

Report on the

Strategic consultation for scaling up research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Cairo, Egypt
5–6 June 2011

World Health Organization 2012

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1. INTRODUCTION

An expert consultation on the strategic directions for scaling up research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region was held in Cairo, Egypt, on 5–6 June, 2011. The consultation was attended by representatives of various research for health stakeholders from the Region, including the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research, EVIPNet and EMRAIN, WHO collaborating centres, parliamentarians, Ministry of Health focal points, academia/researchers and partners.

The objectives of the consultation were to:

- Discuss with relevant stakeholders the document Strategic directions for research for health: scaling-up in the Eastern Mediterranean Region;
- Propose amendments/suggestions to strengthen the strategic directions based on the contextual changes in the region and globally;
- Deliberate on immediate and long-term regional/subregional/national priorities in research for health;
- Agree on the implementation plan for the framework; and
- Discuss regional input for the World Health Report 2012.

The meeting was inaugurated by Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. He highlighted the importance of research for health despite the numerous political, demographic and financial challenges facing the Region. He stressed the need for new approaches and institutional realignments to both address the needs and to accommodate the changes and transitions based on evidence. In 2010, the World Health Assembly had endorsed the global strategy on research for health, which had provided the Region with the opportunity to adapt the strategy to fit its unique needs. The theme of the 2012 World Health Report was “no health without research.” As the phrase “scaling up” indicated, the Region had many good practices that needed to be expanded upon and shared in the report. He closed by acknowledging the participants’ efforts and their dedication to the field of research and invited them to provide feedback on how WHO could be a better convener for health in the Region.

Professor Mahmoud Fathalla, Chairman of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research (ACHR), discussed the recommendations from the twenty-fifth session of the ACHR, which called upon the Regional Office to develop a strategy for research for health for the Region. He noted that the title of the document “Scaling up research for health” recognized what had been done and provided grounds for future optimism. He closed by stressing the need for more collaborative efforts, particularly in light of examples of commendable cross-country research efforts in the European Union, which boasted even greater linguistic diversity than the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Dr Sawsan Al Majali (Jordan) and Dr Salih Al-Hasnawi (Iraq) were elected as Chairpersons for the two days, and Dr Fatma Abdalla (United Arab Emirates) and Dr Samer Jabbour (Lebanon) were elected as Rapporteurs. The agenda, programme and list of participants are attached as Annexes 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

2. TECHNICAL PRESENTATIONS

2.1 Key issues related to research for health in the Region

Dr Mohammad Abdur Rab, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Research is constitutionally mandated in WHO, a fact reflected in the work of the Regional Office. There are many challenges to research for health concerning, for example, quality of research, uptake of research outputs, inadequate research capacities and coordination of research efforts, and research culture remains weak. WHO's contribution to the overall research efforts in Member States is limited but countries and the public view WHO as a credible source. Researchers and policy-makers have divergent expectations from research. Translating research knowledge to action in the Region has been weak. Starting in 2001, Member States have renewed commitment to research for health and have pushed countries to increase budget allocation to research for health to at least 2% of public expenditures on health and build on global strategies for research for health. There is a need to support systematic reviews as these can generate results quickly building on existing knowledge and involving policy-makers.

A key area is monitoring financial flows for research for health, how these are addressing national health priorities and whether donor-driven research helps national health research development. Research for health must be seen as a continuum and a feedback loop of knowledge generation, research application and impact. While researchers may be interested in the first two elements and policy-makers in the latter, WHO should work on all three levels. The Regional Office must work with Member States and stakeholders to set priorities for research for health. The Regional Office needs to raise awareness among the Member States regarding documents related to research for health. Some of the unique issues in the Region include response to emergencies, medical tourism, migrant workers and prevention of infectious diseases and epidemics. The Regional Office must also look internally at setting its own priorities regarding research for health and stress the need for research coordination and sustenance of partnerships and networks in the Region.

Discussion

The participants discussed the key issues related to research for health in the Region. There is a need to map prior and existing work in research for health to move forward. Policy-makers are aware of the importance of research for health and that it is not a luxury. However, there is still need to convince them that investing in research for health is always necessary even during crises. It is important to look at structural determinants of the divergent expectations of researchers and policy-makers of research and the systems of incentives and disincentives that can promote or hinder closer cooperation. National systems for supporting research innovation system are missing in the Region. The Regional Office should work with Member States to establish multidisciplinary and multisectoral councils for national research for health. Member States should utilize the capacity of expatriates in training for research for health. The budgetary targets for research for health must be set by countries and in some 2% may be too far from existing levels. Researchers need to develop the capacity for dialogue with policy-makers and the media. In parallel, science journalists need to be educated on

research for health issues and knowledge translation. Legislation must facilitate research for health and knowledge translation and utilization; this way actions and policies cannot be taken without an evidence-base. Policy-makers change regularly and the change affects all levels of administration. WHO can play a role in developing capacity for research.

The issue of quality of research needs to be emphasized and requires setting standards. A lot of research is done, e.g. masters or doctorate thesis, but is not accessed or disseminated. Policy- and decision-makers are not always aware of what has been done in the country. Researchers need to project the needs for policy making over the next years. Instituting a research culture starts at a much younger age. Researchers must develop the capacity to do clean and quick studies that meet policy-makers' needs during crises situations. Policy-makers need integrative and problem-solving research that analyses a problem and identifies solutions in order to implement action and assess impact. Researchers must also think and act outside the box. Parliamentary forums need to be engaged to support research and innovation. As much of the social determinants of health are outside the health sector, we must engage and work with other sectors on research for health.

2.2 Strategic directions for scaling up research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Dr Naeema Al-Gasseer, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

As stated in the WHO Constitution, "health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest cooperation of individuals and States". This issue is of increased importance given the changing environment some countries of the Region are facing, including political, demographic, epidemiological and economic transition.

The strategic directions come now to emphasize and advocate that research is not a luxury, and that the quest for research for health to improve health is continuous. The strategic directions search for answers on improvement of coordination, collaboration and governance of research for health and are consistent with the global strategy on research for health endorsed during the WHA 2010. The goals and principles have been slightly modified to address the priorities of the Region.

There are many achievements in relation to research for health both by the Regional Office and at the regional level: allocation of 2% of the budget to research, establishment of networks, small grants to strengthen research capacities among researchers in the Member States, and dissemination of research results through publications.

The strategic directions document was developed in a consultative manner by engaging various research for health stakeholders, ministries of health, members of networks, partners and funding agencies, WHO country offices as well as Regional Office and headquarters staff. Their views were solicited through meetings, focus group discussions, and virtual communication in addition to social networking.

The strategic directions provide a flexible framework, taking into account regional diversity, which can be adapted by countries to address their health needs. The document builds on previous achievements, highlights opportunities and sets the stage for addressing new challenges in a multisectoral approach, especially at a time of emergencies and financial constraints.

Discussion

Promoting a research culture is imperative for the advancement of research for health in the Region. In this respect, WHO is centrally located to act as a convener for research for health, bringing to the table the various stakeholders. Establishment of a multisectoral body responsible for research in each country may assist in promoting the research culture. Issues that might be added to the document include the importance of new technologies such as nanotechnology, issues of bio-safety and bio-security, and emphasis on health solidarity in the Region.

2.3 Success stories in research for health

Dr Amal Bassili, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

This presentation focused on regional success stories in the area of research in communicable diseases. The stories presented were in four main areas; evaluation of rapid diagnostic tests, drug studies including drug resistance, new/improved interventions/public health strategies for disease control and knowledge generation through disease epidemiology. In the area of evaluation of rapid diagnostic tests successful research studies highlighted included the study of brucellosis in Lebanon, malaria in Sudan etc. Home-based management of malaria and mid-wife based strategies to increase pregnant women compliance with usage of drug treated bed nets were examples of new public health strategies for disease control. Examples of epidemiological studies included those involving high risk groups such as drug users and prison populations.

The unit's primary aim is to strengthen research capacity in the region to enable reduction of communicable diseases. This is achieved through research methodology training, dissemination of research results, translating findings into policy and practices and support of researchers in Member States through the Small Grants Scheme.

Integrated systems are critical for research was identified as the single most important factor for grant approval. The Islamic Republic of Iran was given as an example of a country that has very close links between universities and the health care community.

2.4 Introduction to the World Health Report 2012

Mr Robert Terry, WHO headquarters

The first chapter of the World Health Report makes the case for research and presents the return of investment on health research and development. It also highlights key global health challenges including pandemics, climate change and its impact on health etc. This chapter also provides a blueprint for building a national health system using research. It

strongly encourages multiple stakeholder involvement in identifying research priorities with special emphasis on the involvement of civil society. Chapter one also provides Member States with a nine-point checklist for setting priorities.

The second chapter presents the main body of the report and highlights good research practice and the importance of knowledge translation with a focus on evidence that is needed to change behaviour. Chapter three focuses on the critical element of gaining public trust and the lessons learnt in this area. The fourth chapter discusses governance and the emergence of new players in the area of public health. The final chapter is yet to be completed and will provide a roadmap/action plan.

The case study portion of the report will highlight global success stories in a variety of areas including vaccine development, research priority setting, capacity building, knowledge translation etc. The participants were invited to submit published research in the above areas or any other pertinent area to the Regional Office. The case study must show clear evidence of impact on the healthcare system and should be no more than 500–600 words. For unpublished papers, there is a web link for the “No health without research”, a call for papers website so that research papers can be uploaded. The deadline for submission of case studies is set for 22 June 2011.

Discussion

The attendees had numerous questions on the criteria for the selection of successful regional examples, in particular the lack of information regarding collaborative efforts and integration, specific impact on health system, application of innovation, cost effectiveness. It was clarified that the various research projects highlighted in the success stories were innovative and had a major impact at the disease level, in relation to communicable diseases.

The importance of expanding systems to include other types of research particularly those related to the social determinants of health was discussed. Capacity-building in qualitative research was also highlighted to enable countries to deal with future challenges. The need to reward and recognize researchers who conduct this type work was suggested.

Social changes in the Region will burden the health systems across countries due to migration, poor access to health, unemployment etc. Thus a situational analysis is necessary to obtain data on trends and to develop a proactive strategy to deal with these challenges.

It is a critical time for research for health. But to be effective in research, we have to be able to define relative research questions. The health systems need to be changed gradually to accommodate for the future, without a negative effect on the health of people now. Thus, new ways of thinking are required to deal with the current challenges in the Region. The Regional Office must activate the mission of “health as a bridge for peace”.

3. GROUP WORK

In the first activity, the participants were divided into two groups and discussed the strategic actions necessary for successful implementation of the strategic directions. Among the issues discussed were the relevance of the actions and the ability to implement them within a given timeframe.

During the second activity, the participants identified expected results from the strategic actions. The consolidated actions will be circulated to the participants, as well as other stakeholders, for their input and feedback.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- The Regional Office is on the right track and moving in the right direction with regard to research for health.
- Performance measurement is vital. All indicators must be realistic and must be consistently reviewed and updated based on SWOT analysis.
- There is need to work on both the demand and supply side of research for health. This means advocating not only for more research but for the utilization of research results to guide health policy and planning. This includes bridging the gap between researchers and policy-makers, an area that the Regional Office can provide assistance with in the future.
- Resources are key in achieving the strategic directions. Researchers must work with entities beyond the ministries of health to avoid competition for meagre resources. International aid agencies are a source of funds by allocating 5% of projects on research for health. The private sector can also play an important role in assisting in research through targeted taxation.
- It is important for WHO to practise what it preaches. WHO must demonstrate that it is a knowledge-based organization, acting as a model for evidence-based decisions, and allocating appropriate resources for research.
- A final comment was related to the suggestion to produce a special issue of the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal focused on research for health in a changing social, cultural, political environment. The special edition might include an introduction to the Strategic directions for scaling up research for health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, success stories in research for health from the Region and challenges for research for health in the Region and how to address them.

Annex 1

AGENDA

1. Feedback from the participants on Strategic directions for research for health: scaling-up in the Eastern Mediterranean Region
2. Presentation of the document
3. Deliberation and agree on amendments/improvements
4. Agree on immediate and long-term priorities with steps for implementation of the framework
5. Deliberations on the regional input for The World health report 2012
6. Next steps

Annex 2

PROGRAMME

Sunday, 5 June 2011

08:30	Registration
09:00 – 10:30	Opening session
09:00 – 09:15	Address by Regional Director
09:15 – 09:30	Address by EM ACHR Chairman
09:30 – 10:30	Appointment of the Chairpersons, Rapporteurs and introduction of participants and their brief reflections on the document
11:00 – 13:30	Strategic directions for scaling up research for health in the Region
11:00 – 11:20	Key issues related to research for health in the Region
11:20 – 12:00	Discussion
12:00 – 12:30	Presentation of the document, Dr Naeema Al Gasseer, Assistant Regional Director, WHO/EMRO
12:30 – 13:30	Discussion
14:30 – 16:30	Strategic directions: actions and expected results
14:30 – 15:30	Group activity I: review of the strategic actions
15:30 – 16:30	Report of working groups

Monday, 6 June 2011

08:30 – 09:30	Group Activity II
09:30 – 10:15	Discussion
10:15 – 10:45	Presentation of the success stories in research for health
11:30 – 12:00	Introduction to the World Health Report 2012, Mr Robert Terry, WHO/HQ
12:00 – 13:00	Discussion
13:00 – 14:00	Concluding remarks

Annex 3

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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