RIVER-EU Reflections

Transferability and Adaptation: How Public Health Interventions Travel Across Contexts

Funded by the European Union

Executive Summary

Reading time: ca. 3 mins

About this Resource

This SEKI learning resource was developed as part of the RIVER-EU project (EU Horizon 2020, 2021–2026). It is intended for junior-to-mid-level healthcare professionals — including doctors, nurses, immunisation program officials, and public health workers — and is available on the SEKI.eu learning platform.

The insights presented here are drawn directly from field experience and research conducted by the RIVER-EU team at Maastricht University and are designed to remain relevant well beyond the project's lifetime

Why Transferability Matters

Public health professionals are often encouraged to adopt interventions that have been successful elsewhere. However, communities differ in their histories, cultures, healthcare systems, resources, and levels of trust. An approach that works well in one setting may not achieve the same results in another. The RIVER-EU project explored a different question: not simply whether an intervention works, but how successful interventions can be adapted responsibly and effectively across different communities and contexts.

The Challenge

Many health programmes fail after transfer because they are implemented without sufficient understanding of the local environment.

Common challenges

- Differences in population characteristics and community priorities
- Language, cultural, and communication barriers
- Variations in healthcare infrastructure and available resources
- Different levels of trust in institutions and healthcare providers
- Assumptions that success in one setting will automatically translate to another

The Core Lesson

Transferability is not about copying interventions. Instead, transferability asks: *How can the outcomes of a successful intervention be achieved in a different setting?*

This requires understanding the context in which an intervention will be implemented and identifying which elements must remain unchanged and which elements can be adapted.

What Makes the RIVER-EU Approach Different?

The transferability work led by Tamara Schloemer and colleagues at Maastricht University emphasised:

- Listening before acting
- Understanding context before implementation
- Engaging communities as partners
- Combining evidence with local knowledge
- Continuous learning and adaptation

Rather than relying solely on expert opinion, RIVER-EU used participatory approaches involving researchers, healthcare professionals, stakeholders, and community members throughout the implementation process.

Five Key Principles of Transferability

1. **Start with the community, not the intervention.** Understanding local realities should precede implementation.
2. **Context matters.** Population characteristics, resources, healthcare systems, and cultural factors all influence success.
3. **Preserve purpose while adapting delivery.** Core principles should remain stable, while implementation approaches may require adaptation.
4. **Engage communities as partners.** Participation and co-creation improve relevance, trust, and sustainability.
5. **Expect adaptation and learning.** Successful implementation is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event.

Transferability in Practice

The RIVER-EU experiences in Poland and Slovakia demonstrate that successful interventions do not need to look identical in order to achieve similar outcomes.

- In Poland, trust-building, culturally responsive communication, and language-concordant care supported engagement with displaced Ukrainian families.
- In Slovakia, trusted Roma Health Mediators and strong community partnerships helped improve HPV vaccination uptake within marginalised Roma communities.

The same principles remained important in both settings, but implementation was adapted to local needs and realities.

Implications for Practice

Healthcare professionals seeking to adapt interventions from other settings should:

- Assess local needs before implementation
- Identify barriers and existing strengths
- Build trust through dialogue and participation
- Distinguish core functions from delivery methods
- Monitor, evaluate, and refine interventions over time

Quick Takeaways

The RIVER-EU Team highlights several important takeaway messages

1. Not everything works everywhere.
2. Transferability is about adaptation, not replication.
3. Communities are partners, not passive recipients.
4. Trust and participation are essential for success.

5. Evidence and context must work together.
6. Adapt the delivery, not the purpose.

Conclusion

One of the most important lessons from RIVER-EU is that successful public health interventions are not simply transferred from one setting to another. They are adapted through listening, collaboration, and continuous learning. By combining scientific evidence with community knowledge and local context, healthcare professionals can design interventions that are both effective and sustainable.

Acknowledgements and Disclaimers

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References

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