

## 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 network 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 network 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 the evidence synthesis organisations, that are part of COVID-END network, initially responded to COVID pandemic.
2. To understand their involvement in COVID-END and experiences to date of the network.

#### Methods:

##### Design:

A mixed-method approach will be adopted to investigate collaborative efforts between all evidence synthesis organisations that constitute the COVID-END network and to gain an in-depth understanding of their initial response to the COVID pandemic as well as their initial involvement and experiences in the COVID-END network.

We will conduct this study in three linked phases: documentary analysis, social network analysis, and in-depth qualitative case study. This study will be carried out during the initial stages of the COVID-END network. COVID-END partners will be informed about the study during their weekly online meetings and will be invited to participate via email.

#### Phase one: Documentary analysis

We will conduct a textual analysis of institutional documents and websites of the ESOs. Descriptive data will be collected on the characteristics of all 46 organizations that are part of the COVID-END network and their initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will identify institutional documents, both directly through email correspondence with the ESOs and indirectly through searching websites of the ESOs. 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 include a description of the organization (mission, vision, scope, etc.) and different aspects of the organization's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This information will be validated during the interviews.

The documentary analysis will focus on information related to the following:

- organization name; document title; Length (very short, short, medium, long); public availability; funding
- mission and vision of organisation (sector, reach (understand networks of engagement))
- pre-COVID activities (type of products, target group(s))
- descriptions of potential challenges encountered, and lessons learned
- descriptions of activities, strategies, processes for COVID-19 response
- ‘other’ category to collect additional relevant data

### **Phase two: Social network analysis**

All COVID-END partners (n=46) will be invited to participate in an online network survey to understand their collaborative efforts. The developed survey tool (Appendix A) consists of an introduction; collaboration with COVID-END partners; and collaboration with other ESOs.

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 network survey to illustrate levels and patterns of relationships and interaction (formal/informal; ongoing/intermittent; awareness of/collaboration (e.g., shared projects, shared resources, etc.) and collaborations with other COVID-END partners and other organisations/groups in the evidence community.

### **Phase three: in-depth qualitative case study**

The in-depth qualitative case study will be conducted through semi-structured interviews with a range of 20-25 ESOs until thematic saturation is reached. The ESOs will be purposively sampled from the COVID-END Network of 46 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/purpose (evidence synthesis, guideline development or HTAs or being evidence intermediaries); location (North America/Europe/Australia or LMICs and others); sector (health or non-health); scale of organization (national or international); and level of collaboration (highly connected, less connected). We will use the documentary analysis and survey results to capture this information.

#### Data collection:

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 agreed to participate and arrange for a convenient time to conduct Webex 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 network (Appendix B). Respondents will receive the survey guide a week in advance of the scheduled interview. Oral informed consent will be obtained from participants before starting each interview. The audio recordings will only be used by the sustaining working group

and will be deleted after publishing the findings. We will offer the opportunity of respondents to decide if they want their organization to be identified.

#### Data analysis:

Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection and analysis will be performed concurrently. Basic qualitative analysis will be conducted through an iterative process. 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].

#### Ethical considerations:

Ethics approval for this research will be sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the American University of Beirut (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 at the beginning of each interview.

#### **Key steps and timeline**

- Identify project team by 3<sup>rd</sup> June
- Develop protocol by 15<sup>th</sup> June
- Ethics approval from IRB-AUB by 30<sup>th</sup> June
- Fieldwork by 22<sup>nd</sup> July
- Analysis and writing up by 19<sup>th</sup> August
- Organisational checking by 26<sup>th</sup> August
- Report to COVID-END partners meeting by 3<sup>rd</sup> September
- Journal submission by 30<sup>th</sup> September

#### **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.

### Appendix A: Network Survey of COVID-19 Partners

Thinking about evidence synthesis organizations you work with with pre-COVID-END, please use the scale below to indicate the extent to which you interacted with each partner.

Five levels of collaboration						
		<b>Networking (1)</b> -Aware of organization -Loosely defined roles -Little communication All decisions are made independently	<b>Cooperation (2)</b> -Provide information to each other -Somewhat defined roles -Formal communication -All decisions are made independently	<b>Coordination (3)</b> -Provide information to each other -Somewhat defined roles -Formal communication -All decisions are made independently	<b>Coalition (4)</b> - Share ideas -Share resources -Frequent and prioritized communication -All members have a vote in decision making	<b>Collaboration (5)</b> -Members belong to one system -Frequent communication is characterized by mutual trust -Consensus is reached on all decisions
Partner	No Interaction	Networking	Cooperation	Coordination	Coalition	Collaboration
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5
	0	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix B: Interview guide

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

### I. Introduction

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My name is \_\_\_\_\_, I am currently \_\_\_\_\_.

We would like to invite you to participate in an interview. Our objective is to understand how the evidence community initially responded to COVID-19 and their early experiences of partnering in COVID-END. The study is being conducted by the Sustaining Working Group of the COVID-END initiative. We are interviewing you to gain a better understanding of your views in relation to your organization's initial response to COVID-19 and its early experiences of partnering in the COVID-END initiative.

Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary; you have the right to decline to respond to any or all questions or stop the interview at any time, for any reason. The interview will consist of open-ended questions and should take approximately 60 minutes. Please let me know if you want to be identified or your organization to be identified and to represent this information with your organization's name. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. Alternatively, you may choose not to have your voice recorded. In that case, I will take notes on your responses.

Do you consent to participate in the interview?       Yes       No

Do you consent to identify you/your organization?       Yes       No

Do you consent to having your voice recorded?       Yes       No

If you have any questions pertaining to the study and your participation, please do not hesitate to ask me now. Also, if you have any questions at a later time, please feel free to contact Dr. Jeremy Grimshaw at [jgrimshaw@ohri.ca](mailto:jgrimshaw@ohri.ca) or (*include name and email of contact person*).

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

Interviewer to discuss what organizational learning is prior to asking interview questions:  
It is the “...the process of [an organization] improving actions through better knowledge and understanding”<sup>1</sup>.

## II. Description of organization:

Please describe your organization:

1. Organization name: -----
2. Has your organization conducted, is currently conducting, or intends to conduct an evaluation of its response to COVID-19?
  - Yes, (provide data if possible)
  - No

## III. Initial response to COVID-19

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1. When did your organisation intensify its focus or refocus on COVID-19? What triggered it to focus on COVID-19?
2. What are COVID-related activities that are being conducted by your organization?  
Factors to consider: types of products and target groups
3. How would you describe your organization’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic; reactive/proactive response? Why? (what was done/what was not done?)  
**Probes: ??**
4. What are challenges or obstacles that your organization experienced during its initial response to COVID-19?  
**Probes:**  
Factors to consider include human and financial resources, evidence synthesis methods, timeliness of the response, priority setting, staff motivation and well-being, etc.
5. The pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on knowledge synthesis organizations, can you tell me about what your organization has learned about successfully coping/managing/surviving/thriving under these conditions?

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<sup>1</sup> Lu, S.-L. and M. Sexton, Innovation in small professional practices in the built environment. 2009: John Wiley & Sons.

- What has contributed to the organization being successful managing (or contributed to your organization’s struggling to manage)
- How have you been able to shift the focus of work to COVID-19? What made it possible for the organization to be able to do this?
- Thinking about the present, what are the organization’s immediate concerns about the impact COVID-19 is having on it?
- Thinking about the future, what are the organization’s longer-term concerns about the impact COVID-19 will have on it?
- In two years from now, how do you see the organization and how might it be different from how it was pre- COVID-19? How come?

#### **IV. Initial engagement with the COVID-END initiative**

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1. How did your organization come to be involved with the COVID-END network?  
*(i.e., what led to your organization getting involved with the COVID-END network?)*
2. What were your expectations as an organization of your involvement?
3. What has been your experience to date with the COVID-END network?
4. What could be done to improve your organization’s involvement with the COVID-END network and improve COVID-END? Suggestions for future activities.