

How to Write an Evidence Brief

for the

Disability Evidence Portal

Background

DEP exists to promote knowledge production related to disability in low- and middle-income countries through a web-based portal designed to inform evidence-based decision making on disability-inclusive development.

This involves you because evidence synthesis is an important part of knowledge production. To know what we know, and get at the important questions which need answering, high-quality reviews of the evidence which already exists, need to take place.

The DEP evidence reviews which currently exist were developed through a three-step evidence-synthesis process.

1. **Firstly**, we conducted a thorough search of the literature on a given topic using multiple online databases. A combination of search terms per question were used, based on a pre-determined list and supplemented with keywords based on emerging literature.
2. **Secondly**, a data base for extracting data was created and coded with detail linked to key questions and the answers which we see as headings on the evidence brief template. These evidence briefs are mostly based on 'Review of Reviews' (a review of existing systematic, narrative, scoping and other forms of review evidence). Special attention is paid to where authors used quality ratings of the included literature.
3. **Thirdly**, we reviewed all the synthesised data and collate the findings into a digestible language and format that outlined answers and recommendations to the questions outlined. Where evidence for key questions in LMICs were limited, the data extracted were drawn from recommendations based on reviews on HICs. For all content published with this consideration however, a blurb to notify the users was included for their attention and to highlight where LMIC evidence is needed.

Now it's your turn to contribute to the DEP repository of evidence.

How do you conduct an evidence review and write a DEP evidence brief?

Start with a question

All DEP evidence briefs answer key questions which are of relevance to decision-makers in disability inclusive development. That means all the evidence reviews should go about answering a question about policy, programs, practices, and other interventions, and the relation of these to the lives of people with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries.

These include questions about the health, education, livelihoods, and broader environment of people with disabilities. The question should be one for which an answer is possible, and for which policy and programming recommendations could be distilled – for instance, it should not be “What is known about x”, DEP reviews go beyond describing the state of knowledge.

Submit your question idea to the DEP team.

Start searching

Start your search informally. Go to EBSCO Host or another search engine, and key in a rough list of key words which you think suit your topic. Include “review or systematic review or narrative review or meta-analysis or synthesis” as a string. This means that when your results come up, you will be able to get a good sense, quickly, of whether you will be able to do a review of reviews, or whether you might need to cast your net a bit wider. Similarly, include “low- and middle-income country or developing country or global south or LMIC or third world” as a string. This will give you a good sense of whether there is enough evidence on your question topic in LMIC, or whether you might need to refer to literature from high-income settings, too.

Now, formalize your search. Break your search terms into groups and flesh out each group. For instance, if your question is, “What can be done to improve healthcare access for people with disabilities in LMIC” you need terms about:

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Healthcare | Health or healthcare or medical or rehab or care or hospital or clinic ... etc |
| Disability | Disability or special needs or intellectual disability or autism or cerebral palsy or disabled ... etc |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Interventions | Program or intervention or access or inclusion or participation ... etc |
| LMIC | Low- and middle-income country or developing country or global south or LMIC or third world |
| Review | Review or systematic review or narrative review or meta-analysis or synthesis |

Input them into your search engine with AND connectors and see what comes up.

The results of this first and most stringent search will be the papers most likely to fit your criteria. It might be that there are very few, particularly when you include the LMIC and review strings. Save the search and the papers. Download the papers and input them into a spreadsheet for review.

Then, delete the LMIC search term box, and run the search again; now you will have results which cover your topic (hopefully) but which are drawing their conclusion based on reviews from a range of non-LMIC locations. Save the search and the papers. Download the papers and input them into a spreadsheet for review.

Then, if you still worry that you may not have enough information for your review, delete the review search term box, and run the search again; now you will have results which cover your topic (hopefully) but which are drawing their conclusion based on reviews from a range of non-LMIC locations and which are individual studies rather than reviews. Download the papers and input them into a spreadsheet for review. Only do this last step if there is very little (fewer than 3) reviews resultant from the prior steps).

Review the abstracts, refine your inclusion list, and extract the important information

Review the abstracts of all your papers; the chances are good that, during this first phase, a lot of the search results will fall away. You will be able to see where the paper is way off topic, not the type of evidence you want, not relevant to people with disabilities, or inappropriate to your purposes for a host of other reasons. Then, find the full texts for the papers which remain.

It can be helpful to begin extraction now. Rather than reviewing each paper in full before deciding whether to keep it or not, and then reviewing the ones which remain in full a second time

to extract important data, you can combine these steps. Open the paper, scan it and see whether it seems to fit your inclusion criteria, and then begin extracting according to the headings below.

Usually, by about heading 5 (aim/scope) you will know whether the paper should indeed be included. If you get to this heading and the paper turns out not to fit your question at all, then discard it from your spreadsheet.

Please note, you should keep a record of the number of papers you exclude at each level of refinement – how many were excluded from their abstracts, and how many were excluded at this stage (and, at this level, note the reason – e.g. wrong population, wrong type of paper, etc).

Important pieces of data to be extracted from each included paper are:

Reference |

Include the full reference and a link to the paper for your records.

Year |

Note down the date of publication – for some reviews, you may have exclusion criteria related to the age of the publication, and this will allow you to filter out papers which are too old.

Paper type (Review/Study) |

Sometimes you do not know if you are going to get enough information from a review of reviews, or whether you would need to include individual studies. In these instances, code the papers according to type. In instances where you know that you will be doing a review of reviews, this can provide an opportunity to exclude articles which are individual studies.

Location (HIC/LMIC/Both) |

For review papers, you will need to look at the list of included studies and the results sections carefully to ascertain whether the review is based on articles from LMIC or HIC only, or a mix of studies from both locations. For individual studies, if you are working with them, this information should be more apparent. Unfortunately, some reviews omit very important information, including the final list of included papers, or the countries represented by the papers. If this is the case, make a note in your quality review column that there is an issue with the quality of the paper. Do not exclude at this point, necessarily.

Aim/Scope |

When examining a review for inclusion or exclusion from your review of reviews, and when framing the extraction of data if you decide to include it, it is imperative that you understand what authors of that review were trying to achieve. Were they trying to scope all the evidence on a topic descriptively? Did they have specific questions which they were trying to answer? This is important information for deciding whether a review meets your inclusion criteria (for instance, if your evidence brief is about how to improve healthcare access for people with disabilities in LMIC, and the review aims to meta-analyze the average cost-to-treat a child with a speech impediment in four countries, it may not be worth including. The topic is still health, but the remit of the review is incorrect.

Relevant data/findings |

As you read through the aim, methods, results and discussion, extract any relevant findings which you think may inform your evidence brief. The authors may not have noted these as a specific recommendation stemming from the data, but for your own purposes and that of providing a complete account of the literature, note these down. For instance, in a review of evidence about the role of user satisfaction surveys in informing quality improvement at outpatient rehabilitation clinics, the recommendations may simply be “yes, use them; or no, do not use them”. However, as the authors frame these specific recommendations, they may note that there are certain reasons why user satisfaction survey could be useful; why more research may be needed; or why infrastructural issues mean that it is hard to make a specific recommendation. All of this information is useful to you as a writer of an evidence brief.

Specific recommendations or implications |

Stemming from most reviews, will be recommendations stemming from, or implications of, the review findings. These will be in the discussion, conclusion, or even a separate ‘recommendations’ or ‘implications for practice’ section of the paper. Extract these. However, be aware that the authors of the review may not explicitly name recommendations or implications for practice as such, and so part of your job during the extraction phase is to make sense of the findings, discussion and conclusions of their work, and note if any logical recommendations or implications of their findings can be derived. **It is important, at this stage, that you ensure your conclusions are strongly rooted in the evidence which they present.** A good way to ensure that you are on the right track, here, is to double code this piece of the extraction; that is, ask a

second person to independently read the paper and extract recommendations and implications from it, without your input, and see whether your and their conclusions are the same. This improves the quality and reduces the risk of bias, of your evidence brief.

Additional notes |

In this comment, keep notes about the quality assurance mechanisms mentioned by the review authors. Did they mention using a quality assessment instrument like GRADE or a REA (rapid evidence assessment)? Do they mention assessing risk of bias in the included studies? If reviews mention taking any of these steps, note it down. If they do not, then make a note that the review, and its conclusions, should be engaged with caution. It is not necessary to discard review evidence simply because of the absence of a quality assurance mechanism in the appraisal of included studies. However, it should be noted in your extraction table so that you can evaluate the prominence you give the recommendations from that paper, in relation to higher-quality review evidence.

Transferability of recommendations to LMIC (if from HIC) |

Finally, as mentioned earlier, often your search will yield too few results from LMIC for your entire evidence brief to be based on LMIC evidence, and you will have to include in your review of reviews information from HIC, too. In these cases, you will need to make comments on the transferability of the recommendations or implications for practice of the reviews, for LMIC. That is, if a review of evidence from North America arrives at some conclusions about how to improve healthcare access for people with disabilities, you will need to view these through the lens of 'Would this work in LMIC?'. Important questions which you can use to make this assessment include, 'Are there a lot of infrastructural requirements for this recommendation to be acted upon?', 'What human resources are required for this recommendation to be put into practice, and could these be built in LMIC?', 'Are these recommendations universalist, or do they carry cultural or contextual assumptions which might make them unfit for application in non-Western contexts?', and so forth. These notes and assessments will allow you to ensure that you make use of applicable HIC data, but do not make recommendations in your evidence brief which are not suitable to the context to which they will be applied.

Now what?

After you have extracted the key pieces of data from your reviews, touch base with colleagues, and one of the DEP team. Reviewing the extraction tables as a group and discussing your first impressions of the extracted information can add rigor to the conclusions which get drawn. Having someone spot check your extraction for a percentage of the included papers can also improve the quality of the final product.

Write it up

Being part of the DEP evidence brief community means that you will come to the process of summarizing the evidence with a predetermined framework.

The question and the problem |

A brief background to your question and why it needs answering.

Recommendations |

About 5. Keep them short and simple.

Challenges |

Expand upon challenges noted in the literature, and the

How did we find answers |

Summarize your methodology and note the distribution of the evidence; how many reviews were included? From which date range? Which were from HIC and which were from LMIC?

Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions |

Tabulate the key recommendations and actions noted in your extraction table, as well as those arising from your engagement with the findings presented in your included reviews.

Policy priorities |

If any policy priorities emerge from the recommendations, state them here.

Conclusion |

Briefly summarize the key findings of your evidence review.

Gaps and research needs |

Note what gaps exist in the evidence – is there a need for more evidence, or a need for better quality evidence syntheses? Highlight, for future researchers as well as for those reading the evidence brief, what we do not yet know and what conclusions cannot be reached as a result of it.

Evidence Brief Language Guidelines

| Do not use | Examples of possible alternatives |
|---|--|
| Questions that ask how 'you' can address a particular query within the platform | Where possible, phrase your question on how 'we' as a community of disability researchers, programmers and policy makers can address questions posed within the Disability Inclusive Development space e.g. "How we ensure that children with disabilities are not bullied in school" instead of "How do you ensure that children with disabilities are not bullied in school". |
| Using phrases such as "suffers from", "is a victim of" or "afflicted by" when speaking about people with disabilities | Avoid using expressions that suggest continued helplessness and vulnerability of people with disabilities. Suggested approaches include person-first language such as "individual who had a stroke" or "person with cerebral palsy". Other suggestions include "people with disabilities experience.." or "people with disabilities are impacted by.." when referring to physical symptoms or social consequences. |
| Using words like "handicapped", "epileptic", "demented", "amputee" etc. | Avoid stigmatizing language that labels people with disabilities, including euphemisms that can be considered condescending e.g. "differently-abled", "physically challenged" etc. |
| Acronyms like PWD for people with disabilities or CWD for children with disabilities | Always use the appropriate and complete language when referring to people or children with disabilities e.g. "people with disabilities", "children with disabilities", "adults with intellectual developmental disorder". When in doubt, always do your research and seek advice from people with disabilities or organizations for persons with disabilities (OPDs) on what their preferred phrasing is when referring to the group. |

Finally, remember that **DEP evidence briefs** need to be:

Accessible |

The portal and all its content are open and free for anyone to access. The portal is also being built in compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (AAA) to ensure content is accessible to users requiring assistive technology. Your writing style needs to be accessible, and the language non-academic.

Decision-oriented |

The portal is unique in that it organizes content as evidence-based responses to key questions for informed decision-making.

Consensus-driven |

Questions and challenges featured on the portal have been sourced through a review of gaps and priorities identified by existing literature and through a Delphi process by key stakeholders in the disability inclusive development space. However, we welcome your ideas. If you want to contribute, please pitch us your suggested evidence review, and we'll put it to some key stakeholders and get back to you.

Targeted |

The portal focusses on designing and promoting content towards policy makers and other key actors with the power to implement changes in policy and practice.

Powered by experts and the community |

Led by a team of researchers and advocates working within Disability Inclusive Development and supported by the Program for Evidence to Inform Disability (PENDA). But DEP recognizes the importance of knowledge-sharing, equity, and participatory knowledge production, and through the crowd-sourcing of evidence briefs, we hope to build capacity in the research community to generate knowledge, whilst ensuring that DEP is answerable to the knowledge needs and priorities of contributors and users alike.

Quality-controlled |

Content is guided by principles of high-quality and rigorous evidence methods. If you want to contribute to DEP, you will be supported to meet these same quality standards.

We aim to enable and empower decision makers within the disability inclusive development space with evidence-based knowledge to make decisions on how best to improve access, health, education, livelihood and social outcomes for people with disabilities worldwide. Providing accessible information on disability inclusive development to stakeholders will ultimately help to inform and improve policies and strategies at the local, national and international level.