# Workshop Report

## *Communicating Science to Facilitate the Uptake of Research Findings into Policy and Practice*

*July 2022*

Contents

## Introduction

On 21st June, 28th June, and 5th July 2022, the Applying Research to Policy and Practice for Health (ARCH) programme at The Global Health Network in collaboration with the Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme (MLW), Fiocruz, and icddr,b conducted the 'Communicating Science to Facilitate the Uptake of Research Findings into Policy and Practice virtual.

Currently, there is significant disconnect between the teams that undertake health research, those making decisions on health priorities and policies, and those who are delivering healthcare and pushing social change, particularly in resource-limited settings. Nevertheless, if research is to deliver its maximum impact and positively change health outcomes, findings from health research should be translated into recommendations that are relevant to communities and can be implemented within policy and practice.

'Science Communication' has been identified as a crucial driver of research uptake. Different stakeholders within the research uptake cycle, such as researchers, journalists, policy makers, and advocacy organisations, are groups that shape how scientific results are communicated, interpreted, and taken up into policy and practice. In this three-part workshop series, speakers shared their skills and experiences in communicating scientific information.

The workshop series focused on three topics, and brought together experts in the field:

*Part One:* How to Talk to the Public About Controversial Topics in Science -21st June 2022

- Ezequiel García-Elorrio, MD MSc PhD, Director Health Care Quality and Patient Safety, Institute for Clinical Effectiveness and Health Policy (IECS) **(chair)**
- Dr Luisa Massarani, science communicator and researcher in science communication, coordinator of the Brazilian Institute of Public Communication of Science and Technology, researcher at Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), and coordinator for Latin America of SciDev.Net **(speaker)**

*Part Two:* How to Write a Policy Brief-28th June2022

- Dr Kondwani Chidziwisano, Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS), department of Environmental Health, Malawi **(chair)**
- Dr Sohana Shafique, a Health Policy and Systems researcher with interest in Urban Health and Nutrition, and lead of the Urban Health Research Group in the Health Systems and Population Studies Division at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), **(speaker)**

*Part Three:* How to Communicate with Journalists-5th July 2022

- Kelvin Ngugi Gichia, Technical Officer, Communications, Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) **(chair)**
- Lindiwe Bandazi-Mafuleka is the Communications and Public Engagement Manager at the Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme (MLW) **(speaker)**

# Content Summary

## Part one

### How to Talk to the Public About Controversial Topics in Science

***Dr Luisa Massarani*** *is a Brazilian science communicator, researcher in science communication, and coordinator at Fiocruz, and SciDev.Net*

Why do we communicate controversies?

- To educate the public
- Controversies increase awareness
- It can be exciting investigative work
- Controversies are part of science as they facilitate further research and new developments

What constitutes a science controversy?

A scientific controversy is any point of view that challenges current concepts or overturns accepted beliefs, theories, or practice. For example, publicly funded projects based on flawed science or unsure technologies can result in controversies. Additionally, statements and observations made by scientists of good repute can spawn a controversy. For example, Nobel Laurette James Watson made a comment that black people were less intelligent than whites which led to his resignation from the Gold Spring Harbour Laboratory. Faking data, plagiarism, and other forms of misconduct also induce controversies. Science controversies are further challenged by other approaches or schools of thoughts such as religion. Controversies can also stem from the path in which scientific research takes other than validity. For example, the world debated on whether it was right to clone human beings in the case of "Dolly the Sheep", when Scottish scientists cloned sheep for scientific research.

When checking for controversies, it is important to use a balanced and journalistic approach when reporting. The following checklist may be useful in checking whether to report on a controversy:

- does the story have a controversial angle?
- which controversies are worth pursuing based on the impact it may have on the society?
- what are the various perspectives of the controversy and who has contrary opinions in the matter?
- note that scientists are not the only reliable and authorised sources of information
- are your sources trustworthy?
- do not distort the debate as this may cause false hope and generate unwanted fears among the public
- are you sensationalising the story?
- are you exaggerating?

It is also important to note issues of ethics when communicating science controversies by being mindful of the truth. It is important to not damage people's reputations and to not raise or spread panic among the public.

Public engagement in science controversies

There are various ways of engaging the public in science controversies:

- Involve non-specialist people to discuss issues through dialogues e.g., discussion groups in the communities, school talks with children, or inviting scientists for science talks
- Use info-tainment e.g., using dramas, plays, poetry, documentaries to communicate issues to the public

Some of the challenges of such public engagement initiatives are that science may be perceived as "not cool" for some to participate in discussions and there may be a disconnect between the artistic and science parts.

## Summary of Q&A

**What healthcare scientific research will help communicate science better?**
When there's important issues in society, we need to have dialogues and have the public participate. We have looked at the conversations that people are having about vaccines on social networks and its very concerning that not a lot of science communicators are involved in these.

**Defining controversies in science is difficult but how do you find out who is right?**
It is important to understand many aspects of the controversies and the different interest groups of the controversy. Our role as science communicators is to explore all these complexities and communicate what is best.

**Some pharmaceutical companies announce findings prior to peer review processes, and this may cause an overload of unverified information. How do you deal with such?**
The peer review process is very important. However, sometimes you cannot wait to give the findings out. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded information to be published about the disease before the peer review. Many people lost their lives, and the information was crucial to saving lives. Perhaps we need to have more doctors, researchers and journalists who can understand that the information didn't pass through a scientific peer review process and manage the information accordingly.

**How can one engage audiences that are not interested in controversial topics to extend the reach?**
It is important to not only have people that show interest in science but also those that consume science information. I believe talking about controversies engages those that are not interested in science. This stimulates the emotional aspect in people and brings different people to talk about science.

**What happens when the public opinion doesn't change after a scientific controversy?**
It is difficult to change people's opinions or behaviour. Sometimes the process is longer and it's not easy and the impact may not be direct.

**What is the fastest way to convince the public about the falseness of scientific news?**
It's just important to give the trustable information to the public.

**Acceptance vs engagement. What works best?**
We need to motivate people to trust scientists and science and understand the complexities of issues.

**How do you better engage the audience?**
There's no one magic way to engage people. You need to use different strategies and initiatives of engagement to reach a wider audience involving different population demographics.

**What would be your advice on how to establish a team of communicators in a research institute to communicate research findings?**
If you have the money and structure, have a group of people with different expertise and background i.e., involve people with communication background, scientific background, artists, and the scientists themselves.

**How do you make engagement sustainable?**
Science communication should be supported all the time and we need dedicated teams in public engagement. We need more visibility for science communication.

How do you assess the impact of public engagement?
It's not simple but there are different strategies to measure impact. You can look at the impact by analysing the conversations that people have raised following the information. This impact can also be looked at after some time has elapsed, so we look at what kind of impressions people have had after time has passed. Studies can also be conducted to assess how people perceive information.

## Part two

### How to Write a Policy Brief

***Dr Sohana Shafique*** *is a Health Policy and Systems researcher with interest in Urban Health and Nutrition, and lead of the Urban Health Research Group in the Health Systems and Population Studies Division at icddr,b, Bangladesh*

What a Policy Brief is

A policy brief is a tool used to communicate and present research and recommendations to a non-specialized audience. It is a clear and stand-alone document that focuses on a single topic showing research findings and links these to policy initiatives. Policy briefs are used as tools to convince the target audience of the urgency of a problem and persuade them to adopt a preferred/recommended course of action. A policy brief can be used on its own or as an accompaniment to a presentation.

Types of Policy Briefs

1. Advocacy Briefs argue for a particular course of action
2. Objective Briefs provide balanced information on several policy options

The Policy-making Cycle

This is a recurrent cycle comprising of four steps

1. **Review**: a situation is assessed, and policy gaps are identified
2. **Agenda setting**: the problem(s) is identified, research is conducted, and the agenda is set
3. **Formulation**: options and strategies are developed, and negotiations and policy formulation occur
4. **Implementation**: the policy is enforced

Planning Your Policy Brief

| Element | What is Involved |
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| **Purpose** (the purpose of the brief needs to be written before drafting the brief to ensure that everything that is written serves that purpose) | • Identify whether the policy brief is to inform or suggest actions and make recommendations<br>• Communicate the urgency of the issue<br>• Focus on the benefits and advantages of the given policy advice<br>• Stay focused on the specific problem |
| **Audience** (policy briefs need to be accessible to the targeted audience) | • Identify who the readers are<br>• Understand the level of subject knowledge of the audience<br>• Understand their openness to the |

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| | recommendations<br>• Understand the interests of the audience in the subject area |
| **Content** (it should be clear, succinct and focus on a single topic) | • Keep it within 1500 words or 2 pages in length<br>• Use plain language<br>• Avoid over describing the methodology |
| **Structure** (the flow of the policy brief should lead the reader from problem to solution) | • Be clear of the policy recommendations<br>• It should be audience specific and reflect their interests |

Template of a Policy Brief

- Executive Summary: A short paragraph or a few bullet points should make up the executive summary. This is where the essence of the entire brief is condensed in a few sentences. It mainly appears on the top of the page.
- Introduction: This section conveys the argument with the goal of giving readers an understanding of what the research is about. It is where you express the urgency of the topic discussed and describe any key questions of your analysis and the conclusion.
- Overview of the Research or Problem: This is considered the most important part of the brief because it explains the reasoning behind the policy recommendations. The focus in this section is on two elements. The first is the research approach (an explanation of how the research was conducted, who was involved and how the data was collected) and the second is the research results (a general picture of the findings).
- Examination of the Findings: The data and findings are interpreted in this section. The goal is to ensure that the analysis is balanced and defensible, but still convincing.
- Conclusion: This is where specific actions are highlighted. Persuasive language is used to present the recommendations. However, one needs to ensure that all arguments are fully supported by the evidence from the findings. The conclusion also needs to highlight that yours is the best advice or route to take. Research implications should be emphasized followed by recommendations written using action words.

Designing a Policy Brief

The way a policy brief is presented is an important consideration as it can help to keep the audience engaged. The briefs need to have titles and headings, sidebars, lists and graphics.

1. Titles and headings

These act like reference points to entice the readers. They also draw the attention of readers to specific topics in the brief. The use of verbs for headings makes it appear more dynamic and phrasing headings as questions may spark the readers curiosity.

2. Side bars

Side bars add depth to the main discussion. They make reading of the brief easier. Side bars are to be short, descriptive, engaging and action oriented.

3. Lists

These are an effective way of simplifying content in a brief. Each bullet point should express a complete thought and there should be no more that 5-7 bullets presented. It is important to note that bullet points that have only one or two words in length must be avoided.

4. Graphics

Visuals make briefs interesting for readers. Captions for photos and other visuals used are mainly to explain the content to the reader.

Revising the Policy Brief

It is important to reflect on the brief's purpose, audience, content, and structure before publishing it to readers. It is also useful to make the brief user-friendly by removing jargon and statistics. This can be achieved by asking someone with no prior knowledge of the content of the brief to read it and give feedback.

## Summary of Q&A

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| If the goal of a policy brief is to influence or inform, what methods can be used for one to influence uptake?<br>*For informing, using info graphics can help. It's good to describe the information and share the information. This is a way to just start the conversation.* |
| Can you refer to other researchers when writing a policy brief?<br>*You can refer to other important findings researched by others. However, the limited scope of presenting findings in the brief will make you limit your presentation to 4-5 key references.* |
| In which section of the brief are side bars used?<br>*It's mostly the research overview section when you present key findings. Sometimes it can be placed on the front page, it all depends on how you wish to present your brief.* |
| Can a policy brief using evidence in literature be seen as implementation research?<br>*It is important to conduct and share findings of implementation research because it helps us to know what needs to be done. Policymakers are more interested in this. The findings of this type of research can be used in an evidence brief to make it more relevant. Whenever research is done, it is to bridge a knowledge gap so each policy brief can have some implications and you can then come up with a policy. Or, you can have a summary from several researchers with a similar topic to write a policy brief. Always think about the policy implications of the study when you're conducting research.* |
| Can a policy brief be written to target influential stakeholders and not policymakers? What about the issues of conflict of interest?<br>*If there is a conflict of interest, it needs to be clearly mentioned and it is our moral duty to mention it. It also depends on the context and the problem you're dealing with.* |
| Can you develop a policy brief from research whose findings are yet to be published?<br>*If it is very urgent, you can make recommendations. But if the situation is not urgent, you can wait for the results of the research.* |
| It seems difficult to come up with the target audience for a brief.<br>*It is good to have people that know the language and can interpret the research results and take this information to policymakers. Most times, researchers are not skilled in communicating research to policymakers, so it's good to find knowledge brokers or pressure groups to take the information forward. The media or journalists also play an important role by writing press releases to reach the targeted audience.* |

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| How can we monitor uptake and impact of the policy brief?<br>*Engaging policy makers from the beginning is important so that they take interest and ultimately follow up. For evaluating purposes, it is difficult to assess. However, the policy position can be documented through qualitative investigations and reviewing it.* |
| Can we write a policy brief following research that has been done once or even for research conducted over a short timeframe?<br>*Some research is based on rapid quantitative studies, so for this type of research, a policy brief can be written to the targeted policymakers. It all depends on the problem.* |
| Where do you submit a policy brief once written?<br>*The actual policy brief is a 2 paged document and must be submitted to the policymakers. However, other discussions and opinions on the brief can be shared to the media through newspaper or through roundtable discussions. It is a way to also engage the citizens and not only policymakers. If you are having an open policy dialogue with citizens, it is good to use the local language so that everyone can understand.* |
| Who should write a policy brief?<br>*Anyone involved in the research can write the brief because everyone has their own perspectives. It should be a team effort.* |
| What is the difference between a policy brief and a policy analysis?<br>*A policy brief is more in-depth and comprises of the policy recommendation. The goal is to make recommendations. The objective of writing an analysis is different.* |
| What target mobilisation tactics can a researcher use?<br>*Understand the stakeholders by doing a stakeholder mapping including the citizens. This will help us know their interests and identify who will take your agenda forward or block it. You also need a series of dialogues with the stakeholders.* |
| Do you need to state that study results are not yet out when writing a brief?<br>*It's a good idea and you need to mention that it is from preliminary findings.* |
| Is it necessary to include links of the publication of a policy brief?<br>*You can mention it, and that way it shows that there's more information on that area. So, you can share the hyperlink to other research when sharing through online platforms.* |

## Part three: How to communicate with journalists

***Lindiwe Bandazi Mafuleka*** *is the Communications and Public Engagement Manager at the Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Programme (MLW)*

Introduction

Science communication allows scientific ideas to be transmitted to non-specialist audiences in an accessible and understandable manner. Journalists are major stakeholders in science communication because of their ability to efficiently communicate to a wider audience (they inform, enlighten, educate, and entertain). Because journalists have a duty to inform, they can act as watchdogs. Journalists are also able to see what is worthy as news and share it with the public.

Scientists and researchers have a duty to help journalists to tell stories. Some of the channels used by journalists to report on issues include press releases, reports, company websites, briefs, interviews, events, and social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Therefore, scientists can use these platforms to share news about their work.

There are several points to consider when communicating with journalists/the public:

- Language used to communicate to journalists needs to be simple and without jargon since most journalists are not specialised in science reporting. When jargon is used, explain it immediately and use online tools such as up-goer-five text editor.
- Analogies and metaphors can help scientists to explain things to non-specialist audiences for easy comprehension.
- Give access to yourself and the study team for journalists to reach you for information. Social media is a useful tool for making yourself accessible more favourable presently. Journalists also use social platforms to source news ideas and disseminate news.
- Provide context by giving background information, explaining your scope and limitations, and presenting supporting information so that the audience can understand you better.
- Be concise by presenting main points clearly (for example by using bullet points or using visuals) and always plan what you want to say.

Press Releases

Press releases are one of the commonly used tools to communicate to the public. They are used to accurately present and promote significant news and information.

Format of a Press Release:

1. Heading: summarises the points you are trying to convey
2. Dateline: shows how current the information is
3. Summary of key points: this includes description of the research, top line results, statistics, and the background
4. Quotes: this is where experts are quoted, and should contain relevant quotes
5. Contact information: allows journalists to easily follow up on the information for any news material

How to Handle Interviews with Journalists

- Preparing for the interview is an important step to take. This can be done by researching the media house and identifying whether they have a particular viewpoint and who their audience is. This allows you to plan better and decide whether to do the interview or not.
- Know the topic. Talking to journalists in advance allows you to know what the journalist is interested in. This can also give you the opportunity an angle that reflects your story.
- Asking for questions before the interview from the journalists allows you to prepare what to say including facts and examples.
- Keep the audience in mind when speaking with the journalist. Points presented must be clear, simple, and whenever necessary, important points can be repeated for emphasis.
- Facts must be supported, and limitations must be mentioned when speaking with journalists. If the answer to a question is not known, it is okay to say you don't know.
- Speak at the right pace and mind your tone and body language.

## Summary of Q&A

**How do you handle scientific words that can't be translated into the local language?**
"Analogies can be used to explain things. Additionally, instead of using a direct translation of a word, longer sentences help to explain scientific words".

**Is there a common template for communicating with journalists vs the science community?**
"The same principles as shared in the presentation can be used in different scenarios".

**What are some of the recommendations for building relationships with journalists?**
"You can have special departments for media engagement. You can also pair up researchers with journalists for co-learning purposes and you can also have presentations made by researchers to journalists to allow them to learn more about what the researchers are doing, and why it's important".

**How do you deal with information that is taken out of context by journalists?**
"You can ask the journalist to crosscheck the content before publishing. However, if the audience has already seen the misinformed article, you can contact the journalist and the reporter may retract the information and an apology may be given".

**How do you communicate with locals and special risk groups?**
"Engage with the special group, the language they use, their level of knowledge, beliefs and way of life and prepare appropriately for the information you want to give out".

**How do you handle reporters that demand money or want an incentive to cover your story?**
"You can talk to the editors in the most respectful manner and report the journalist. It is unethical for journalists to demand money unless it is an advert".

**How do you manage stress during an interview?**
"The best way is to adequately prepare so that you are relaxed. You can also vary the pace of how you speak. Most reporters are also able to notice a tense interviewee and can help you manage your stress by the way they ask questions or approach you".

**Is there any special approach to present rebuttals? How do we correct journalists when you are misquoted?**
"You can contact the journalist and let them know that you have been misquoted and what the right information is".

**How can scientists understand the urgency of the newsroom?**
"It's important for the scientists/ researchers to be accessible. You can ask the reporter what their deadline is and decide whether to do an interview or not from there. Keep good and open communication with reporters".

**How do you communicate to a journalist or stakeholder that has bias on your specific topic?**
"Always stick to the truth, present the facts, present your context and make a call for action".

**Have you used media clinics to train journalists on science reporting? How did you do it?**
"We do quarterly meetings where journalists come and listen to presentations from different research projects. We also invite lecturers from universities that train journalists to write effectively on stories".

**How can scientists and journalists build trust in each other?**
"It goes down to different personal values that each may have. It's important to tell the truth and keep an open line of communication".

**How do you deal with a situation where sensitive information about your work is leaked to journalists?**
"We have an institutional stance that deals with crisis communication. We contact the media outlet and expect a retraction where information is misrepresented. An official statement may also be issued to correct the misinformation".

**Concerning innovative studies, how do scientists communicate to journalists within the context of public urgency of the findings and the science drawback and how to align comprehension between scientists, journalist and the audience?**
"In the case of the covid 19 vaccines, we had an educational webinar and we invited journalists and the public to attend which allowed them to have a better understanding on vaccines and COVID-19. You can employ the same".

**Is there an approach to use when journalists refute your evidence?**
"The best advice I can give is to always state your facts with supporting information. Always be truthful".

## Call to action and next steps

Feel free to catch up on past and future events and resources under thematic areas of Stakeholder Mapping, Community Engagement, Communicating Science, and Science Advice here: https://arch.tghn.org/topics/. You are encouraged to register for the ARCH knowledge hub for free at arch.tghn.org. The workshop recordings and speakers' slides are shared here: Communicating Science Workshop.

## Demographics

### Geographical coverage

A total of **779** people from **88 countries** registered for this two-part series, and **469 participants** from **63 countries** attended the webinar which corresponds to an **attendance rate of 60%.**

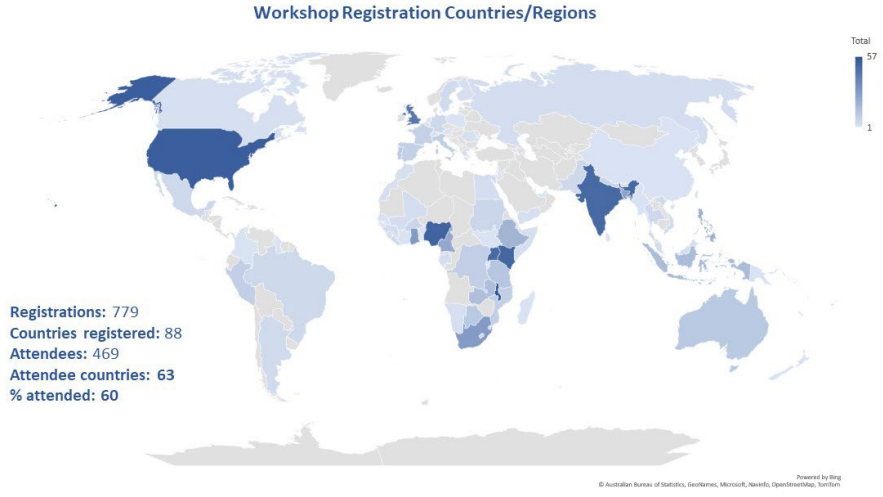


Figure 1. Heat map showing the geographical distribution of webinar registrants. The scale bar shows how the colour corresponds to the number of registrants from each country.

## Participants' work

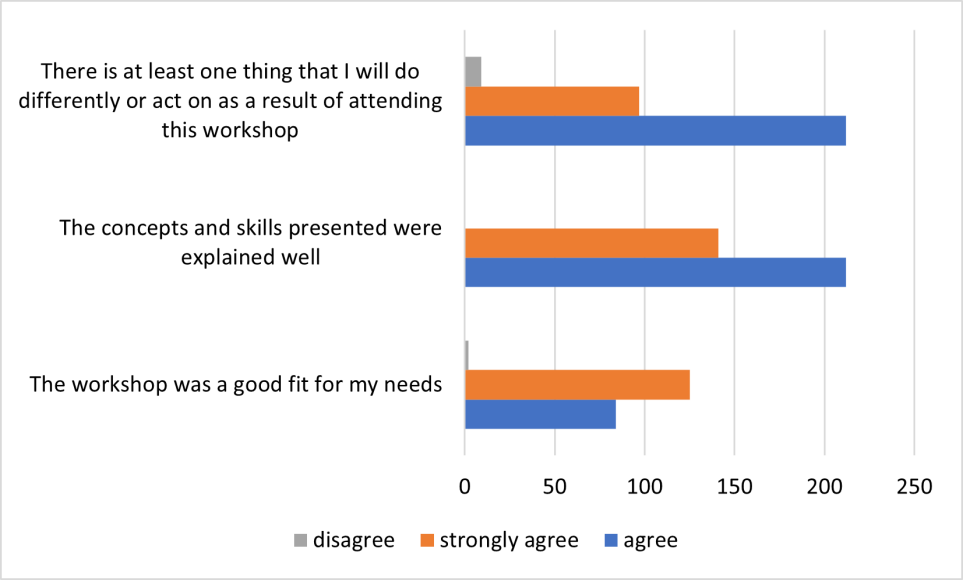
As part of registration, participants were asked to indicate their occupations. Most of the participants were health researchers (including research fellows, research coordinators, research managers, and epidemiologists), physicians, nurses, lab technicians, students, project managers, lecturers, communication officers, country directors of health organisations, and pharmacists.

## Feedback

Out of the 469 individuals that attended the workshop series, 212 completed the feedback form, which corresponds to an **attendance rate of 58%**

Participants registered and attended for many reasons as illustrated below:


We then asked participants their agreement with the following statements:



We asked participants what they had learnt and how they would act differently after attending this workshop. The answers were positive. Many expressed that they had gained more knowledge on the theme of each session, and more specifically how the speakers used examples to explain their concepts, the relevance of engaging non-academic stakeholders/audience throughout research projects, and the significance of multi-sectoral collaborations in addressing research uptake.

Participants gave us suggestions on what we address in future workshops:

Participants mostly suggested that in future sessions, we could incorporate more interaction through means such as breakout rooms and polls and encourage peer to peer communication. Improve audio translation services. Participants also felt that extending workshop invitations to more people from different countries could bring more effectiveness to the workshop. Participants also felt that the audio (especially for interpreters) could be improved. Nevertheless, there was a contradicting suggestion regarding time. While one participant suggested that allocating more time to the workshops allowing more Q&A sessions would be useful, more participants argued that they found the session too long and the questions addressed were too many. The optimal suggested time was one hour. Lastly, one participant suggested on shifting the workshop time to later in the day (after working hours).

We finally asked participants, if the following development opportunities were available, which ones they would be interested in: