

Rapid and living evidence synthesis for environmental action

Lessons from rapid and living evidence synthesis in health

What transfers, what doesn't, and what the environmental evidence community might find useful

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Health has not solved this.

It has stress-tested it.

Clinical decisions, fast-moving guidance, and pandemics have put rapid and living synthesis under intense pressure.

What made that response possible:

- International methods networks and training capacity
- A shared way to describe how strong the evidence is
- Reporting norms that make review methods visible
- Living evidence tied to real decisions, not just publications

What it has actually delivered

Examples

01

Living reviews during COVID-19

Systematic reviews updated rapidly and repeatedly, feeding into WHO's living guideline on COVID-19 therapeutics. When evidence shifted on treatments, recommendations shifted with it.

Evidence synthesis as operational decision support

02

Rapid reviews for Ireland's Dept of Health

Evidence Synthesis Ireland produces rapid reviews on commissioned policy questions, from prevention to service delivery. The defining feature is not the speed.

...the decision maker helped frame the question from the start.

What we got wrong/are still working through

1

Rapid does not mean rough

Every shortcut must be pre-specified and transparent, not improvised. Integrity depends on being explicit about what you have not done.

2

Living synthesis is expensive

Many reviews that start out as living quietly become static. What keeps them alive is infrastructure and funding commitment, not author enthusiasm.

3

The bottleneck is the relationship

If the question is not co-produced with the decision maker, the output risks being shelved, however methodologically robust it is.

4

We need better evidence on our own methods

How we plan, do, and share rapid and living reviews is itself a research question. We are still building the evidence base for our own methodological choices.

What might transfer to environmental evidence

Methodological standards

The foundations exist in environmental evidence. Protect and extend them.

Training capacity

Methodology scales only as fast as the people trained in it.

Sustained, not one-off, commissioning

Project funding produces projects. Services need service funding.

A cautious eye on AI

The tools are moving faster than the methodological guidance, in both fields.



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The bottleneck is rarely the synthesis.

*It is the relationship with the people
who will use it, and whether our
institutions are set up to sustain it.*

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