

Health Research for Development in Mali – a summary

Mali is located in northwestern Africa and covers a territory of 1.24 million km². The population of the country is 7.9 million, comprising a number of major ethnic groups. The average population density is 6 persons per km². 90% of the population are Islamic. The country is divided into 7 regions plus the capital, Bamako with a population of 700,000. It is considered one of the world's poorest countries with a predominantly agricultural economy.

In December 1990 the Declaration on the Sectoral Policy for Health and Population was based on the principles of the Bamako Initiative, although no direct reference was made to health research. But in 1992 a great need and potential for health research was identified in implementing health policy. On 10 May 1993 the General Policy Declaration reaffirmed the worth of scientific and technological research and the function of the researcher. The importance of health research rests in the adaptation and innovation of the General Policy Declaration, which is ambitious in medical, socio-economic and socio-cultural specialities of the country.

A great many national and international bodies are involved in health research in the country, but as yet no national research policy framework has been adopted, and no coordination mechanism set up. Two ministries are involved in the administration and management of health research in Mali, the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESSRS) and the Ministry of Health. MESSRS set up the National Centre for Scientific and Technological Research, which has organised several national meetings that have also attracted those engaged in health research and medicine. The Centre, however, plays no coordinating role. The National Institute for Research in Public Health was set up by MoH in 1981 as a privileged instrument for public health research. It was promoted to the status of a Public Administrative Office in 1993 and was granted relative autonomy in the management and flexibility in organising its research activities. Its mandate includes promoting medical and pharmaceutical research for public health of all kinds, organizing technical training and recycling for health professionals, standardizing the production of common medicines and vaccines, safeguarding the country's scientific heritage and promoting international co-operation.

The national Institute has encountered difficulties, such as the shortage of trained researchers, the absence of career plans, the lack of evaluation of researchers, the lack of information equipment, and poor communications structures. The lack of domestic funds for research was seen as an important obstacle, noting that from the State contributes no more than 1% of the national budget to research as a whole. Research, therefore, is heavily dependent on foreign sources. There are also shortcomings in the dissemination and publication of health research findings. As far as scientific outputs go, there is a wish to publish in international journals, often in collaboration with external partners. This makes articles inaccessible to domestic readers, since they are usually published in English. The INRSP is the only publisher of scientific reports in the country.

The positive aspects of health research in the country were listed as the contribution that basic research has made to the growth of general knowledge about health in Africa and the influence it has had on WHO global and regional strategies. Mention was also made of its contribution to the enlargement of the list of essential medicines and for the light it has shed on the scale of socio-health problems and the impact this has had on the allocation of resources and national policies.