COVID-END SUSTAINING GROUP

Proposal for baseline assessment of the COVID-19 response of evidence synthesis organizations: views and perspectives of the COVID-END partners

Background
Evidence synthesis and intermediary organisations have rapidly responded to the COVID pandemic to provide evidence to inform practice and policy decisions. COVID-END is a global initiative of many of these organisations which aims to promote cooperation and collaboration across organisations and reduce inappropriate duplication of effort. The COVID-END sustaining working group aims to formatively evaluate COVID-END to support its development and identify lessons for better organisation of the evidence community post-COVID.

An important early project relates to understanding how the evidence community initially responded to COVID and their early experiences of partnering in COVID-END.

Objectives:
1. To understand how evidence synthesis organisations responded to COVID pandemic.
2. To understand their involvement in COVID-END and experiences to data of the network.

Methods:
Design:
A qualitative approach in data collection and analysis will be adopted to investigate collaborative efforts between evidence synthesis organisations and gain an in-depth understanding of their response to the COVID pandemic and their (initial) involvement and experiences in the COVID-END network.

Recruitment and sampling:
The survey and semi-structured interviews will be carried out during the initial stages of the COVID-END initiative. COVID-END partners will be informed about the study during their weekly online meetings and potential participants will be invited via email.

All COVID-END partners (n=39) will be invited to participate in an online survey to understand their collaborative efforts. The key informant interviews will be conducted with a range of 20-25 ESOs until thematic saturation is reached. The ESOs will be purposively sampled from the COVID-END Network of 39 partners. The sample will be chosen to represent a diverse group of ESOs and ensure maximum variation. We will recruit ESOs that vary by group type (evidence synthesis, guideline development or HTAs or being evidence intermediaries); location (North America/Europe/Australia or LMICs and others); sector (health or non-health); and scale of organization (national or international).

Data collection:
The data collection period will extend for two months (June-July 2020). Methodological triangulation will be achieved through ensuring respondent validation and reflexivity and by using multiple data sources. The results will be communicated to all participants willing to receive it.

Online survey
Quantitative data on the existence and type of collaboration between evidence synthesis organisations will be collected through an online survey. All COVID-END partners (n=39) will be invited to participate. The developed survey tool (Appendix XX) consists of an introduction; background of participant and organization; collaboration with COVID-END partners, collaboration with other ESOs.

Semi-structured interviews
The invitation letter will outline study objectives, characteristics of the interview process, potential benefits and harms, consent to participate and to record the interviews. A trained research assistant will contact the ESOs who showed interest and arrange for a convenient time to conduct telephone interviews. Interviews will be conducted in English. The interview guide will include various questions on the initial COVID-19 response and initial engagement with the COVID-END initiative (Appendix A). Respondents will receive the questions a week in advance of the scheduled interview. Informed consent from participants will be obtained prior to each interview. Interviews and transcriptions will be de-identified to preserve confidentiality and anonymity (by using serial numbers and pseudonyms on transcripts). The audio recordings will only be used by the sustaining working group and will be deleted after completion of the transcription process.

Documentary analysis
To understand how various ESOs initially engaged in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study will also include a textual analysis of institutional documents. We will identify documents, both directly through the engagement process with the ESOs and indirectly through searching websites of participating ESOs (and other electronic resources?). We will select institutional documents such as mission statements, reports, public news releases, and major COVID-19 related initiatives. Documents should be written in English and describe different aspects of the organization's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The documentary analysis will focus on information related to the two study objectives, including:

- Organization name; Document title; Length (very short, short, medium, long); Public availability; Funding
- Mission of organisation (sector, reach (understand networks of engagement))
- pre-COVID activities (type of products, target group(s));
- collaboration (type of collaborators and collaboration);
- description of potential challenges encountered and lessons learned

- descriptions of activities, strategies, processes for COVID-19 response
- fourth category (other) will be used for additional relevant data

Data analysis:
Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Grounded theory will be used [1], and data collection and analysis will be performed concurrently. Basic qualitative analysis will be conducted through an iterative process for each type of organizations (evidence synthesis, guideline development, HTA, evidence intermediaries). Transcripts and abstracted data will be thoroughly analyzed to identify and refine emerging codes. The codes will combine into themes and subthemes as recurrent concepts emerge from data. Matrices will be constructed to organize themes. Further analysis will be conducted across different statements related to the same theme, and across different themes to identify possible connections [2]. Validity will be enhanced through discussing emerging themes with members of the sustaining working group.

Social network analysis
Social networks are developed through social interactions of entities, such as institutions and countries. Social network analysis is used to analyze collaboration produced by the relationships of different entities and determine implications of those relationships [1]. We will use data from the survey, interviews, and documentary analysis to illustrate patterns of previous relationships(formal/informal) and collaborations with COVID-END partners and other organisations/groups in the evidence community.

Ethical considerations:
Ethics approval for this research will be sought from the institutional review board at AUB? The study objectives, potential benefits and harms and voluntary nature of the study will be explained to participants, and oral informed consent will be obtained before each telephone interview. Confidentiality and anonymity will be preserved by using serial numbers and pseudonyms on transcripts.

Resources to conduct study: conduct 20 interviews; dual coded analysis; graduate student to assist with documentary analysis

Key steps and timeline
- Identify project team by 3rd June
- Develop protocol by 3rd June
- Ethics approval (identify institution with rapid approval for low risk COVID projects)
- Fieldwork by 22nd July
- Analysis and writing up by 19th August
- Organisational checking by 26th August
- Report to COVID-END partners meeting by 3rd September
- Journal submission by 30th September

Data items:

Mission of organisation (sector, reach (understand networks of engagement))

Pre-COVID activities (type of products, target group(s))

Baseline social network analysis (previous relationships (formal/informal) with COVID-END partners and other organisations/groups in the evidence community)

Timeline of when organisation became aware of COVID and began to pivot

COVID activities – type of products, target groups; responsive vs prospective; new/existing relationships; whether these have changed over time; how did it affect the organisation's processes; lessons learned/challenges experienced; resources devoted to COVID activities; expected timelines of response; any internal and external evaluations; opportunity costs (?does it create risks for the group); relationships with funders

Early interactions/collaboration with other ES groups

How did they get involved in COVID-END? What were their expectations of their involvement?

Experience to date of COVID-END. What could be improved? Suggestions for future activities.

Blind spots (what was done/what was not done?) eg in QC INESSS did not consider long term

Partners could volunteer to do part of the work (about the local dynamics): local networking of each organization? How to develop new collaboration with larger scale network such as COVID-END; quantitative section to report on projects they worked on together

Existing relationships vs. new ones

Any internal evaluation of the organization

How did it affect the organization's processes? What needs to change moving forward?

Risk assessment (long term risks) and opportunity cost

Relationship with funders

Blind spots (what was not done), e.g., long term care agenda in Quebec; priority setting? Horizon scanning

Burnout/fatigue of individuals/teams/organizations? Sustainability

Phases of the response: initial, sustained, etc. Sprint vs. marathon

References:

1. McCulloh, I., H. Armstrong, and A. Johnson, *Social network analysis with applications*. 2013: John Wiley & Sons.
2. Vaismoradi, M., H. Turunen, and T. Bondas, *Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study.* Nursing & health sciences, 2013. **15**(3): p. 398-405.