

Pioneering change: ANSER's impact linking research and policy on sexual and reproductive health

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In the midst of challenging times for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), the Academic Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Policy (ANSER) stands out as an innovative force. As an international academic network, ANSER sets an inspiring example of effective knowledge translation, connecting research and policy. Through their pioneering efforts, ANSER sets a benchmark for excellence in strengthening evidence-based policies to safeguard and promote SRHR.

Challenging Times for SRHR

Today fake news is everywhere. Misinformation spreads rapidly on social media, bypassing fact checks of journalists and using algorithms made to reinforce existing beliefs rather than providing critical analysis. Not to mention the financial and political benefits sensational fake news can provide to their propagators.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are particularly susceptible to fake news due to societal taboos and stigma. The lack of open discussions around the topic contributes to knowledge gaps and thus the inability to critically assess information.

SRHR issues are also politically and religiously polarized, leading to intentional misinformation for ideological or political purposes. For instance, a study found that 24 % of #HPV Tweets written in English between December 2019 and March 2020 contained misinformation about adverse health effects, mandatory vaccination and inefficacy of the vaccine (Kornides et al., 2023).

In recent years, there has been a disturbing backlash against women's rights and particularly sexual and reproductive health rights, such as Poland's ban on terminations of pregnancies with fetal defects and Hungary's restrictions on gender changes in 2021. Just a few months ago, Uganda passed a law crimi-

nalizing LGBTIQ identification¹, and today in the US, 19 states teach sexual abstinence in schools, without discussing contraception, healthy relationships or bodily autonomy.² Over the last years discriminatory norms, cultural and religious beliefs as well as conservative agendas hindered or even reversed progress on SRHR. Addressing this requires comprehensive sexuality education, open discussions, media literacy, and empowering policymakers with accurate knowledge.

More than ever it is necessary to promote evidence-based policies and knowledge sharing in this crucial area, hence the international network, known as ANSER, was established.

Historic evolution of ANSER

In September 2015, the international community approved sustainable development by formally agreeing on a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), providing a framework to address global challenges. SRHR plays a vital role there, intersecting with SDG3 (ensure healthy lives), SDG5 (achieve gender equality), SDG10 (reduce inequalities), and impacting other goals. As a result, SRHR had a central position in various new policies being introduced in the aftermath of the SDGs.

Effective SRHR policies require evidence-based approaches to ensure adequacy and sustainable impact, such as research findings that provide the foundation for the policies, stakeholder engagement to ensure all voices are heard and included as well as monitoring and evaluation to weigh the effectiveness of policies and identify areas of improvement. Recognizing the importance of evidence-based SRHR policies and the need for collaboration, Gh-

ent University established the ANSER network in December 2016. The network's members engage in education, research and societal outreach, striving to translate SRHR evidence into effective policy plans and practice. Through education, ANSER attempts to equip students and academic staff with the necessary skills and understanding to effectively translate SRHR evidence into policy. By empowering the next generation of experts, ANSER plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of SRHR knowledge translation initiatives. Through research, ANSER creates an environment that aligns with the needs of policymakers and delivers meaningful outcomes that directly contribute to the development of effective SRHR policies. By ensuring the accessibility and comprehensibility of research findings, ANSER maximizes their impact. Lastly, through societal outreach, ANSER empowers policymakers with knowledge about formulating evidence-based SRHR policies and encourages members of the network to actively participate in policy forums to guarantee inclusive, rights-based, and evidence-grounded policies. By bridging researchers and policymakers, ANSER fosters trust, understanding, and collaboration.

ANSER's thematic focus covers various SRHR topics, such as maternal health, contraception and family planning, safe pregnancy termination, SRHR of vulnerable groups, HIV and STIs, sexual health and well-being, gender rights, gender-based violence, SRHR monitoring and evaluation. The network comprises academic institutions and non-profit organizations worldwide, leveraging the expertise of researchers and policy-oriented entities. Currently, ANSER has 35 academic members and 7 associated members from 23 countries across six continents. Ad Hoc Working Groups drive the network's activities, supported by the ANSER secretariat.

Leading the example of effective knowledge translation

The focus of ANSER's first phase (2016–2020) was mainly on building a cohesive community among the members. In this period, members established working relationships, harvested the added value

1 Uganda passes a law making it a crime to identify as LG-BTQ. (2023, March 22). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/uganda-passes-bill-banning-identifying-lg-btq-2023-03-21/>

2 Abstinence-Only Education States 2023. 2023 World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/abstinence-only-education-states>

of collaboration and developed an appreciation for knowledge translation into policy.

In the second phase (2021–2025), the network clearly shifted towards a more output-focused network, with the aim of activities that directly impact evidence-based SRHR policies. Research has shown that effective strategies to increase the use of evidence in health policies should have four components:

- Making research findings more accessible for policymakers.
- Increase opportunities for interaction between policymakers and researchers.
- Addressing structural barriers to research receptivity in policy agencies and a lack of incentives for academics to link with policy.
- Increase the relevance of research to policy. (Campbell et al., 2009.)

Thus, we started focusing our activities in these directions to ensure a more targeted impact.

Making research findings more accessible to policymakers

ANSER members are encouraged to continue their research process after they have published the results in scientific literature. Through webinars, workshops and dedicated courses within larger training sessions, senior researchers but also PhD students and Master students were taught how to develop more accessible outputs.

Different output materials were created to provide a condensed and understandable version of the research findings, making it easier for policymakers to grasp the main points. Examples are policy briefs that highlight the key takeaways and policy implementations (see an example on SRHR of Ukrainian refugees in [box 1](#)), infographics that help convey complex information in a visually appealing and accessible manner, knowledge clips that offer a time-efficient way to deliver research results to policymakers with tight schedules and joint ANSER thematic webinars where research from many different institutions is presented collectively.

BOX 1: POLICY PAPER “ENSURING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES”

Shortly after the war in Ukraine started in February 2022, policy makers faced a significant knowledge gap regarding the impact of the conflict on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of Ukrainian refugees in neighboring host countries. To address this issue, ANSER collaborated with the European Parliamentary Forum on SRHR (EPF) to develop a policy brief. This comprehensive document examines the potential challenges hindering the fulfillment of SRHR of Ukrainian refugees and offers clear policy recommendations based on academic literature. The brief covers various SRHR topics, including access

to contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, unsafe pregnancies and deliveries, unsafe pregnancy termination, sexual and gender-based violence, LGBTI+ rights and surrogacy.

The policy brief was widely circulated among European policymakers and had a notable impact. It prompted several parliamentary questions and garnered attention from influential figures, such as the Belgian Deputy Prime Minister, who referenced the brief during a keynote speech at the European Society for Contraceptives Conference in May 2022.

Increase opportunities for interaction between policymakers and researchers

By organizing interactive moments between ANSER members and policymakers, the network aims to encourage meaningful interactions, promote mutual understanding and strengthen the bridge between research and policymaking.

ANSER actively strengthens connections through strategic partnerships with prominent political entities like the European Parliamentary Forum on SRHR, UNFPA and WHO. By engaging these partners extensively in network activities, researchers gain profound insights into the policy context, priorities, and challenges. This approach ensures that research questions, methodologies, and outcomes align directly with the policy agenda, resulting in greater relevance and impact. Furthermore, ANSER invites political stakeholders to participate in its own meetings and activities while consistently attending diverse SRHR-related policy forums. This proactive engagement fosters direct interaction and dialogue and helps build trusted networks. Additionally, it provides researchers to offer clarifications, address misconceptions, and engage in open discussions directly with policymakers. And crucially, ANSER's annual stakeholder meetings serve as vital platforms where a diverse range of non-academic stakeholders involved in SRHR can voice their evidence needs based on their respective work. These meetings encompass a broad spectrum, from young SRHR activists sharing insights into the needs of their peers in the community to politicians seeking data to support the development of new national SRHR strategies, and healthcare professionals highlighting relevant observations from their patients that warrant further research. For a more detailed insight into the 2022 ANSER stakeholder meeting [see box 2](#).

Addressing structural barriers to research receptivity in policy agencies and a lack of incentives for academics to link with policy

Repeated training sessions are set up for senior researchers, PhD students and Master students to equip them with the necessary skills to effectively engage with policymakers. Furthermore, ANSER also offers training packages for policymakers em-

BOX 2: ANSER STAKEHOLDER MEETING 2022

In November 2022, ANSER hosted its annual stakeholder meeting, uniting over 50 participants from 40 different organizations spanning 22 countries. The consultation started with compelling pitches done by non-academic professionals, presenting data needs that they experience from their respective work domains. Building upon these valuable inputs, a priority-setting exercise was conducted, resulting in an agreed set of research topics deemed most important:

- SRHR research capacity strengthening
- Access to SRHR supplies & services
- Adolescent SRHR
- Access to SRHR for LGBTIQ+
- Climate crisis and SRHR

Subsequently, group discussions were organized for each theme, delving deeper into the existing and missing data on the issue. Participants identified pertinent research questions and brainstormed to explore collaborations between the different stakeholders and the ANSER members on the topic. The valuable insights generated from these discussions served as a foundation for ANSER's network-wide research priority-setting exercise, conducted during the ANSER Members Meeting in late November 2022. This inclusive process culminated in the establishment of the current four ANSER Ad Hoc Working Groups, each focused on advancing research in key areas:

- Climate & SRHR
- Contradicting SRHR consent policies for adolescents
- Effective SRHR knowledge translation to policy
- SRHR Policy Implementation

This year, for the first time, external stakeholders are also invited to join the working group meetings throughout the year.

powering them with the knowledge and tools to utilize evidence in their SRHR decision-making processes (see box 3). In those sessions, a lot of attention is given to the difference in thinking and responsibility of researchers and policymakers, but also the importance of working together to reach sustainable change. By offering pieces of training to both stakeholders, we hope to build trust and credibility. Policymakers who witness the rigor and integrity of the research process are more likely to see researchers as trusted sources of evidence. Researchers can build trust to work with policymakers when they better understand the policy landscape and the specific needs and challenges policymakers face.

Increase the relevance of research to policy

Maximizing the relevance of research to policy requires a multifaceted approach. At ANSER, we concentrate on addressing topics that directly align with policy priorities and shed light on pressing issues overlooked by policymakers. By providing tangible

and actionable recommendations, we enhance the value and applicability of our research within policy contexts. We also look at the evidence to support the implementation of existing SRHR policies. This includes conducting mappings of existing SRHR policies, studying the triggers and barriers to effective SRHR policy implementation, developing a suggested set of indicators to measure the success of SRHR policies (see box 4; WHO Regional Committee for Europe, 2016) and other evaluation studies to assess the impact of specific SRHR policies.

Future directions

The year 2024 will mark a unique momentum for academics to influence policymakers about sexual and reproductive health and rights. It converges significant SRHR-related policy processes, offering academics valuable opportunities to drive change. Firstly, it commemorates the 30th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Devel-

BOX 3: UNFPA/ANSER FALL CLASS: “ACCELERATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL SRHR STRATEGIES AND ACTION PLANS IN THE EECA REGION: LINKING EVIDENCE, POLICY AND PRACTICE”

In October 2023, ANSER is organizing its third training program for UNFPA-related policy stakeholders. The course provides participants with a theoretical background and practical tools on how to ensure strong SRHR policies, based on evidence and experiences from the field. The Fall Class is conducted online, spanning a week of intensive learning. Every year, the course welcomes approximately 20 participants and over 20 distinguished lecturers representing diverse countries and institutions worldwide. Throughout the week, participants work on an assignment, applying what they have learned directly to their daily work. On Friday, participants present their work to peers in small groups, fostering valuable discussions and undergoing a peer review process.

During the evaluation of the 2022 course, all participants noted the opportunity to develop valuable expertise, enhance skills, and gain deeper insights into the vital connection between evidence, policy, and practice. They strengthened their capacity to search for and critically analyze research findings, effectively translate evidence into policy, and better appreciate the voice of practitioners and service delivery needs. All they have learned was seen as directly relevant for their day-to-day roles and responsibilities. In the past two editions, ANSER has successfully certified 35 policy stakeholders. For the 2023 edition, 20 new participants are registered, eager to embark on this transformative learning experience.

BOX 4: SUGGESTED INDICATOR FRAMEWORK FOR THE WHO EURO REGIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

In 2019, ANSER developed a set of indicators to measure the objectives outlined in the WHO "Action Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health: towards achieving the 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Europe – leaving no one behind".

To ensure efficiency and avoid duplication, the suggested set of indicators draws upon existing monitoring frameworks such as the Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UNECE Monitoring Framework for the ICPD Program of Action beyond 2014 (ICPD+25) and the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016–2030).

The intended purpose of this set of indicators is to support UNFPA and WHO in the process of determining the final set of indicators. Each suggested indicator is accompanied by clear definitions, potential data sources, and a description of the methodology employed in the indicator selection.

opment (ICPD), enabling academics to emphasize achievements and remaining gaps in SRHR. Secondly, as Belgium assumes the presidency of the Council of the European Union in Spring, it grants academics a substantial platform to shape EU policy decisions on SRHR issues. Capitalizing on this momentum, ANSER is organizing a conference in February 2024, dedicated to advancing evidence-based SRHR policies in the post-ICPD+30 era.

Regarding the future focus of the ANSER network, the specific topics will be decided upon by its members. However, our commitment is to generate evidence in areas that are entering the political debate but lack sufficient data (e.g. SRHR within Universal Health Coverage), topics requiring more political attention (e.g. equitable access to SRHR), subjects that we anticipate will gain prominence on the political agenda in the times ahead (Climate & SRHR) or suggested solutions for any of the concerns addressed above (e.g. Technology & SRHR).

ANSER is also developing its business planning for 2025 and beyond, as the Ghent University's seed

funding for international networks reaches the end of its second and final term. To sustain our ongoing work, we are actively exploring alternative funding opportunities, ensuring the continuity of our activities.

Conclusion

ANSER stands out as a powerful platform that unites academics and other SRHR stakeholders, with a strong emphasis on connecting research with policy and linking research to policy. It plays a crucial role in driving evidence-based sexual and reproductive health and rights policies, fostering collaboration, and shaping sustainable change. As a pioneer in this domain, ANSER leads the way for improved policy implementation and contributes to positive change in sexual rights and the well-being of individuals worldwide. ANSER's model sets an example for other networks and organizations engaged in knowledge translation for effective policy implementation. By prioritizing the integration of research and policy, fostering collaboration, and promoting

evidence-based decision-making, ANSER sets a benchmark for excellence. The success and impact of ANSER's work demonstrate the significance of robust research, stakeholder engagement, and the translation of knowledge into actionable policies.

Literature

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