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Future of Evidence Synthesis Production - Perspectives of Geographical Groups

Paper of the Geographic Group Executive to the Cochrane Council and Governing Board – November 2021

The directors of Geographic Groups (GGs) held an online meeting (two sessions) on November 17, 2021, that focused on the future of evidence synthesis at Cochrane, the currently suggested re-organization and the perspectives of GGs. In both sessions, Karla Soares-Weiser provided a brief introduction, after which she answered questions and a general discussion was held. In its meeting of November 24, 2021, the Geographic Group Executive further discussed the issues raised by the GG constituency. This document aims to summarize the main points from both rounds of consultation as well as additional informal discussions. Some of the questions raised during the meetings were not directly linked to the future of evidence synthesis production and are for that reason not included in this paper to the Council and Governing Board.

1. We need to define an active role of GGs' in supporting the Strategy of Change

GGs are supportive of a process of change in Cochrane, in particular if this will help address long-standing problems that they have encountered in the past, for instance when working both with author teams and CRGs. Although GGs did not have a defined role in review production, they have contributed to it in multiple ways either at group or individual level (e.g., as review authors) or when supporting external author groups in their countries/regions. In the meetings GG directors emphasized several of the roles or activities that GGs have and voiced concerns related to them:

- To produce or support producing Cochrane reviews: GGs are supportive of a new structure that will allow authors not affiliated with any Cochrane group to directly submit review manuscripts to a Central Editorial Service (CES) for publication in the Cochrane Library. As to their own involvement in review production, some GGs could possibly collaborate closely with or even be part of Evidence Synthesis Units (ESUs). Recently, many Cochrane reviews in response to COVID-19 were produced by GGs in direct interaction with the CEU. These reviews contributed significantly to Cochrane's response to the pandemic and its profile as a trusted partner for evidence syntheses. In addition, GGs have pioneered some of the methodological innovations that now might become more attractive to funders than standard Cochrane reviews. Any new model for review production should be flexible enough to empower this kind of engagement / innovation across different Cochrane groups rather than restricting the role of GGs to activities other than evidence synthesis production.
- To train Cochrane review authors: GGs are concerned about how the proposed changes would impact on one of their main roles: capacity building. It is important to have a qualified and diverse base of authors around the world and to further develop the opportunities for young people to join Cochrane either as authors or on other pathways. Geographic Groups train many of these people. The interactions with CRGs have been important though problematic at times, e.g., when authors received training and advice by GGs but then were unable to register titles with CRGs. GGs are concerned how any training for high-quality evidence synthesis would be integrated in the new structures if these are very much geared towards delivering evidence synthesis products on request of stakeholders.
- To ensure dissemination, advocacy and knowledge translation activities: GGs are best placed to reach out to local/regional stakeholders, identify formats that are suitable for their information needs, and advocate for the use of Cochrane evidence in general. Much of this work is done in languages other than English and contributes significantly to Cochrane's global visibility. These activities also provide valuable opportunities for people who do not speak/write English at the level of review authoring to become involved in Cochrane and to contribute meaningfully. With an emphasis on evidence synthesis production alone GGs are concerned that these activities will no longer be a focus in Cochrane.
- To support priority setting: Identifying priorities for evidence synthesis is quite a challenge but crucial for effective knowledge translation, i.e. to ensure that Cochrane reviews meet the needs of stakeholders. GGs

can support this activity at local/regional level. But frequently they do not have the resources (or skills) to respond to the needs of stakeholders alone, e.g., by taking on review projects within tight timelines. GGs can help Cochrane to become more outward facing by involving stakeholders such as local decision makers or consumers in priority setting efforts and by serving as knowledge brokers. In turn, Cochrane should ensure that its future structures and processes will be accessible and responsive, so that, for instance, a national guideline group has a fair chance to come to Cochrane with a request/mandate for evidence and find a clearly defined pathway for how to work with us (possibly across different groups) up to an evidence synthesis product that responds to their needs.

2. We need to maintain cohesion and foster diversity in the community

For GGs, maintaining cohesion and fostering diversity within the global Cochrane community is very important. Diversity is closely linked to capacity building as newcomers need training to become productive Cochrane members. Consequently, GGs ask how capacity building would be taken into consideration by the new ESUs if they are thought to be a key structure in Cochrane in the future. This includes training for review production but also for other tasks, for instance, in knowledge translation. If Cochrane's fundraising efforts focus on a small number of ESUs to ensure their financial sustainability, capacity building and other important collaborative efforts in the Cochrane community may become secondary. While some ESUs may be willing to contribute (or even lead) in areas other than review production (e.g., if they are part of an academic institution) others may just focus on review production alone. GGs ask that any roles that ESUs should have *beyond evidence synthesis production* be clarified and defined early on. Transparent and meaningful performance indicators will be needed and should reflect such additional roles.

3. We need transparency in the conceptualization and selection of ESUs and in managing competition

GG staff are very committed to Cochrane and its collaborative spirit. Through their in-kind or earmarked funding for staff with part- or full-time Cochrane roles, GGs and their host institutions bring substantial resources to Cochrane. Right now, some GGs already have a local 'ESU' profile and want to continue in this way. Cochrane should adopt a flexible model when going forward defining its new way of producing evidence syntheses, specifically avoiding "one-size-fits-all" models which may benefit some but not other groups. This would avoid an erosion of the existing valuable expertise and resources if a strong element of competition was introduced into a community that is rooted in collaboration. Of course, the challenge is how to reconcile this with funders' preferences for competitive (short-term) project funding. Competition among Cochrane groups (incl. groups from different constituencies) can become quite dangerous and undermine the 'core values' of Cochrane. If a decision in favor of establishment of ESUs is to be taken, Cochrane should be very transparent about the criteria and processes that will be used to define and select the groups that will lead these ESUs, and in particular, whether some geographical balance is intended. Furthermore, Cochrane will need to develop a comprehensive plan to resolve conflicts, including those that potentially may arise between GGs.

4. We need to guarantee the continuity of review production during this period of change

There is quite some uncertainty in GGs whether CRGs (generally, and in the UK, in particular) will continue to take on new reviews until the restructure is completed. GG staff and the author teams they work with need to have clear indications whether new review titles can still be submitted (or published reviews be updated) during this period of change and who will be their point of contact. At least during the transition phase, a flexible approach with co-existing review production models might bear less risks than changing from CRGs to ESUs all at the same time.