Systematic reviews are likely to be more relevant to the end user and of higher quality if they are informed by advice from people with a range of experiences, in terms of both the topic and the methodology (Rees 2004a, Thomas 2004a, NHS CRD 2001). The International Development Coordinating Group encourages all its author teams to establish an advisory group to inform and comment on the review throughout the process (Greene and Higgins, 2011) and this note provides some guidance to authors establishing and managing a review group.

What is the role of a review advisory group?

Review Advisory Groups are established to help reviewers determine the parameters of their proposed review and to provide inputs throughout the review process to help ensure that the final review is policy relevant and useful in informing policy and practice. The advisory group should be established during the initial stages of review scoping.

Examples of opinions sought from the review advisory group:

- Does the review question seem to capture the essence of the topic under review (will it sound interesting and useful to its target audience)?
- What interventions should be included in the review? How should they be defined?
- Which populations should be included in the review and which should be excluded?
- Are there specific sub-groups of interest which should be investigated in the review (e.g.: by income group, gender or ethnicity)?
- Are the needs of low and middle income countries adequately considered in the review?
- What types of outcomes should the review include?
- What information is useful for assisting users to assess applicability to their context?

The members of the Review Advisory group may also assist with drawing out the policy implications (including lessons for practice and programme design); and disseminating the findings of the review, for instance by distributing the final review among their network or facilitating presentations of the review findings at events. They can also play a role in identifying opportunities to influence policy or practice, or to act as knowledge brokers between the research and policy/practice communities.

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1 This document has been developed based on the guidance developed by the Cochrane Health Promotion and Public Health Field. The IDCG secretariat is grateful for the permission to draw on the existing guideline document.
Who should the members of the advisory group be?

Advisory groups are not intended to be another layer of peer-review. The primary focus of the role of the Advisory Group should be to provide content-related support, highlighting what end users of the review will want to have included in the review. They may be able to direct review teams to additional studies and/or to provide background information on the topic, particularly within the context of their local situation. This latter point is a good reason why membership of the advisory group should be inclusive of people from different parts of the world, to ensure the end review has relevance globally. Experience by Effective Public Health Practice Project in Canada suggests six members is an appropriate size for the advisory group. Reviews registered with IDCG will likely have a global audience of policy-makers, practitioners and academics, and for some topic areas it might be appropriate with a slightly larger group to allow representation from major actors, but we do not recommend this to be more than ten.

The members of your advisory group will vary depending on your review question. However, it may be useful to consider members in the following categories:

- Content experts
- Policy-makers (from aid agencies, development banks and major NGOs, and from governments)
- Practitioners (those implementing the intervention/s under review)
- Knowledge brokers

The review team should ensure that members of the advisory have demonstrated knowledge, skills and experience is the roles they are asked to undertake.

How do I establish an advisory group?

IDCG may be able to assist in suggesting potential candidates for the advisory group, but the lead author or her/ his designee has primary responsibility for establishing and coordinating the advisory group.

It is important that the review team have set up tasks or terms of reference for your advisory group prior to making contact with potential members. This will ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated from the outset.

When making the initial contact with potential members of your advisory group you should provide adequate details about the review, including proposed title, scope and authors. They also may need information about the Campbell Collaboration and the review process. The IDCG secretariat can provide some examples of documents you can draw on for this.

The major contribution of the advisory group will likely be in establishing the scope of the review. We strongly recommend that authors establish the advisory group and have the first meeting 
before the title registration form is submitted to IDCG.

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2 A knowledge broker is defined as “someone who provides a link between research producers and end users by developing a mutual understanding of goals and cultures, collaborates with end users to identify issues and problems for which solution are required, and facilitates the identification, access, assessment, interpretation, and translation of research evidence into local policy and practice” (Dobbins. M., et al 2009).
How to get the most out of your advisory group?

To ensure that your advisory group works effectively it is important that you establish roles and responsibilities. We suggest that you consider the following issues and communicate this information early in the process:

- What is the role of each advisory group member and which tasks do you want them to complete?
- What method of communication will be used and how frequently will the advisory group members be consulted?
- What workload is involved?
- Are there timelines that need to be considered?
- When does the work of the advisory group end?
- How will advice be managed and what will happen if conflicting advice (or that quite contrary to the reviewer’s beliefs) is offered?

The ideal candidates for your advisory group are also likely to be busy people, so preparing for and facilitating their engagement is likely to be important. Some practical suggestions:

- Agree timelines and dates for consultations well in advance, and be aware that you are unlikely to be able to request more than 1 to 2 days in total over the course of the review from unpaid members.
- Provide necessary background documents before any meetings. This can include draft title, protocol and review reports.
- Prepare an agenda for meetings, highlighting key issues and decisions you’d like the advisory group to consider.
- If the advisory group is providing feedback in writing, provide guidance on particular key issues you’d like the advisory group to consider.
- For organisations with high staff turn-over, such as central government agencies, it may be useful to discuss a hand-over plan in advance with advisory group members.
References
Dobbins, M., Robseson, P., Ciliska, D., Hanna S., Cameron, R., O’Mara, DeCorby, K., and Mercer, S., 2009
‘A description of a knowledge broker role implemented as part of a randomised controlled trial evaluating three knowledge translation strategies’, Implementation Science, 4, 23.


Appendix 1

Terms of reference
Members of Systematic Review Advisory group

Review Advisory Groups are established to help authors of systematic reviews determine the parameters of their proposed review and to provide inputs throughout the review process to help ensure that the final review is policy relevant and useful in informing policy and practice.

Members of the advisory group can be policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, and other stakeholders with an interest in the review. Members of the advisory group will be asked to provide inputs on various aspects of the review throughout the review process. The total time commitment is not likely to exceed two days.

The tasks of the advisory group members may include:

- Advice on key decisions regarding the scope of the review, including refining the review question and definitions of key concepts
- Determine important outcomes
- Suggest relevant background literature and studies for inclusion
- Participate in up to 3 teleconferences for the duration of the review (title/ scoping stage; draft protocol; draft review)
- Provide written comments on draft protocol and draft review
- Help the team draw the policy implications from the review findings. This can involve participating in a brainstorm/focus group meeting to review the lessons and implications of the review in terms of policy and practice.
- Assist the study team with dissemination. This can involve advising on the review team’s dissemination plan, assist with disseminating the review report/ policy briefs or hosting events for the dissemination of review findings.
- Identify opportunities for policy influence and act as a knowledge broker, providing a link between the author team and the end users and facilitating access to, interpretation, and translation of the review findings into local policy and practice.