

Health Research in the WHO African Region: Notes from the Field Research, Publications & Library in WHO African Region

Background

Research appears 3 times in the WHO constitution and within that context WHO is expected to promote and conduct research in the field of health in an equitable way via the personnel of the Organization, by the establishment of its own mandate.

In the regional Offices in WHO Africa there are a number of documents that help build the framework for implementation:

- Algiers Declaration and framework
- Bamako Declaration, Global Strategy and Plan of Action on Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property - for controlling infections and diseases in least developed countries and those diseases which are not as common in developed countries and for which there are a lack of appropriate tools for financing and coordinating research addressing neglected diseases in neglected populations
- The Ouagadougou declaration on PHC and framework for action
- Also, the AU/NEPD documentation with the AMCOST target of 1% GDP and others.

There are also another number of important dedications and support for the work WHO coordinated, including the MDGs, G8 focus, Global Health Initiative, creating “health science chairs’ for universities and other sources of external funding.

WHO Strategy on Research for Health: Set priorities, increase capacity, establish promote standards, ensure research is translated and making sure all of these activities and results are organized.

The model for organizing translational research means ensuring the Ministry of Health works with the other sectors that also provide resources for research including civil society, academia, NGOs.

National Health Research Systems

The WHO national health research system is differentiated from other initiatives (such as the essential national research from the 1990s), in that the Health Research Systems is intended to primarily to produce knowledge and use this knowledge and translate research into action.

There are 4 primary areas of focus:

- Stewardship (responsible for policy and regulating research)
- Creating and sustaining resources (creating researchers and institutes of tomorrow and ensuring a national health information system)
- Producing and using research (publications, public opinion, translating and communicating research to inform decision making) and,
- Financing (very important and the problem with many researchers in the african region is that there is a struggle to find funding - need indigenous financing and financing from Public Private Partnerships).

National Commitments to Research

The primary declaration for the African region is the Algiers declaration; the purpose of this declaration was to narrow the knowledge gap with commitment from all African ministers and allocate at least 2% of national health expenditure and at least 5% of external aid for health projects, health programmes, research and increasing research capacity as well as investing more in research aimed at improving health systems

At this time, Sept 2012, only South Africa has been able to allocate 2% that were promised.

There are 6 primary core functions of WHO. One of them (#2) is "Shaping the research agenda and stimulating the generation, translation and dissemination of valuable knowledge and #4 is articulating ethical and evidence-based policy options. Since $\frac{1}{3}$ of the core functions are devoted to dissemination of knowledge, one would think a significant portion of the budget is allocated to support these efforts, but only 1% of budget is allocated for these functions.

Review of Spectrum of Research: 5 generic areas of activity:

1. measuring the problem
2. understanding its [problem] causes
3. elaborating solutions
4. translating the solutions or evidence into policy, practice and products
5. evaluate the effectiveness of solutions.

We can keep on Identifying the problems that lead to the disruption of health. But we need to determine whether or not we are actually solving the problem - sometimes there are good solutions but are not taken up for various reasons. We need to be able to look at the impact.

How do you measure the impact/success of what you are doing? You need to set guidelines within programs, periodic checks to make sure we are going in the right direction, and have plans for course correction to alter program/strategies if they are not succeeding or need to be corrected. Part of the problem we do have is that we do not have proper indicators throughout the programmes and projects over time, instead of what we have now which is "more of the same," regardless of efficacy and that truly becomes a waste of resources.

The finality of what we do must have an impact and we need to be able to measure the impact and need the right tools or strategies (to be created or modified via innovation of interventions or innovations for access) to accomplish this goal. These are the things one needs to be able to be carried out.

This begs the issue of equity: we need to make sure there is equitable access and in our approaches need to be not only biomedical but also behavioral, social and anthropological aspects of our work to ensure what we have is really utilized.

WHO/AFRO Contributions to Research for Health

As an example: the African Advisory Committee for Health Research & Development, which convened in 17-19 November 2011.

The issues they addressed were:

Regulations and governance (regional policy and strategic framework on research regulation & governance)

Fostering the culture of research to recognize and incentivize innovative and responsive research (national and regional awards) - get the young in the front and let them carry on and be able to secure funding.

Why is this important? Let's use the example of HIV AIDS - there is a lack of collaboration in Africa. 95% of collaborations are with US facilities. We need to facilitate research between different African sites.

To ensure the cultivation of African collaboration and research capacity, we have created the African Forum for Health Research mainly to meet the need of ensuring a clear career path for young researchers and the primary goal is to accelerate the achievement of health equity and development in Africa through research in the region. This is particularly important for young researchers, to enhance south-south/Africa-Africa collaborations and leverage collaborations and researchers to optimize resources.

Immediate steps include getting common research topics, allowing researchers to present their findings to the African Forum for Health Research, as well as supporting countries to implement important declarations.

Conclusion

Q&A

Is there a problem of incentivizing young investigators to be able to be funded directly by their own countries? Yes, and that is one of the charges of the African Forum

How do you hold countries accountable when they sign declarations? We talk on principle but we act on interest. It's very difficult. Some donor countries have come up with ways to incentivize this process by promising funding for countries who have shown previous commitments (i.e. MDGs) to ensure greater funding.

Accountability is an important function overall - the biggest problem we have (in Africa). There is a risk when you ask civil society to hold governments accountable - both a personal risk of harm and a lack of recourse. Although some big institutions (i.e. World Bank) is able to hold countries accountable but other than that, it is very difficult.

The forum is really to grow the population of researchers - encouraging governments. Broadening health research beyond biomedical. However, we need more statistics: Ministries of Health don't know how many doctors they have, and when you don't even have those data, how can you be asked to allocate resources appropriately? We need to gather those data.

Do you have any advice for future postdocs?

1. NCD is the number one issue right now, mental health, substance abuse.

2: HIV, TB, Malaria

Number 3: NTDs, that too has come up very strongly in the pipeline

Number 4: Health systems research. We don't have systems to deliver even the best products

Number 5: Social determinants of health (environment)

We agree that incentives are important, but what are the incentives to attract grants? Building infrastructure is needed to attract people who can stay and engage in research. Right now, we have people who are well trained but when they come and see the infrastructure, they cannot stay for too long because there are not enough resources. There are initiatives (GAVI, Global Fund, some World Bank Funding) provide 10% for countries for research (infrastructure).

98% of countries do not include research in their funding applications. Initiatives exist but are not exploited. I think one main reason for this is that we at WHO do not do an effective job of informing policy makers this is important initiative to take on. This is the one area where we do not do an effective job; we do not communicate well.

Could there be an exchange program where African countries could have technical corporations (sharing best practices)? Yes, absolutely. This, in general, was something the Forum wants to happen but we need to take it one step further to encourage and incite people to take the initiative to further address such as issue and show examples of success in the region. This is definitely important for the young people, this is what we intend to do. Also need to train medical doctors to also be good managers.