

New research helps to inform the design of scientific advisory committees

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At a time of "fake news" and a growing mistrust of scientific experts, researchers at York University's Global Strategy Lab are working to increase the likelihood that policy decisions will be informed by the best available science.

Steven J. Hoffman, Professor of Global Health, Law, and Political Science at York University, and his team at the Global Strategy Lab, convened an international group of experts from several disciplines to prepare 12 journal articles offering a broad suite of insight into how to effectively create and manage scientific advisory committees (SACs). The project was undertaken to support the World Health Organization in improving its own SACs that produce clinical, health systems and public [health](#) guidance.

The findings of the three-year-long effort were published this week as part of a special issue of the [journal](#) *Global Challenges*.

The special journal issue draws important lessons to be learned about SACs and their design, with two of the articles specifically considering SACs at the World Health Organization. These insights may help maximize the application of high-quality scientific research towards future policy and program decisions.

"The effectiveness of scientific advice depends greatly on having well-designed processes for generating that advice," said Hoffman. "With these 12 journal articles, we provide governments and international

agencies with evidence-based guidance for setting up scientific advisory committees, tailoring them for each unique context, and ensuring that their work can be most impactful."

The special journal issue explores SACs in a number of areas including environmental policy in California and globally as well as malaria control and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. The special issue also includes insights from interviews with 35 senior World Health Organization staff.

It approaches SACs through an institutional design lens, by analyzing their formation, their size, and their functionality among other criteria.

"The good news is that small design changes can greatly improve the effectiveness of scientific advisory committees for greater public benefit. The composition of a [committee](#) matters, so does its chair, diversity, decision-making rules, stakeholder engagement, and many other factors. Governments and agencies like the World Health Organization that convene many scientific advisory committees can take a leadership role in further developing the science of scientific advice by studying their own processes and drawing lessons for improvement over time," said Hoffman.

Some of the other key findings about scientific advisory committees include:

- Members of SACs must be transparent about their own conflicts, commitments, and biases which can then be appropriately managed
- SACs must balance the need to involve stakeholders in discussions without compromising the independence and integrity of the scientific process
- SACs facing scientific uncertainty should be transparent in how they evaluate evidence and should continuously discuss what it

means to develop and provide scientific advice in political contexts

More information: Steven J. Hoffman et al. Designing Scientific Advisory Committees for a Complex World, *Global Challenges* (2018). DOI: [10.1002/gch2.201800075](https://doi.org/10.1002/gch2.201800075)

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