

Report

Executive Summary:

A Decade of Emerging Voices: Looking at Past, Present and Future

Evaluation Period	October 2020 – March 2021
For	The Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp
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International



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The underlying premise of the Emerging Voices for Global Health (EV4GH) Programme is a 'disruptive idea': to give a voice to young researchers and researcher/activists from the global south through an innovative, catalysing blended programme of learning and peer support. This is linked to the Health Systems Global (HSG) biennial health systems research symposium (HSRS), where participants immediately apply their learning and skills. Since its initiation in 2010, EV4GH has always been about giving voice, particularly to underrepresented groups, to enable them to shift discourses and paradigms using evidence. An equity focus has been embedded within the initiative through the application of gender and power lenses, and a more recent focus on decolonisation, planetary health, and fragile and conflict-affected states.

In this report we present the evaluation of the EV4GH training programme and network from the perspective of alumni, staff and stakeholders and provide strategic recommendations for the shape and structure of the initiative moving forward. It covers all ten years of the initiative and focuses on the impact on the main beneficiaries of the programme, firstly alumni and secondly, the wider health systems research/practice community. Specific attention is given to fundraising and how EV4GH can remain relevant and innovative, reach the right people, and create a sustainable network structure. This evaluation was delivered by Capacity Development International and dala! Consulting between October 2020 – March 2021.

Methods

This mixed methods evaluation used a realist, theory-based approach, both formative and summative, with a focus on drawing lessons to inform future strategy and improvements. The formative element was a largely qualitative exploration of success factors and barriers, and the extent to which the pathways of change follow the theory of change (ToC). The summative element included stocktaking and an assessment of the degree to which the programme objectives have been met. A participative approach was used, particularly in the design of the evaluation framework through the co-development of a ToC

with beneficiaries, and through a review of preliminary findings with the steering committee. The evaluators mapped the client's evaluation questions onto the ToC to ensure a logical and coherent framework. All indicators and tools were shared with the steering committee before being finalised.

Most of the primary data collected for this evaluation came from key informant interviews. This was supplemented with additional data from programme documentation and an e-survey. The survey was used to prioritise and assess levels of agreement with key strategic and operational recommendations derived from the primary data. Sampling of interviewees was purposive and pragmatic, in particular based on availability and willingness to participate. Sixty key informant interviews were conducted, of which 44 were with alumni and the remainder represented the EV4GH Secretariat, ITM Antwerp, partner staff and the broader health policy and systems research community. All interviews were conducted remotely, and saturation was sought. Informants came from 37 countries across Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America. Observations were also made through attendance of the closing panel of the EV 2020 Virtual Programme and the EV4GH business lunch. The alumni-only e-survey was completed by 59 alumni, a response rate of approximately 21% of total alumni (n=285). A bespoke qualitative analysis tool was used to code and organise the qualitative data from all sources into categories derived from the ToC. Measures of impact were largely based on participants' perceptions of impact - now and in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that all face-to-face engagements were cancelled, this in addition to the increased responsibilities of some alumni due to the pandemic may have limited engagement and participation in this evaluation. The sample may not have been representative of all alumni, in particular inactive alumni were difficult to reach. Another limitation was the small number of key informants from the wider global health systems space or with knowledge of the fundraising activities of EV4GH.

7 Ventures

285 Alumni

from 66 countries

Figure 1 Key indicators for EV4GH

Relevance

EV4GH is well **aligned to beneficiary needs**, with its focus on innovative communication formats, knowledge translation and hot topics; areas typically not covered in academic programmes. The content and timing of the programme was particularly useful for emerging researchers where it enabled them to boost their confidence and skills at a crucial time in their academic careers. There was less agreement on how aligned the programme was for the needs of activists although most participants on the activism track were activist/researchers. The EV4GH programme was widely regarded as a **network and training programme** and is making a valid and needed contribution. Informants identified that there was potential and ambition for the network, but that more needs to be done to enable it to meet that potential particularly in relation to creating an arena for collective action.

Coherence

The initiative provides **value to the broader global health systems research community** through its diversity of young voices from the global south who have a commitment to social justice and are invested in change. EV4GH is highly valued by partners, stakeholders, and alumni, however, it was also felt that more could be done to maximise its potential niche role. However, with limited resources both financially and in terms of human resource there is a need to focus on a small number of strategic goals. There are equally valid directions that the network could take with a focus on advocacy and thought leadership, broadening reach, facilitating collaboration, or providing more support to existing alumni. Hence a key recommendation is the creation of a strategic plan to help the governance team prioritise over the short, medium, and long term and enable them to reach the full potential of the network. Good relationships have been established with **partner organisations** (co-hosts), who host the face-to-face training, prior to the Health Systems Research Symposium, whilst these do not always sustain in

direct ways post-venture many of them continue to encourage applications and support applicant review processes. Post venture partner relationships tend to be dependent on individuals rather than an institutional commitment. Some informants felt that there was space to further develop the roles of these partners post-venture. The **relationship with HSG** brings benefits to both parties. Participants learn how to engage and navigate international conferences and have the potential to widen their networks and engage with HSG. Many alumni have gone on to have key roles in thematic working groups (TWGs) and the board of HSG. EV4GH brings youth, dynamism, energy, and a focus on equity to the biennial symposia. HSG is currently in a period of strategic review - exploring how to expand its work regionally, and EV4GH is participating in these discussions and initiatives. Some informants felt that EV4GH did not take advantage of further potential synergies between HSG and EV4GH, particularly in relation to strategic thinking and fundraising. Others described that being a TWG reduced the ability of EV4GH to develop, particularly in relation to fundraising. Hence some clarification of roles and key processes such as fundraising would be helpful within EV4GH to allow identification of the opportunities within the boundaries of HSG. EV4GH is well-known within the **Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp (ITM)** and is aligned with its policies. It is well integrated with the International Health Policies (IHP) newsletter, with EV4GH providing editors and articles. There are also synergies between ITM and EV4GH in terms of course participants, PhD supervision, internships, and projects. It provides a good example of the ITM Antwerp goal of 'switching the poles' with leadership being transferred to the mainly global south alumni-led board. Rather than seeking further integration which may be at odds with the decolonisation agenda instead a focus on enabling collaboration between EV4GH and other ITM Antwerp initiatives is recommended. Linked to an overarching strategy, EV4GH would benefit from investing in the strategic development of its partnerships. HSG is a key relationship for EV4GH and a central part of the effectiveness of the training. The strategic review at HSG is a key time for EV4GH to explore how the two can better work together, particularly in relation to diversity and broadening reach. Once a strategic direction has

been chosen, EV4GH will be in a stronger position to identify strategic partnerships and negotiate ongoing roles with co-hosts.

Effectiveness

The initiative was praised for its commitment to and enactment of enabling underrepresented groups to develop their voice within the health systems research and policy space. Participants valued **diversity** and its contribution to peer learning and an understanding of the importance of context. However, certain groups were still seen as underrepresented both within EV4GH and the wider space; these included some language groups, some geographical regions, indigenous peoples and marginal communities in high income countries, non-privileged groups in low-income countries and candidates from institutions without strong international networks. The balance between activists, policy makers and researchers was an area of ongoing debate and discussion but there was an acknowledgement that EV4GH targets activist/researchers rather than activists per se. It may be that EV4GH has to make a choice about whether to focus on participants with high potential to influence the global discourse or increasing the participation of underrepresented groups who may not have had the same opportunities to build their skills and hence have the same potential. This decision should be part of the strategic review. The evaluators recommend focusing on increasing participation from underrepresented groups who are local to the venture as this will be a cost-efficient approach. Whilst regionalisation was widely recommended by informants as a way to include underrepresented groups, the level of effort required to set up a regional structure should not be underestimated and hence it is recommended this should be done in tandem with HSG rather than setting up parallel structures.

The **training programme** was widely commended. The power of the learning experience of EV4GH comes from selecting and bringing together a diverse group of talented individuals at an early stage of their career who will respond to the catalysing call for social justice, using a range of innovative capacity strengthening techniques, and enabling them to immediately utilise their new skills in an important global conference. The sense

of community and trust within the network contributed to a culture of volunteerism and giving back. The face-to-face element was identified as energising, motivating, and fostering strong relationship and network building. Hence, the requirement to go purely online in 2020 due to the pandemic resulted in a lesser experience for this cohort who also identified the difficulty of getting protected time to fully engage with virtual conferences or training. There was also feedback that the online training platform was dated and difficult to navigate. Training content relating to communications tools, methods and approaches were highly valued. In addition, the hot topic debates were new formats to most of the informants and were also highly valued. If EV4GH wants to keep a reputation for 'cutting edge' communication techniques, then more attention to this would be needed in the fallow years between ventures and in selection of strategic partners. It is, however, entirely valid to focus on effective rather than innovative communication.

Alumni universally expressed the value and continued utility of the communication components of the training. Informants talked about increased confidence to **communicate and present** in a wide range of formats. Opportunities to write blogs, opinion pieces, or articles for the IHP newsletter and BMJ Global Health were highly valued and more of these type of strategic partnerships would benefit the network and reduce dependency on a small number of individuals. Whilst EV4GH had previously undertaken formal mentoring in relation to academic or other outputs this had proved difficult to maintain due to the intense time and resource commitment needed and other opportunities offering this service. It is not recommended to return to this approach. There was evidence of alumni collaborating on writing either blogs based on events they attended or think pieces on topics of mutual interest. At the present time, however, these outputs occur organically between alumni rather than as part of a coordinated EV4GH collective voice.

There was significant agreement that the **network** had unmet potential but less agreement on how to best move the network forward with options to promote virtual learning events, alumni database,

collaborative and joint advocacy work. Alumni greatly valued the Google Group emails allowing them to keep up to date in the field and identify opportunities. It is largely consumed passively and a few found the volume difficult to manage. WhatsApp groups seemed to be the backbone of active communication between alumni, largely organised at a cohort level where strong bonds between participants facilitated sustained interaction. Whilst alumni recognised the potential of a regional approach to broaden reach and catalyse more action, to date there has been limited success in creating active regional networks and the evaluators feel that a cohort approach is a more natural organising principle than large regions where barriers between members are often significant (geographic, language, unfamiliarity). The twitter handle was praised by alumni as highlighting and amplifying alumni achievements but the newsletter, Facebook page, LinkedIn presence and website would all benefit from a review in relation to their utility to the needs of alumni and/or external audiences. If channels are little used, then they should not receive significant time investment. Survey respondents (n=59) identified space for facilitating/seeking collaboration, noticeboard for current opportunities and the ability to contact other alumni based on interests/geography as the top three additional functionalities they would like to see from EV4GH networking platforms. The evaluators recommend that EV4GH focus on how to catalyse the unmet potential within the alumni network. The network could seek to draw together alumni and coalesce around core themes identified by the network. Ideally this should combine some ongoing themes for instance decolonisation with a biennial theme chosen by each new cohort, ensuring that the issues selected are important to emerging rather than emerged researchers. Quarterly virtual meetings could contain content and debate around the issue, as well as giving an opportunity for the new cohort to introduce themselves to the wider group. Emerged alumni could also be given spots to share career hacks and experiences with younger members. Hence these virtual meetings would enable more inter-cohort exchange but have a clear theme to organise around. There is also an opportunity for EV4GH to be at the forefront of innovation in thinking about

how to facilitate participation and discussion in online spaces.

There are high levels of **volunteerism** in the network with alumni taking the lead in designing and facilitating ventures and in leading the initiative through the board and taskforces. The dedication and commitment particularly of the board members is commendable and highly appreciated by stakeholders and alumni. However, there were concerns about over reliance on a few individuals and the risk of burnout. For those alumni who were less active, this was due to personal and professional commitments rather than disillusionment with the programme. The alumni network is diverse and, largely alumni-driven and **southern-led**. There are opportunities to broaden the volunteer pool through smaller but meaningful opportunities to volunteer, having a separate channel to communicate volunteering opportunities (and internal network news) to avoid it being 'lost' in the Google Group and incentivising volunteering.

Peer-to-peer and expert **mentoring** and support was considered extremely important and useful within the alumni network, however, quality and quantity of mentoring varied both within and between ventures. This was particularly highlighted as an issue for the online elements of the programme where some participants did not receive feedback on their submissions. The training programme at the HSR Symposia benefits from the close bonds made between the participants and the facilitators. EV4GH should decide on the optimal number for this training to ensure it does not become diluted nor go beyond the capacity of volunteers.

The mix of capacity strengthening techniques used by EV4GH during the venture are perceived by the alumni to, in some cases, have had a profound effect on their attitudes and, in all cases, to have **built skills** that will aid them through their subsequent careers. Informants valued critical thinking skills obtained through the various formats of debates. An enhanced commitment to tackling equity was identified by alumni as a product of the training. The focus on soft skills that are often not developed well within academic programmes was highly valued and aligns with best

practices in strengthening the capacity of researchers.

Alumni report being provided with significant opportunity as a result of participation in the programme, including **increased visibility**, increased **international networks** and access to decision-makers and other influencers. International collaborations have been identified as being particularly important for researchers from the global south and there were examples of alumni having leveraged these networks to further their professional careers and publishing opportunities. Increased visibility was through opportunities at HSRS, publishing platforms and amplification by alumni and the network. As with all opportunities the degree to which alumni made use of them was largely a personal decision motivated by their particular aspirations and constraints.

Efficiency

Current programme **funding** allows the training to be delivered biennially but does not allow EV4GH to widen its scope or offer through for instance broadening reach, increasing participant numbers, advocacy, and activities between ventures. It will require different and more strategic resourcing as the needs of alumni grow or if a more ambitious set of impacts are envisaged. The **governance board** should be commended for their commitment to delivering high quality ventures on a voluntary basis. The board works well with the secretariat. There is a need to better separate out strategic governance from operational functions so that the board are able to give sufficient attention to their strategic roles which are currently underdeveloped. Currently, governance is driven by the venture rather than driving the programme and the network. There are a number of strategic options for EV4GH but limited resources means that prioritisation is crucial to maximise potential. Alumni value the transparency of the governance election procedures and felt that EV4GH is largely alumni- and southern-led. Whilst regional representation is valued by alumni, regional activity is minimal. With recent elections, some governance members are new to the board and additional support, through training or mentoring, would be beneficial. **Taskforces** need to have stronger terms of reference and clearer sets of

deliverables and accountabilities, including timeframes and concrete outputs. Increasing the number of volunteers on taskforces and enabling them to take on more operational roles from the board would free up the board to be more strategic. The **secretariat** function is fulfilled very well but is dependent on the good will of staff to provide additional unpaid inputs, particularly at the time of a venture. The secretariat needs to relocate from its current institutional home. Depending on the strategic decisions made as to the future of EV4GH, consideration needs to be given to increasing the number and focus of professional roles within the secretariat. Useful skills within the secretariat include strategic partnerships development, fundraising and communications. **Partner** institutions were invaluable in their contribution to co-hosting the face-to-face training and pre-symposium providing venues, expertise and logistical support. They also enabled connection to a broader set of actors in the regions in which they operate, and continued to 'feed' the programme by recommending it to staff and peers. ITM Antwerp fulfils a key role within the initiative providing curation of the Google Group, access to the IHP platform, intern opportunities, staff to facilitate or provide expert inputs into the venture, management of funding and advice to the Board. The 'hands off' but supportive role of ITM Antwerp was widely praised by the alumni. The initiative would benefit from choosing several indicators to support better **monitoring, evaluation and learning** in particular being able to track numbers of applications, diversity of participants and scholarship funds between ventures. Other indicators should reflect the strategic priorities decided in the review process.

Impact

It is clear that EV4GH has a significant impact on its alumni beyond what might be expected from a short-term capacity strengthening input. Alumni describe increased **professional effectiveness** because of the communications training, development of critical thinking and the Google Group emails, which keep them at the cutting edge of thinking and the field. Participation also increased participants **motivation and confidence** to engage and be critical in global health debates. Alumni reported feeling empowered to engage

with policy and decision makers at local, regional, national, and global levels. Participation in the venture also led to increased **opportunities** some directly for instance through collaborations between alumni, internships at ITM Antwerp and through opportunities circulated in the Google Group emails. Other opportunities were indirect such as broadening horizons of the type and scope of career pathways available and the confidence to attain them. Uneven access to opportunities, especially internationally, is often cited as a barrier to participation of LMIC academics in the global research market, hence EV4GH's contribution to making this a more level playing field is an important one. Alumni are moving into positions of **influence** in academia, NGOs, INGOs and government. They are working at global, regional, national, and subnational levels. They are exerting influence through innovations in research, contextual research with a social-justice focus, developing policy, policy briefs, advocacy, building networks, influencing new early career researchers, and providing technical advice. Alumni felt that participation in EV4GH increased their personal visibility within the HPSR space and through publishing platforms and social media. There was widespread agreement that EV4GH had been successful in bringing a more youthful **voice** into HSRS which was predominantly from the global south and gender balanced. Through this EV4GH has been successful in influencing the global health discourse, in a "constructively disruptive" manner within HSRS. In the wider public domain, some alumni are at the forefront of the **global health debates** on decolonisation, and others are prominent in conversations around planetary health. But as yet EV4GH has not achieved a collective voice. There were both personal and structural barriers identified as to why this had not happened. The recommendations already made in choosing one or two core themes and one biannual theme for collective discussion, research and advocacy could facilitate the development of a collective voice helping unleash some of the potential of the network. As the alumni mature into their careers and take on more 'powerful' roles in the space, so too has their ability to influence the global health discourse grown. The sense of community, a shared motivation to address inequality, and the positive brand of EV4GH within the health systems

research community is all capital that is currently not being utilised to its full potential due to resource constraints. Focusing some effort on increasing opportunities for collaborative work in this context could create powerful synergies within EV4GH for collective action and voice for social justice.

Sustainability

It is clear that EV4GH participants gain skills that are used **throughout their careers**, but also that the experience has a profound effect on some alumni. This is through a change in the attitudes characterised by a social justice perspective, a respect for difference, and a commitment to think critically and engage constructively. These are skills and attitudes central to an ability to lead transformative change - and hence are central to improving global health. It is notoriously difficult to create changes in attitude through short-term training interventions, and so this is a commendable achievement. The boost to self-confidence which occurs at the venture and is then consistently amplified through engagement in the network is also vital in enabling underrepresented groups to take on more prominence in the field. The network also continues to boost participants' knowledge through the Google Group. Kristof Decoster's role in providing valuable content to the Google Group was seen as central to maintaining group coherence and for its ongoing impact. Concerns were raised about sustainability and whether succession planning should be in place to protect this vital role. Increased and diversification of **funding** are important for long term sustainability but investment is needed for EV4GH to be in a position to pursue these goals. There is a strategic and skills deficit that needs to be addressed before being able to strongly pursue additional funding. This could be through leveraging expertise from partners or seeking funding to support an expanded secretariat including fundraising skills. Whilst EV4GH is potentially an attractive proposition to funders there is a need to clearly define the purpose and focus of EV4GH to support fundraising, and to clarify the type of funds which are acceptable for different activities and to develop more detailed costings of different aspects of the initiative. It would also be useful to estimate the considerable in-kind costs which are provided by ITM Antwerp,

the Institute of Public Health (IPH) Bangalore and co-hosts which can be used to demonstrate value for money. A further area of consideration is how to resource collective advocacy and influencing work, given donor potential to influence programming. While some funders would be interested in this kind of work, there may be instances where the initiative will need to consider self-funding because the network challenges prevailing norms and generally accepted practice, or when the ideological position of the network makes collaborations difficult. In addition, it is recommended that smooth transfer of the secretariat function is a priority operationally, as this presents significant risk to the continuity of the initiative. While creating a **critical mass** in health policy and systems research at an institutional level was perceived to be a good idea, especially in certain regions where this area is relatively neglected, there was also some ambivalence as to its implications in practice. There was a sense that critical mass was important, but that it was not EV4GH's role to focus on institutional strengthening, however, there may be scope to explore this in the longer term in relation to the regionalisation agenda.

Conclusions

EV4GH is an exceptional capacity strengthening programme, which purposively selects participants mostly from the global south who have a commitment to social justice and the potential to have influence and impact in the field of health systems and policy. It is a unique training experience in the health policy and systems field, with its focus on communication skills, current debates, equity and its link to a prestigious global conference where participants can immediately put the skills they have learned to use. Alumni have both loud voices in the sector and quiet influence. They are working in roles with leadership potential or are already exerting leadership in national, regional and international roles. EV4GH has had a lasting impact on the HSG conference and EV4GH alumni are at the forefront of some of the challenging discourse in terms of gender, decolonisation and planetary health. However, more collaborative/collective action may be needed in changing the discourse and being constructively disruptive at a global level. There are many options and potentials that the network

could meet but, with limited resources, it is important to focus. There is also a clear appetite for more collective and collaborative action and potential to do more between the training ventures. With the transfer of the secretariat in 2021, there is an opportunity to review the staffing needs and fundraising capacity. EV4GH is an impressive initiative but it is time for the next step in order to both underpin sustainability and unleash its transformative potential. We consider the following strategic recommendations to be important, more detailed strategic and operational recommendations and sub-recommendations can be found throughout the report and are also presented as one combined list under the strategic recommendations in Annex 8.

Strategic Recommendations

1. Commission the facilitated development of a ten-year strategic plan, detailed financial model and associated fundraising strategy
2. Strengthen initiative monitoring and evaluation
3. Develop a partnership strategy that differentiates the types of partners and highlights their added value
4. Restructure the board, secretariat and taskforces to create more delineation between operational and strategic roles
5. Expand the volunteer base and consider a limited incentives and awards scheme within available resources
6. Make strategic decisions about criteria for EV4GH recruitment in relation to diversities
7. Choose one or two core focal areas and one biennial topic to harness a collective EV4GH voice
8. Recognise that influence through activism and advocacy is understood in different ways and encourage EVs to use these different models to have an impact
9. Launch a quarterly webinar series to promote cross-cohort interaction, career advice, skills sharing and collaborative action
10. Focus on innovation in online and face to face learning communities, both for the venture and the network
11. Engage with HSG to better understand how HSG and EV4GH can complement their evolving strategic thinking including regionalisation