

Panel Summary

Putting Evidence at the Centre of
Everyday Life in Ontario

20 & 21 October 2022



HEALTH FORUM

EVIDENCE >> INSIGHT >> ACTION

McMaster Health Forum

The McMaster Health Forum's goal is to generate action on the pressing health and social issues of our time. We do this based on the best-available research evidence, as well as experiences and insights from citizens, professionals, organizational leaders, and government policymakers. We undertake some of our work under the Forum banner, and other work in our role as secretariat for Rapid-Improvement Support and Exchange, the COVID-19 Evidence Network to support Decision-making (COVID-END), and the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges.

Citizen panels

A citizen panel is an innovative way to seek public input on high-priority issues. Each panel involves 14 to 16 citizens from all walks of life. Citizens share their ideas and experiences on a particular issue, and learn from research evidence and from the views of others. A citizen panel helps us to understand the values that citizens think are important when making decisions about the issue, and reveals new understandings about the issue and how it should be addressed.

This panel summary

On the 20 and 21 October 2022, we convened two citizen panels on putting evidence at the centre of everyday life in Ontario. This summary highlights the views of panellists about:

- the challenges of using evidence in everyday life
- possible solutions to address these challenges
- potential barriers and windows of opportunity to move forward.

The citizen panels did not aim for consensus. However, the summary describes areas of common ground and differences of opinions among panellists and (where possible) identifies the values underlying different positions.



Exploring the problem



Discussing solutions



Identifying barriers and windows of opportunity to moving forward

Summary of the panels

Two citizen panels were convened virtually, each engaging a diverse group of citizens – in terms of age, gender, ethnocultural background and socio-economic status – from across Ontario. The first panel took place on 20 October 2022 and brought together seven citizens, while the second panel was held on 21 October 2022 and brought together 12 citizens. All participants were provided with a plain-language citizen brief prior to attending their respective citizen panel, which helped to inform and guide the deliberations.

The problem

During the deliberation about the problem, panellists were asked to share what they perceived to be the main challenges of using evidence in everyday life. They generally agreed about the framing of the problem in the citizen brief, but emphasized the following seven challenges:

- citizens are facing many complex decisions on a daily basis, but lack time to find and use evidence for each
- there is a decline in trust, particularly towards governments, businesses, so-called ‘experts,’ and the media
- we live in a polarized society, which makes it hard to have public dialogues informed by the best available evidence
- people do not have the same views about what constitutes ‘evidence’ (and ‘good quality’ evidence)
- the volume of evidence and misinformation is overwhelming
- citizens do not all have the capacity to find and use evidence
- citizens have a limited role in producing and interpreting evidence.

The solutions

After discussing the challenges, panellists were invited to reflect on four potential solutions to support the use of evidence in everyday life. We introduced the solutions in a particular order in the citizen brief, but panellists appeared to have more appetite for the solutions in the following order:

3. helping citizens judge what others are claiming or more generally find (and receive) reliable information on a topic
2. making evidence available to citizens when they are making choices
4. engaging citizens in asking questions and answering them (with new research or with existing evidence)
1. making evidence-based choices the default or easy option.

Several values-related themes emerged during the discussion, such as citizens wanting to strengthen their competencies, having access to the most up-to-date evidence, and being meaningfully engaged with evidence producers. However, perhaps the most salient one was trust, specifically the need to build more trusting relationships between citizens, evidence producers and evidence intermediaries. Thus, any solution should highlight its potential regarding improving trust.

Barriers and windows of opportunity

Panellists identified three key barriers to bring about change: 1) some people will never change their minds, no matter what the evidence says; 2) we live in a very polarized and volatile world (and it may be difficult to implement local solutions without considering what is happening globally); and 3) fighting misinformation and disinformation may be a lost battle (the ‘bad guys’ spreading false information are getting very clever).

Despite skepticism in the capacity to bring about change, many panellists were encouraged to see other fellow citizens sharing the same concerns and committed to supporting the use of evidence in everyday life.

Exploring the problem

Why is it challenging to use evidence in everyday life?

In the citizen brief that was pre-circulated to panellists, we proposed three reasons why it may be challenging for citizens to use evidence in everyday life: 1) it is often left to individuals to find, understand and use evidence on their own; 2) governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations do not set things up so that everyday choices are based on evidence; and 3) we live in an era of misinformation, disinformation and infodemics. Panellists generally agreed about the framing of the first and third reasons, but the second reason resonated less with them.

During the deliberation about the problem, panellists emphasized the following seven challenges:

1. citizens are facing many complex decisions on a daily basis, but lack time to find and use evidence for each
2. there is a decline in trust, particularly towards governments, businesses, so-called 'experts,' and the media
3. we live in a polarized society, which makes it hard to have public dialogues informed by the best available evidence
4. people do not have the same views about what constitutes 'evidence' (and 'good-quality' evidence)
5. the volume of evidence and misinformation is overwhelming
6. citizens do not all have the capacity to find and use evidence
7. citizens have a limited role in producing and interpreting evidence.

Challenge 1. Citizens are facing many complex decisions on a daily basis, but lack time to find and use evidence for each

At the beginning of the deliberations, panellists discussed their use of evidence in everyday life. They shared diverse experiences with searching for and using evidence. Most recalled searching for evidence to inform personal decisions (most often for health and financial/investment decisions), or to inform professional decisions at work.

Many panellists indicated that they face many complex decisions on a daily basis, but lack time to find and use evidence for each. One panellist indicated that people with chronic conditions are facing many stressful health-related decisions on a daily basis: "As a person with Type 1 diabetes, it has been said that we make 180 decisions a day about diabetes alone."

Challenge 2. There is a decline in trust, particularly towards governments, businesses, so-called 'experts,' and the media

The decline in trust was a common theme throughout the panels: whether it is a decline of trust towards government, businesses, so-called 'experts', or the media.

In the past, people used a variety of factors to determine whether something was trustworthy: evidence found in a peer-reviewed article in a scientific journal; claims made by an expert in a specialized field; a statement made by a doctor; or an announcement made by a government official. The decline in trust now leads people to question everything, and this has been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many panellists expressed frustration at the governments' response to the pandemic (with many decisions being criticized for not being supported by the best available evidence), and by so-called experts providing advice that was constantly changing. As one panellist said: "If the most trustworthy source is no longer 'trustworthy,' then where does one go [to get reliable evidence]?" However, several panellists later acknowledged that evidence does change (sometimes rapidly), as does the context in which it is being considered.

Exploring the problem

When asked what being ‘trustworthy’ meant to them, panellists indicated that it was influenced by past experiences, as well as personal beliefs and values. As one panellist said: “What is trustworthy for me isn’t necessarily trustworthy for my neighbour.” Yet, most panellists indicated that trust (and trustworthiness) was a relational phenomenon.

Challenge 3. We live in a polarized society, which makes it hard to have public dialogues informed by the best available evidence

Many panellists indicated that social, political and scientific polarization is shaking societies across the world (not just Ontario). While the COVID-19 pandemic may have put the spotlight on the need for evidence, it also fed anti-elitist and anti-expert sentiments in large segments of the population. According to panellists, these views are prevalent in the media, on the internet and on social-media platforms.

An example of this polarization is the presence of experts on both sides of the debates around vaccination and mask mandates. A panellist who was opposed to mask mandates and other government responses during the pandemic stated: “We had doctors too [in our camp].”

This polarization seems to have an impact on open-mindedness and critical thinking. It encourages people to stand their ground, as opposed to fostering public dialogues informed by the best available evidence. As one panellist indicated, many people seem to enjoy this polarization: “I find today that many people would rather have the drama than the truth.”

Challenge 4. People do not have the same views about what constitutes ‘evidence’ (and ‘good-quality’ evidence)

Another common theme is that people do not have the same views about what is ‘evidence’ and ‘good-quality’ evidence. This discussion highlighted four points: 1) people are not familiar with the different forms of evidence; 2) evidence appears detached from the realities of citizens; 3) people may not be prepared for the evolving and probabilistic nature of evidence; and 4) how evidence is portrayed in popular culture may set unrealistic expectations.

Regarding the first point, panellists indicated that most citizens are not familiar with the different forms of evidence and how each form can help at different steps of a decision-making process (as highlighted in Figure 1 of the citizen brief). Some panellists indicated that their professional background (for example, pharmacy, food safety, psychology, finances) influenced the forms of evidence they typically consulted to make decisions.

A few panellists expressed that, for them, evidence was ‘textbook stuff’ that is often not applicable to their local or personal circumstances. They emphasized that evidence often seems detached from the realities of citizens (for example, for those living in rural and remote areas). They also felt that doctors and other experts were often unable to contextualize the evidence. Therefore, many panellists indicated being more confident in the lived experiences of people they knew as a credible source of evidence.

In addition, evidence is something that is dynamic, it evolves, and it is about probability and uncertainty. As one panellist emphasized: “When we look at evidence beyond the surface, we need strong tolerance for ambiguity. (...) People have to accept that it’s a changing game. Science is pretty dynamic and I don’t think that a lot of people are trained to internalize that dynamism. (...) You have to accept change and reversals. That goes against our Cartesian sense of logic.”

Exploring the problem (cont'd)

Lastly, the general public sometimes conflate different forms of evidence such as research evidence, evidence that individuals themselves derive from their own lived experiences, and evidence considered in a court of law. This conflation may be nurtured by popular culture and may set unrealistic expectations. Referring to the 'CSI effect,' one panellist indicated how evidence is presented in crime and legal television shows may create unrealistically high expectations (for example, establishing a cause-and-effect relation).

Challenge 5. The volume of evidence and misinformation is overwhelming

Most panellists mentioned how overwhelming the volume of evidence can be. As one panellist said, many citizens are "not used to that." Another panellist indicated: "Too much evidence and conflicting stuff can paralyze us in making decisions." A third panellist said: "There is so much 'evidence' to review. We must pick and choose from sources that we have used previously and in which we have a certain degree of trust."

They also pointed out that the volume of misinformation can be overwhelming too (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic). They noted that: 1) false claims are spreading at a fast pace (particularly with traditional media, the internet and social-media platforms); 2) efforts to intentionally spread false information can be very sophisticated (making it hard to distinguish what is true or false); and 3) misinformation often resonates with people.

Regarding the last point, some panellists pointed out that misinformation often resonated with many people. As one panellist said, "some people like the taste of [misinformation]." This situation is sometimes so troublesome on social-media platforms that one panellist indicated the need to 'curate your friends' (meaning that many people are spreading false information and we need to be careful about whom we choose to follow on these platforms).

Challenge 6. Citizens do not all have the capacity to find and use evidence

The challenges of access to evidence and the limited literacy skills among the public were brought up throughout the panels. As one panellist said: "Not everyone has the same capability of working through evidence and coming up with a sound decision." Many panellists called for greater efforts to make sources of evidence more friendly and accessible to all.

Challenge 7. Citizens have a limited role in producing and interpreting evidence

Lastly, some panellists felt that citizens are typically considered as passive recipients of evidence. They have a limited role in the production of evidence (including asking relevant questions, interpreting/contextualizing the evidence, and disseminating the findings). One panellist asked: "Where do average Canadians go on an ongoing basis to influence [the production of] evidence?" This resonated with another panellist who previously expressed that evidence seems like "textbook stuff" detached from the realities of citizens (particularly for historically underserved and marginalized populations, as well as rural and remote populations).

Exploring the problem (cont'd)

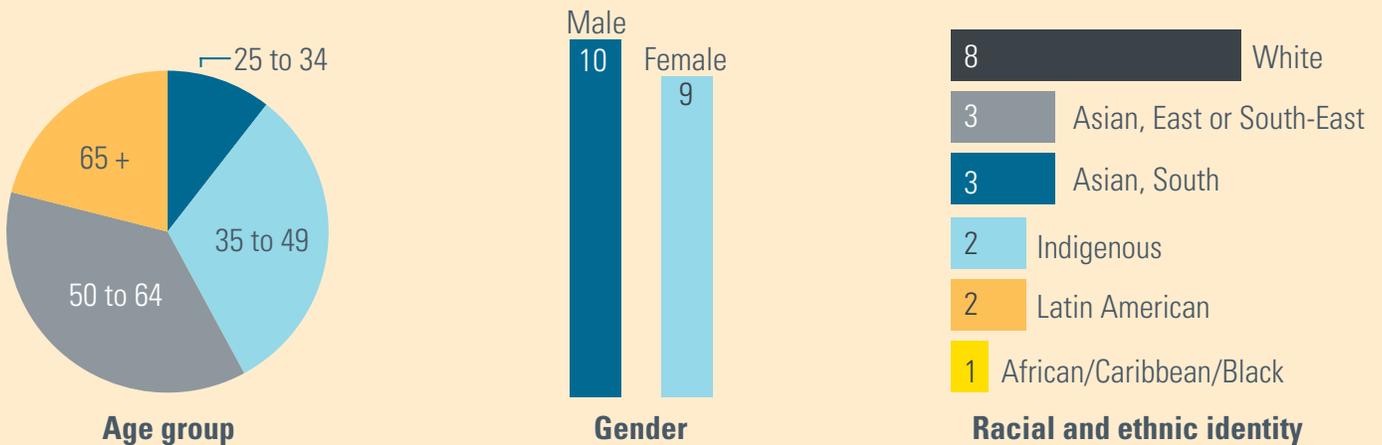
Box 1: Key features of the citizen panels

The virtual citizen panels about evidence in everyday life in Ontario had the following 11 features:

- they addressed a high-priority issue
- they provided an opportunity to discuss different features of the problem
- they provided an opportunity to discuss solutions for addressing the problem
- they provided an opportunity to discuss key barriers and windows of opportunity to move forward
- they provided an opportunity to talk about who might do what differently
- they were informed by a pre-circulated, plain-language brief
- they involved a facilitator to assist with the discussions
- they brought together citizens affected by the problem or by future decisions related to the problem
- they aimed for fair representation among the diversity of citizens involved in or affected by the problem
- they aimed for open and frank discussions that preserved the anonymity of participants
- they aimed to find both common ground and differences of opinions.

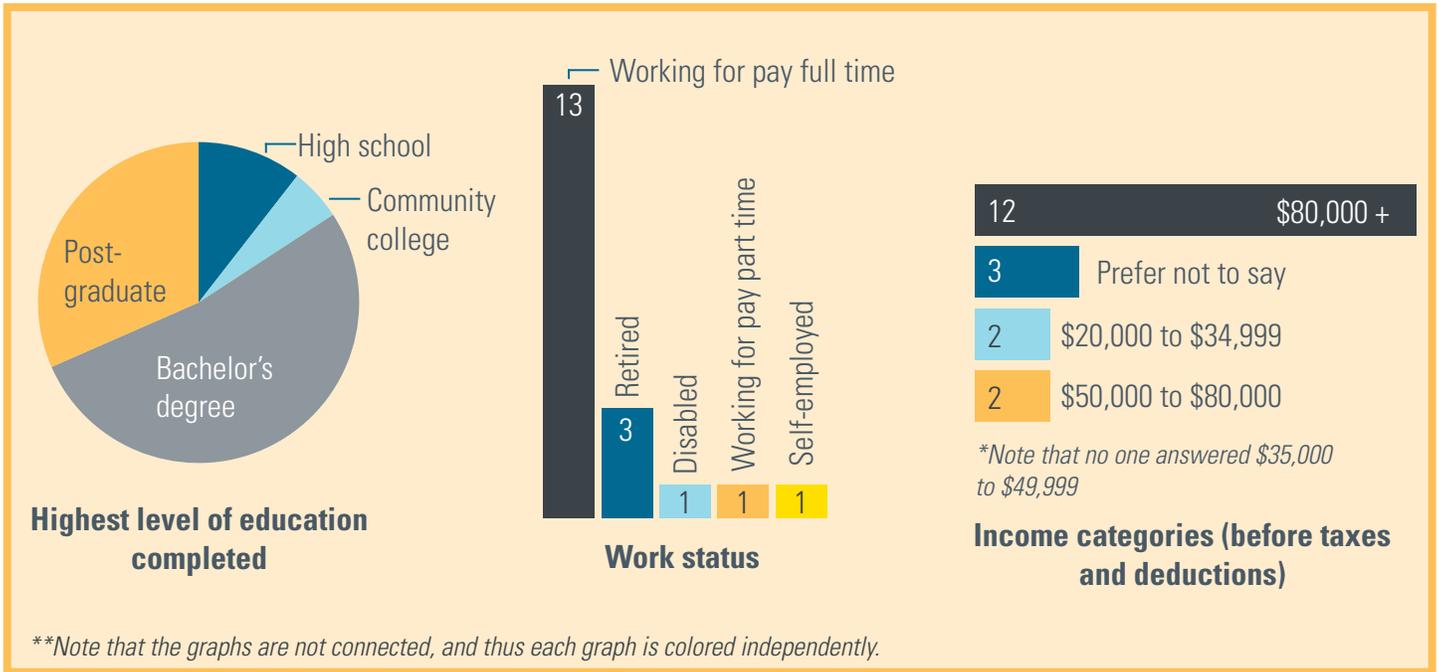
Box 2: Profile of panellists

Two citizen panels were convened virtually, engaging a diverse group of 19 citizens – in terms of age, gender, ethnocultural background and socio-economic status – from across Ontario. More specifically:



Exploring the problem (cont'd)

Box 2: Profile of panellists (cont'd)



Discussing solutions

After discussing the challenges, panellists were invited to reflect on four solutions to support the use of evidence in everyday life. We introduced the solutions in a particular order in the citizen brief, but panellists appeared to have more appetite for the solutions in the following order:

3. helping citizens judge what others are claiming or more generally find (and receive) reliable information on a topic
2. making evidence available to citizens when they are making choices
4. engaging citizens in asking questions and answering them (with new research or with existing evidence)
1. making evidence-based choices the default or easy option.

Whenever possible, we describe areas of common ground and differences of opinions among panellists and (where possible) identify the values underlying different positions.

Helping citizens judge what others are claiming or more generally find (and receive) reliable information on a topic

This solution garnered the most interest from panellists. It aims to develop citizens' skills to sort out whether claims are true, false or misleading. Alternatively, this solution aims to strengthen citizens' skills to find reliable evidence on a topic.

This solution could include ideas like:

- developing tools and training for citizens to develop their critical-thinking skills
- publishing very short documents summarizing the best evidence on different topics using everyday language (for example, plain-language summaries)
- promoting the use of strategies that journalists and science communicators can use to counter misinformation (for example, fact-checking services, 'pre-bunking' strategies, 'truth-sandwich' strategy)
- building a culture where evidence is understood, valued and used.

During the discussion about this solution, four value-related themes emerged:



User-friendliness



Recency (being based on the most up-to-date evidence)



Competence strengthening



Trusting relationship (between citizens and evidence producers/intermediaries)

The first and second values-related themes (user-friendliness and recency) relate to how the evidence is presented to citizens. Panellists agreed that making evidence available in formats that are incomprehensible to the average citizen is a 'non-starter.' The notion of integrating evidence producers or intermediaries into the process to convert the evidence into plain-language summaries was noted as a step in the right direction by most panellists. However, it was noted that such summaries are only valuable as long as they are kept up-to-date.

The third values-related theme (competence strengthening) relates to increasing or developing a citizen's ability to find and use evidence. It was suggested that developing critical thinking skills among school children should be considered so that future generations have the ability to make sense of evidence from the start. However, one panelist noted that "it is never

Discussing solutions (cont'd)

too late to learn” so community-based skill development for adults should also be considered (as noted in the next solution). One panellist emphasized that to develop the competencies of people of all ages, we need to make evidence fun and engaging.

The fourth values-related theme (trusting relationship) relates to the creation of stronger bonds between evidence producers (or intermediaries) and citizens. Developing evidence products that citizens better comprehend combined with citizens developing a better understanding of evidence may bring the two sides closer together and begin to develop a better atmosphere of trust. One panellist emphasized that trust must be nurtured constantly, and not just at times of crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic): “We need to reach out to the public periodically, not only when an emergency takes place. This creates trust and a relationship that can give credibility to the information.”

Making evidence available to citizens when they are making choices

This solution focused on ensuring that whenever citizens are making a choice, they can have access to evidence at their fingertips.

This solution could include ideas like:

- building more trustworthy websites that feature evidence about a wide range of choices
- creating tools (sometimes called decision aids) like websites, videos, and brochures that explain what evidence is available about different options alongside the pros and cons of each option.

During the discussion about this solution, three values-related themes emerged:



Trusting relationship
(between citizens and
evidence producers/
intermediaries)



Recency (being
based on the most
up-to-date evidence)



Community-based
(support and
infrastructure)

The first values-related theme (trusting relationship) relates to both the source of the evidence (meaning who produced it) and evidence intermediaries (meaning who is making it available). While an overall lack of trust was discussed as well as the lack of a clear definition of ‘trustworthy,’ it was agreed that developing a strong relationship with evidence producers/intermediaries will help citizens (consumers) when they must make choices. One panellist indicated that something like a seal of approval from a government agency might aid in this aspect, although panellists’ earlier comments about a decline of trust towards governments may suggest that this option may not resonate widely.

The second values-related theme (recency) relates to the challenges faced in finding the most recent information, and that sources should be actively updated as new evidence is discovered. One panellist expressed dissatisfaction with primary-care physicians who base their decisions on “textbooks that are 10 years out of date” and do not keep themselves up-to-date with the latest advances. However, other panellists cautioned that too many updates in a short period of time will have a negative impact on citizens, much like we saw with the continually changing information associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussing solutions (cont'd)

The third values-related theme (community-based) relates to how citizens access evidence. Some panellists suggested that this solution could be improved by addressing the lack of community infrastructures that could help citizens have access to evidence. One example could be to leverage public libraries or community centres to create 'evidence hubs.' These evidence hubs could provide the digital infrastructure that many citizens are missing, could harness the expertise of librarians or volunteers (as evidence curators) to find evidence, and could serve as a unique place where citizens could discuss with other fellow citizens evidence on pressing societal challenges. In addition, a community-based approach could further aid those from rural and remote communities, and from historically underserved or marginalized communities, who may not have access to the internet and may have limited literacy levels. One panellist emphasized the need to proactively engage community leaders as evidence intermediaries, "reaching out to community leaders. They have the trust of their communities so they can help make information available to others."

Engaging citizens (like you) in asking questions and answering them (with new research or with existing evidence)

While this solution garnered a lot of interest, it may present more challenges to scale up and spread than previous solutions. This solution aims to engage citizens as partners of researchers, organizations that fund research, and organizations that produce evidence syntheses and provide evidence support. They would be able to ask the questions that are important to you and other citizens like you, but also help them answer these questions (with new research or with existing evidence).

This solution could include ideas like:

- creating a website where citizens can submit their questions to organizations funding research or funding evidence syntheses
- having citizens engaged in prioritizing questions from all of those received
- encouraging citizens to become partners in a research team to answer the question
- encouraging citizens to become partners in teams that are dedicated to summarizing existing evidence on the question.

During the discussion about this solution, five value-related themes emerged:



Trusting relationship
(between citizens and
evidence producers/
intermediaries)



Meaningful
engagement (as
opposed to tokenism)



Incentivization



Inclusiveness (need
outreach activities targeting
historically underserved or
marginalized communities)



Independence

Many panellists pointed out that this solution was the most explicit in addressing the decline in trust. They indicated that the proposed activities could create stronger and longer-lasting bonds between citizens and evidence producers (even if it is done on a small scale).

The second values-related theme (meaningful engagement) highlighted the vision of citizens being real partners in research, evidence-synthesis teams, and evidence-support teams. They emphasized that there is often a risk of tokenistic engagement, and that all efforts should be put in place to mitigate this.

Discussing solutions (cont'd)

The third values-related theme (incentivization) highlighted that this solution may not come naturally. We need proper incentives for both citizens and evidence producers to engage. However, panellists did not discuss what these incentives could be.

The fourth values-related theme (inclusiveness) highlighted the need for outreach activities targeting historically underserved or marginalized communities. Inclusive engagement may require considerable efforts to engage members of these communities, many of whom feel 'abandoned'.

Lastly, the fifth values-related theme (independence) revealed a concern among panellists that some activities may be hijacked by those contributing to disinformation campaigns. For instance, they pointed to the idea of creating a website where citizens can submit their questions to organizations funding research, or having citizens engaged in prioritizing questions from all of those received. As one panellist pointed out: "How do you protect the question-receiving function from being overwhelmed by disinformation campaign drivers?"

Making evidence-based choices the default or easy option

Of all the solutions discussed, this solution garnered the least appetite from panellists. This solution focused on governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations creating an environment where evidence-based choices are the default option or the easy option.

This solution could include ideas like:

- adopting laws to ensure that policies, programs, services and products presented to citizens are based on the best available evidence
- providing rewards or penalties to businesses advertising products depending on whether the products are supported by the available evidence
- supporting big tech companies to ensure that information and products presented to citizens is evidence based
- using 'nudge' strategies to steer citizens towards evidence-based choices, but still allowing them to go look at other choices too.

During the discussion about this solution, five values-related themes emerged:



Stewardship



Trusting relationship
(between citizens
and governments/
businesses)



Freedom (of
speech and
choice)



Equity (fairness)



Evidence-informed
interventions

The first values-related theme (stewardship) relates to the role that the government should play to create a favourable environment where citizens can easily make evidence-informed choices. One panellist emphasized that the government should use policy levers to develop standards about how businesses should present the evidence supporting their products: "Since evidence is constantly evolving, there is a need to adopt policy standards to work from." However, the scope of involvement of governments in this solution remained debated during the panels.

Discussing solutions (cont'd)

The second value-related theme (trusting relationship) relates to the decline in trust towards governments and businesses. A panellist said: "Everything here feels a lot top-down and controlled by someone who we might not trust in the first place [governments and businesses]."

The third values-related theme (freedom) related to the concerns expressed by panellists towards this solution. Making certain choices the 'default' option was perceived as infringing on the personal freedom of citizens, and that such an authoritative approach may polarize people (like the growing opposition to mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic).

The fourth values-related theme (equity) highlighted the concern that this solution may have a disproportionate impact on small, local businesses that may not have the same capacity as big corporations to ensure that their products are supported by the available evidence. One panellist said: "The problem with having independent companies verify a product is that the testing company can charge high prices for their seal of approval. The cost may be unreasonable for small companies that have ethics and standards and can't afford the approval of the independent testing."

The fifth values-related theme (evidence-informed interventions) relates to the expectations that any intervention should be proven to be effective. Referring to some 'nudge strategies' used in smoking cessation efforts (for example, having warnings on packages), one panellist said: "Pictures of very sick people have not stopped people from smoking." Therefore, some panellists were not convinced that nudge strategies would always be effective in steering citizens towards evidence-informed choices.

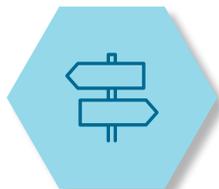
Identifying barriers and windows of opportunity to moving forward

After discussing possible solutions, panellists examined potential barriers and windows of opportunity for moving forward.

The discussion generally focused on three key barriers to bring about change:



Some people will never change their minds, no matter what the evidence



We live in a very polarized and volatile world



Fighting misinformation and disinformation may be a lost battle

Regarding the first barrier, participants indicated that despite our best efforts to promote the use of evidence to inform decisions, some people will continue to reject the evidence if it is contrary to their deeply rooted beliefs and values. As one panellist said: “Some people can’t be changed no matter how much is tried. Their mindset and personality just doesn’t allow it.”

Panellists were also skeptical about our capacity to bring transformative change given the very polarized and volatile world we live in. They also wondered whether implementing local solutions to address the issue would be effective without considering what is happening globally. Much of the misinformation is being spread on global platforms and channels, and can undermine our local efforts.

Regarding the third barrier, several panellists indicated that the “bad guys” are getting very clever at spreading false claims, such as doctoring videos to alter someone’s remarks. They also indicated that if we found more effective ways to present or package evidence to citizens, this may inform those same “bad guys” at doing the opposite: becoming increasingly more effective at presenting or packaging false information (for example, mimicking websites that are a one-stop shop of evidence in order to spread false claims).

While some panellists were skeptical about the prospects for bringing about change, many others identified key windows of opportunity to move forward, notably:



a growing importance placed on the use of evidence for supporting decisions among citizens, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic



an appetite among many citizens for developing their skills to sort out whether claims are true, false or misleading



a shared commitment among many citizens to support the use of evidence in everyday life (and to reduce inequities in access to evidence)



a number of promising efforts led by the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges and its partners, including its Citizen Leaders Group, that involve working with citizen-serving NGOs and citizen leaders to put evidence at the centre of everyday life.

Acknowledgments

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