ESIC

EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS
INFRASTRUCTURE
COLLABORATIVE

National Academies webinar

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Statement of interests

- Advisor to the Wellcome Trust on ESIC
- Chair of ESIC's Steering group and Communities council
- Facilitator of ESIC's collective-impact approach

- Three decades of work as an 'evidence intermediary,' providing timely demand-driven evidence-support 'up' to advisory and decision-making processes and 'out' to learning and improvement platforms
- Co-lead of the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges (or Global Evidence Commission), and lead writer on its report 2022 and updates 2023, 2024 and 2024

ESIC is a big, bold, agile effort to get the balance right between rigour & speed in evidence synthesis (before it's too late)

- The Evidence Synthesis Collaborative (ESIC) is a '**community of communities**' committed to a collective impact approach to learning from others – using evidence synthesis – to improve lives
  - 45 UN entities (through the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition), the big producers of evidence synthesis (e.g., Campbell & Cochrane), the big networks of science advisors, and 35+ funders (with US$128 million raised)

- Infrastructure elements
  - 11 sectoral **evidence-synthesis hubs** → see eight capabilities (e.g., taxonomy, living evidence maps, policy-scale AI-enabled LESs, question banks, active protocol management)
  - 5 regional **evidence-intermediary hubs** → see their complementary capabilities
  - Open **evidence-synthesis data system** to support the sharing and reusing of synthesis data
  - Living **inventory of AI-DESTs**, or AI-enabled digital evidence-synthesis tools
  - [Year-2 candidate] **methods transformation** that will move us to policy-scale, AI-enabled living evidence syntheses on all of the big questions of our time
  - [Year-2 candidate] **capacity sharing** through existing networks

Responses to eight pre-shared questions

1) You've spent much of your career focused on bridging research and policymaking. How has your thinking about evidence systems evolved, and how did that lead you to ESIC?
   - As the Global Evidence Commission said, we need to: a) formalize and strengthen national, state and local evidence-support systems; b) **enhance and leverage the global evidence architecture**; c) put evidence at the centre of everyday life
2) What do you view as some of the biggest barriers to supporting a well-functioning evidence ecosystem?
   - Lack of the structures and processes to support a **collective-impact approach**: a) common agenda; b) shared measurement system; c) mutually reinforcing activities; d) continuous communications; and e) backbone support
3) What are some of the biggest gaps in the infrastructure for conducting high-quality systematic reviews? What gaps motivated the creation of ESIC, and how does ESIC envision closing them?
   - Agreed and funded (and 'learning systems' approach to) **sectoral hub capabilities**
   - Open data system so we extract data & conduct RoB assessments once, & **reuse data** many times
   - Methods that operate at the right 'level' and get us to **full, 'living' coverage** of the 'big questions'
4) One persistent challenge is duplication of reviews. How is ESIC approaching coordination across funders and producers?
   - Funding, governing and strategically coordinating for **collective impact** (via the Funders executive and interest group, Steering group, and Communities council), which includes moving to **'active management' of protocol registration**

Responses to eight pre-shared questions (2)

5) Infrastructure is often harder to fund than individual project. How do you make the case to sponsors for investing in shared systems?
   - Making the case that we have a '**window of opportunity**' to get the balance right between rigour and speed, or lose the battle to AI approaches that don't have the necessary rigour
6) What are the priorities of some of the sponsors that you work with in terms of evidence synthesis (e.g., the Wellcome Trust, WHO)? From a sponsor's perspective, what are the biggest inefficiencies or missed opportunities in how systematic reviews are currently commissioned and used? What are the major pressures that they are wrestling with (e.g., wanting faster reviews, reviews not addressing what they need or being unusable for certain policy contexts, reviews not incorporating certain types of evidence)?
   - A priority: **Evidence is there when it's needed by decision-makers**
   - An inefficiency: **Duplication** (and its flip side, **lack of coverage** of all the big questions of our time)
   - A pressure: '**AI for policy**,' with evidence synthesis being just one of five elements of what is needed
7) You've worked on rapid evidence services—how should sponsors think about the trade-offs between speed, rigor, and relevance? Do you see living evidence synthesis as a potential solution for these tradeoffs?
   - Contribute your fair share to policy-scale, AI-enabled living evidence syntheses, or '**global public goods**'
   - Fund 'rapid evidence services' that provide **timely, demand-driven, context-sensitive evidence support**
8) What role should sponsors play in encouraging methodological innovation versus relying on established guidance?
   - Rely on what will now be **living guidance in this rapidly evolving space** (and decide whether contributing to a methods transformation will be an example of your fair-share contribution to global public goods)

Appendix
(if questions arise about AI)

Even the big tech companies agree that AI cannot yet safely & responsibly, & with the right balance of human-in-the-loop processes…

- Be used in each step in the **evidence-synthesis process** (& identify, quantify & communicate **uncertainty)**

Or help in other elements of 'AI for policy'

- Be used to conduct the **localization assessments** needed to determine which evidence – created in particular contexts & with particular groups – likely applies in a given context or group
- **Mix and match** different **forms of local evidence** (e.g., data analytics, evaluation, behavioural science) **and global evidence** (where ESIC comes in) in each of the four typical steps in a policy analysis
- Combine all of the above to **answer bigger goal-related questions** or cross-sectoral questions in a contextually relevant way (e.g., what are the 'best buys' in education for a country like ours? what are the best ways in any sector to improve under-5 mortality in a country like ours?)
- Combine all of the above to support its **real-time use** in policy and program work, including in partner engagement

ESIC's approach to AI and to tech company engagement

- Introduce AI in each step in the evidence-synthesis process (and in other steps in 'AI for policy' work) as it is shown it can be done safely and responsibly
- Pursue tech-company engagement primarily as:
  - A way to shift tech companies' trajectories towards greater rigour – as our community of communities would define it – in the 'AI for policy' tools that they are developing
  - A way to accelerate our thinking and our delivery of tools
- Convene a tech-savvy advisory group to support our engagement with tech companies
- Explore in parallel partnerships with public/sovereign AI bodies
- Add an ethical analysis to our living inventory of AI digital evidence-synthesis tools