the number of independent reviewers varies, but a reasonable approach consists in using one reviewer to extract the data, with a second reviewer checking at least a 10% random sample.
- For the synthesis, narrative summaries are common. Final reports often include implications, policy recommendations, and limitations of the research.

The quality of evidence is not determined by the fact that it is published in a major journal or that it is widely cited, that it is produced by internationally renowned researchers, and even less by the fact that it is produced in a country well-known for their quality of the research.

CHECKLIST OF CRITICAL TASKS

TASKS	COMPLETE
Formulation of the research question	
Use a framework to refine the research question	
Define the limits of the research (type of study, publication date, language, etc.)	
Identifying publications	
Search in scientific databases	
Research in gray literature (institutional websites, theses, etc.)	
Sort titles and abstracts	
Sort complete content	
Assessment of the quality of the publications	
Methodological rigor	
Precision	
Credibility of information	
Objectivity	
Current	
Degree of coverage of the subject	
Store references and keep track of the review	
Note taking and data extraction	
References	
Combining with the existing	
Data analysis (narrative format)	
Illustration	
Contextualization and synthesis	
Setting the context	
Content made understandable for its target	

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