A knowledge synthesis method to effectively inform decision makers about public policies

Journées annuelles de santé publique
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National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP)

Our mandate
- Support public health actors in their efforts to promote healthy public policies

Our areas of expertise
- Health impacts of policies
- Methods for analyzing policies
- Intersectoral actors and mechanisms
- Strategies to influence policy making
The National Collaborating Centres for Public Health

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Imagine the following scenario...
The government wants to act to combat obesity and is asking the following question:

**What are the most effective policies for addressing obesity?**

You have been asked to produce a knowledge synthesis to inform their decision...
In 2005, the NCCHPP was given a dual mandate

1. Produce a **knowledge synthesis** aimed at identifying **public policies that seem to be effective** at addressing obesity

2. Document **the methodological issues** associated with this exercise
But what exactly is a “public policy”? 
The quest for a definition

- No agreed upon definition
- NCCHPP: “A strategic action led by a public authority in order to limit or increase the presence of certain phenomena within the population”

- Definition focused on action
  But a public policy can also be a statement that defines a public problem and formulates a response in terms of objectives and actions

- Public authority:
  Any government at the federal, provincial, regional or municipal level

But what exactly is a "knowledge synthesis"?
Definition by CIHR (2010)

“The contextualization and integration of research findings of individual research studies within the larger body of knowledge on the topic. A synthesis must be reproducible and transparent in its methods, using quantitative and/or qualitative methods”
Different types of syntheses (CIHR, 2010)

• Systematic reviews (e.g., Cochrane Collaboration)
• Meta-analyses
• Narrative syntheses
• Scoping reviews
• Realist syntheses
• Etc.

Why a specific method applicable to public policies?

• **A policy is not a simple intervention**
  • Applied at the population level
  • The decision maker is a public authority who is accountable

• **Beyond effectiveness**
  • Policy makers are interested in implementation issues

• **Beyond the literature**
  • Sometimes few studies have been published
  • Need to contextualize the data
Five principles guiding our reflection

1. Methodological rigour
2. Political relevance
3. Broadened conception of evidence
4. Flexibility – The best is the enemy of the good
5. “Honest broker” (Pielke, 2007)

Some sources of inspiration

- Political science(s)
- Public policy evaluation and analysis
- Deliberative processes
- Evidence-informed decision-making
A synthesis in four steps

Analytical framework: effectiveness, unintended effects, equity, cost, feasibility, and acceptability

- **Step 1**: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis
- **Step 2**: Logic model
- **Step 3**: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
- **Step 4**: Enrichment and contextualization of data

Each element can also be used by itself
Step 1.

Inventory of options and choice of policy
Instead of deciding in advance that the synthesis will focus on this or that public policy...
... start with the targeted health problem and identify the range of policies proposed for addressing it

E.g.: “What can the government do in the area of nutrition to prevent obesity?”
- Regulation of advertising that targets children
- Nutrition labelling
- Taxing junk food
- Setting up public markets
- ...
# How to compile the inventory?

## Preliminary exploration of the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grey literature</th>
<th>Scientific literature</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Websites of organizations interested in the targeted health problem:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Governments and NGOs</td>
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<td>- Public health and other concerned sectors</td>
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<td>- Your province, Canada, international</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Websites that inventory systematic reviews</td>
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<td>• Optional: preliminary exploration of databases</td>
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If resources are available: study *several* of the policies proposed to address the health problem

But often, it is only possible to explore *one* option
From among all the proposed options, how do you choose the one that will be the subject of the knowledge synthesis?
Who chooses?

- The decision maker/commissioner of the synthesis
- Negotiation between the decision maker and yourself
- Yourself: complete autonomy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection criteria</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Convenience</strong> &lt;br&gt; Ease of producing the synthesis (including: accessibility of data)</td>
<td>Saves time, money and energy</td>
<td>Lack of rigour</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Predetermined criteria</strong> &lt;br&gt; E.g.: the policy should be low-cost, or socially acceptable, or equity-focused, etc.</td>
<td>Prioritizes a criterion that is of interest</td>
<td>Neglects promising options that do not fit the criterion</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Political importance</strong> &lt;br&gt; The public policy is on the discussion agenda</td>
<td>Relevance of the synthesis to stakeholders</td>
<td>Neglects promising options that are not already on the political agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A policy that has been successful in another jurisdiction</strong></td>
<td>Promising option</td>
<td>Must be contextualized +++</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SEVERAL SYNTHESIS</strong> &lt;br&gt; Maximum variation &lt;br&gt; E.g.: from the least to the most coercive policy</td>
<td>Informative for policy makers</td>
<td>Cost of producing several syntheses</td>
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E.g.: “What can the government do in the area of nutrition to prevent obesity?”

- Regulation of advertising that targets children
- Nutrition labelling
- Taxing junk food
- Setting up public markets
- ...
Step 2.
The logic model
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Logic model

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data

You are here!

Prior to data collection
Logic Model

How many of you have heard of logic models? How many have used one?

• Many terms...
  – logic model, theoretical model, theory of change, conceptual framework, logical framework, etc.
  ...and they are assigned different meanings
    e.g., logic models for Ontario Public Health Standards

• We do not wish to enter into these debates
  What is important = understanding the proposed way of proceeding
Usually:

• A public policy is proposed as a means of obtaining a desired effect
• But the intervention logic (mechanism of action) is not made explicit
Detail the intervention logic

Deconstruct the chain of expected effects between the public policy and the problem targeted

(Champagne et al., 2009; Weiss, 1998)


Example: Nutrition labelling

PUBLIC POLICY

Nutrition labelling → Read by consumers → Well understood consumers → Better-informed consumers → Purchase of healthier foods → Healthier diet → Obesity prevention

INTERMEDIATE EFFECTS

EFFECT ON THE PROBLEM
The logic model is not...

...a causal model:

– Does not represent all the causes of the targeted problem, only those targeted by the policy under study

Example: Causal web for obesity

Source: Groupe de travail provincial sur la problématique du poids (inspired by work carried out by the International Obesity Task Force), 2004, p. 12.
The logic model is not...

... *proof* of causality:

– It represents the *theory* of how the public policy should produce its intended effects
– Data collection will indicate whether this proves true in reality
Contribution of logic model

1. Define the subject of the knowledge synthesis
   - Too complex a model = confusion among several policies?
     - To be able to manage the data gathered:
       Narrow down the subject of study until there is a single mechanism of action

2. Plausibility of the intervention logic?
   - If plausibility is weak: not worth pursuing

3. Examine effectiveness step by step
   - Identify what is more or less likely to succeed (effectiveness gaps), to be verified during data collection
     - If there is a significant gap upstream: not worth pursuing
Example: Nutrition labelling

In a population whose majority is of low literacy or illiterate, this public policy would be ineffective from the start.
Contribution of logic model (cont’d.)

4. Guide data collection
   – Relevant intermediate effects to document
   – Interesting, because data on ultimate effects of public policies are scarce

5. Strengthen the assumption of causality
   As opposed to simply correlating policy and ultimate effect

6. Structure the synthesis (the report)
   – In the chapter synthesizing the effectiveness data: a sub-section for each intermediate effect
   – Useful as a guide to decision making and action
Constructing a logic model

- Suggestion: Start by noting the “last” intermediate effect
  - Generally the most well-known in the field of public health
Constructing a logic model

• Reflection based on:
  – knowledge gathered during preliminary exploration of the literature
  – (as needed) consultation with experts
  – simple reasoning

• Variable number of steps

• One path or many

• == Simplicity ==
  – Key to establishing an appropriate level of precision: will additional detail be helpful to you when you plan your data collection?
Constructing a logic model (cont’d.)

• No "right answer"

• Tool to guide reflection

• Iterative construction
  – Prior to data collection
  – During: rework model based on data found
Exercise

The logic model
Imagine the following scenario...

You are called to a meeting.

You are informed that the Minister of Health is concerned about the consumption of energy drinks by young people.
Energy drinks
(Dubé et al., 2010; Plamondon, 2011)

• Consumption observed among young people in high school or college

• Health risks:
  – **Caffeine** (main active ingredient):
    • Excessive consumption => undesirable effects ranging from nausea to heart arrhythmia
    • Addiction / Withdrawal symptoms => depleted energy, drowsiness, depressive mood, difficulty concentrating, headache, irritability, etc.
    • Children and adolescents: group sensitive to the effects of caffeine
  – **Association with alcohol**: masks feelings of drunkenness => may lead to greater consumption of alcohol and risky behaviour
  – **Sugar** (regular consumption): negative impact on dental health and body weight

Energy drinks
(Dubé et al., 2010; Plamondon, 2011)

Marketing practices:

• Sold along with other sugary drinks
• "beneficial" effects over-emphasized / undesirable effects eclipsed
• Themes that attract young people

The government is weighing the idea of banning the sale of energy drinks to those under 18 years old.

Your mission
Produce a knowledge synthesis to inform the government about this option.
Exercise: Construct the logic model for the banning of energy drink sales to minors

- Public policy
  - Ban on sale to minors

- Intermediate effects

- Effect on the problem
  - Prevention of associated health problems
Step 3.
Collection and analysis of data drawn from the literature
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Logic model

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data

You are here!
Dual challenge: A literature review that is **rigorous** and **adapted to public policies**

= **SIMPLE OVERVIEW** =
- Documentary search
- Appraisal of the quality of data
- Data extraction
- Data synthesis

*Details: consult the document*
What are your usual sources of data?

– Scientific literature
  • Including qualitative data?

– Grey literature
  E.g.: Research reports, documents produced by governments or NGOs, statements by professional associations, opinion polls, theses, etc.
RIGOROUSNESS

Describe the process (record): transparency and reproducibility

Inclusion and exclusion criteria
E.g.: content, countries, period, language
No convenience sampling

ADAPTATION for public policies (PPs)

Openness: Do not document only effectiveness, decision makers need more
=> 6-dimension analytical framework

Scientific literature: several disciplines
E.g.: public health, political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, ethics, law...

List of databases

AND grey literature
Websites of organizations interested in the targeted health problem

Refer to Step 1 - Inventory
Appraisal of the quality of data

RIGOROUSNESS

• Describe the principal characteristics of the documents selected
  E.g.: type, source, design, authors' affiliations, potential sources of bias

• Data from the scientific literature / the grey literature are treated the same way, but separately

ADAPTATION for PPs

• The hierarchy of evidence excludes relevant evidence regarding PPs

• Sort documents according to their relevance (contribution to the knowledge synthesis)
Data extraction

**RIGOROUSNESS ADAPTATION for PPs**

**Extraction tables**
- One for scientific lit.
- One for grey lit.

**Type of data to extract**
Refer to analytical framework: Effectiveness + 5 other dimensions

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Data synthesis

RIGOROUSNESS

• Use all the data extracted
No cherry picking

• Distinguish data from scientific lit. / grey lit.

⇒ A rough criterion for classification, but helps orient readers re.: “quality” of data

ADAPTATION for PPs

Narrative synthesis

Thematic:
themes = dimensions of the analytical framework
Limited resources? A few shortcuts

**Automatic documentary searches** in PubMed, by topic.

Ontario Public Health Standards website:

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/pubhealth/oph_standards/ophs/litss.html

PubMed = one database among others...

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**Limit the number of documents to be analyzed**

- Existing literature reviews + documents published subsequently
  - *See list of alternative resources*
  - An existing review will never cover *all* the aspects that interest us
  - Can be complemented by deliberative processes
Limited resources? A few shortcuts (cont’d.)

Limit the number of documents to be analyzed (continued)

• Narrow the inclusion criteria
  – In particular, by country, time period

• Begin reading + saturation criterion
  – To avoid bias: Read documents in a neutral order, e.g., reverse chronological order and, alphabetically, by author

• Ignore the grey literature (Warning !!!)
  – Suggested in rapid review methods
  – But results in loss of much relevant data
  – Can deliberative processes compensate for this?
Shortcuts - Warnings

• The result is always less optimal than with a full literature review

• Remain transparent about the process followed

• Indicate the limitations and biases introduced
A framework for analyzing public policies
A synthesis in four steps

Analytical framework

Step 1
Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2
Logic model

Step 3
Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4
Enrichment and contextualization of data
A framework for guiding data collection

What do we want to know about the policy under study?

• Whether it is effective => Classic focus in public health

• Policy makers also want to know about the implementation issues

➢ In short: Gather all the data required to make an informed decision and to plan an implementation strategy
The NCCHPP’s analytical framework

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Major sources of inspiration: Salamon, 2002; Swinburn et al., 2005

List of elements to consider for each dimension

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Effectiveness

Remains the most important dimension of the analysis

- Effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the policy under study at addressing the targeted problem
- Intermediate effects [refer to logic model]
- Plausibility of the intervention logic [refer to logic model]
- Impact of context on effectiveness
- Distribution of effects over time

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Unintended effects

• Unrelated to the objective pursued
• Effects in all sorts of areas
  Health (aspects other than the targeted problem), economic, political, environmental, tied to social relations, etc.
• Positive or negative

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• Measures to mitigate negative effects?
Equity

Watch out for policies that improve the overall average but increase inequalities

- Differential effects of the policy under study on various groups
  
  Groups defined by age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, residence in certain zones, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc.

- Effects on social inequalities in health

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The government is weighing the idea of banning the sale of energy drinks to those under 18 years old.

Produce a policy analysis to inform the government about this option.

Part one: Effects

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Cost

- Costs related to implementation and gains
  - for the government
  - for other actors
- Distribution over time
  - One-time or recurrent costs
  - Immediate or deferred costs
  - Short or long-term investments
- Visibility
- Cost compared to that of other potential policies
  - Cost-effectiveness

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Feasibility

• Availability of resources (human, material, "technological"...)
• Conformity with all relevant legislation
  Including: Levels of government
  Mandate of sectors involved
• Existence of pilot programs
• Can the policy be administered by pre-existing mechanisms?

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Feasibility (cont’d.)

• Is the authority promoting the policy also the one applying it?
• Number of actors involved in implementing the policy
• To what extent are their activities being guided by the policy’s promoters?
  – System of incentives and sanctions
• Quality of the cooperation among actors...
• ... and ability of opponents to interfere

Not necessary to document ALL these elements!

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Acceptability

- How stakeholders view the policy under study
- Influenced by their knowledge, beliefs, values, interests, etc.
- Acceptability influences the adoption, implementation and potential for success of a policy
- Policy makers are subject to various forms of pressure that they wish to anticipate

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Acceptability (cont’d.)

First: identify relevant stakeholders / actors:

Groups directly targeted by the policy, the wider public, gov’t. ministries, municipalities, other policy makers, professionals from the relevant public sectors, funding agencies, industry, the media, political organizations, etc.


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Second: For each actor concerned, as much as possible:

- Acceptability of acting on the problem—and how
- Acceptability of the policy under study:
  - Assessment of its effectiveness, unintended effects, equity, cost, and feasibility
  - Assessment of the degree of coercion involved (information vs. incentives vs. regulation)
Acceptability (cont’d.)

**Second:** (Continued) For each actor concerned:

- Acceptability of the conditions for adoption and implementation of a policy
  Sometimes the *content* of a policy is accepted, but the *process* surrounding it is not

- Possible evolution of acceptability over time?

*Low acceptability does not necessarily mean the policy should be discarded*

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Using the analytical framework

• To guide data collection (literature & deliberative processes)
  – List of key questions
  – List is indicative; answers to everything rarely found

• Structuring
  Extraction table & structure of report

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Using the analytical framework (cont’d.)

• Outside the context of a knowledge synthesis: summarize informal or expert knowledge possessed about a policy
  => Assists reflection (individual or group)
The government is weighing the idea of **banning the sale of energy drinks to those under 18 years old**

Produce a **policy analysis** to inform the government about this option

**Part two: Implementation**

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Step 4.
Enrichment and contextualization

(Thanks to François-Pierre Gauvin who helped to develop previous version of this presentation, and this section in particular)
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Logic model

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
drawn from the literature

Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data

Certain issues are not identified or addressed in the literature...

Transferability to your own context...

You are here!
A deliberative process can enrich and contextualize your literature review

Deliberation:
Act of reflecting, of examining a question, discussion

How does it work in practice?

A **half-day meeting** (by invitation) of a group of **10-20 key informants**

- Able to bring forward **knowledge**
  - about the **expected effects** or
  - the issues surrounding the potential **application** of the public policy under study in their own context

- Balanced group representing many perspectives
  - experts, professionals, decision makers, civil society actors
  - From public health and other relevant sectors
  - From the relevant geographical zone
How does it work in practice? (cont’d.)

• Send participants a summary of the literature review a few weeks prior to the meeting
• The objective is to identify and clarify issues on anticipated effects and implementation issues.
• The day of the meeting: the facilitator ensures that the discussion is organized around the six dimensions of the analytical framework

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List of key questions for each dimension
How does it work in practice? (cont’d.)

• Finding a balance between transparency and confidentiality:
  Neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant may be revealed.

• Ideally, exchanges are recorded
  – To facilitate analysis
  – To ensure proper transcription of the exchanges

• Recordings are transcribed, a thematic analysis and synthesis is produced and transmitted to the participants
The benefits expected from deliberation

- Better document certain issues
- Increase the relevance of the synthesis to policy makers
- Knowledge translation*

What are the risks (real or perceived)?

**Scientific**
- Scientific objectivity

**Political**
- Creation of a space for deliberation on certain politically sensitive issues

**Project management**
- Time and resources

**Deliberation**
- Diven by complex group dynamics
Example: Our knowledge synthesis of nutrition labelling

- 3 deliberative processes, in British Columbia and in Ontario
- Participants involved in the fight against obesity, from the public, non-profit and academic sectors (public health, agri-food, education, physical activity, children's services)

Advantages

- Literature included little Canadian data
- Deliberation brought to light knowledge that was not found in the literature, including:
  - Suggested avenues for the implementation of new labelling policies in Canada
  - Overview of the standpoint of concerned actors in Canada (those addressing obesity, population, industry)
Practical Exercise
Deliberative process
Imagine the following scenario...

You have produced a literature review on the banning of energy drink sales to those under 18 years old.

You want to organize a deliberative process to enrich and contextualize the review.
Deliberative Process
« The banning of energy drink sales to those under 18 years old »

Which aspects would be better documented?
- ...

Who would you invite, and why?
- ...

What issues are raised by this?
- ...
After the 4 steps...

Integrating the different kinds of knowledge gathered
Structure of the knowledge synthesis document

• Transparent description of the process
• Logic model of the policy under study
• Synthesis of data drawn from the:
  – Scientific literature
  – Grey literature
  – Deliberative processes

Example: Nutrition labelling Synthesis
http://www.ncchpp.ca/docs/Synthesis_nutrition_labelling_highlights_EN.pdf
Use of the method

• The whole is more than the sum of its parts
• But sometimes you may want to use only parts of the method

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You want to do a quick scan of potential policy options to address a problem.

Scenario 1

Step 1
Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2
Explication of the intervention logic

Step 3
Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4
Enrichment and contextualization of data
You want to reflect on the potential effectiveness of a policy option.

**Scenario 2**

1. **Step 1**
   - Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

2. **Step 2**
   - Explication of the intervention logic

3. **Step 3**
   - Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

4. **Step 4**
   - Enrichment and contextualization of data
More scenarios – Logic model

- For communication purposes, you seek to represent simply the way a public policy works

- You wish to facilitate a discussion among various stakeholders about a public policy
  - Joint construction of the logic model
You are asked to produce a literature review on a given public policy. You are looking for an adapted approach.

Scenario 3

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis
Step 2: Explication of the intervention logic
Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data
A high-quality literature review is released. Although it was produced elsewhere, it is relevant to policy issues in your region / province. You are interested in contextualizing the results of that literature review.
Resources on deliberative processes

• Series of **fact sheets** produced by the **NCCHPP** (F.P. Gauvin)
  [http://www.ncchpp.ca/130/publications.ccnp](http://www.ncchpp.ca/130/publications.ccnp)

You are looking for a framework with which to conduct a policy analysis.

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- List of recap questions
- Analyze *all* or *some* of the dimensions
Available at: http://www.ncchpp.ca/docs/Guide_frame_work_analyzing_policies_En.pdf
Many thanks!

• To the other members of our scientific committee:
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  – François-Pierre Gauvin
  – Geneviève Hamel
  – Marie-Christine Hogue

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