



Learning Brief

Data for health research planning and development in Uganda

Background

A recent report entitled “Analysis of institutions doing health research in Uganda – year 2000” details the development of health research in Uganda’s various research institutions. The report is particularly aimed at determining the country’s progress in terms of developing health research capacity, and the problems experienced in implementing the essential national health research (ENHR) plan for the period 1997 to 2001.

Uganda embraced the concept of ENHR in 1991. In 1997, a secretariat - the Uganda National Health Research Organisation (UNHRO) - was established by the Minister of Health to promote, coordinate and provide guidance for health research and development in the country, as well as to provide technical back up and support to districts.

In 1997, Uganda was selected to be one of the countries to conduct country case studies for capacity development for ENHR. The development of a national health research database, including an inventory of health research organisations, funding agencies and a listing of individual researchers was one of the key recommendations of the study. UNHRO was tasked with implementing these recommendations, and has recently compiled a list of research institutions which includes a complete research profile for each organisation.

Analysis of institutions conducting health research in Uganda

The main objective of the study was to review the current health research situation in Uganda’s health research institutions, and to determine the progress and problems experienced in implementing the national ENHR plan for 1997-2001.

Study methods

In 1998, the East African Cooperation compiled a checklist of institutions, organisations and agencies involved in conducting research in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. A smaller checklist of institutions, organisations and agencies carrying out health research in Uganda was added to this list through roundtable discussions by the study team. The study team consisted of researchers from Makerere University, Uganda Virus Research Institute, Mulago Hospital and UNHRO.

The team developed a questionnaire which gathered information on the following areas:

1. Researchers (number, discipline, type of research and time available for research): to assess the skills available for conducting health research in Uganda’s research institutions;
2. Funding (available financial resources, both internal and external): to assess the proportion of the institutions’ budget allocated for health research;
3. Perception of research environment: to assess ongoing health research in Uganda’s research institutions and to determine whether this research is relevant to Uganda’s health research priorities and whether it is being translated into policy;
4. Dissemination and use of research results: to ascertain factors which foster/hinder dissemination of health research findings and their use by research beneficiaries;
5. Networking and collaboration: to assess the level of collaboration between national, regional and international health research institutions.

Each member of the study team was assigned a set of health research institutions with which they were familiar. The head of the institution (or their representative) was sent a questionnaire by mail, which was followed-up by a visit of a team member who assessed the work of the institution.

Findings

Forty-eight institutions replied to the questionnaire. The findings of the study point to the following:

- There is a reasonable number of researchers (around 600) who can carry out research on health issues in the institutions solely devoted to health research. The majority of other institutions carrying out health research are university departments which are, in reality, devoted to teaching.
- Funds for research are generally scarce and more than 70% of the institutions undertaking research on health issues do not have a budget line for research. Even where a budget line exists, the percentage of the total institutional budget which is allocated to research is minimal.
- The majority of funding for health research is from external sources, though a few Ugandan private sector groups have provided some funding.
- There are few incentives for carrying out health research and there are many constraints including poor training, isolation of researchers, lack of equipment and supplies, lack of information, career difficulties, poor financing, etc.
- On a positive note, health research being conducted at the various institutions did address all the health research priority areas as outlined in Uganda's ENHR plan for the period 1997 to 2001.
- Dissemination of health research findings to policy makers is done through seminars and results in utilisation of research in policy making. Although many channels are being used for dissemination (workshops, conferences, seminars and

journal publications), dissemination to the beneficiaries is not done properly and publication in peer-reviewed journals still remains a problem. There are many obstacles to dissemination of research results, including:

- Lack of funds to prepare final results into a user-friendly format, e.g. publications, papers, booklets or reports;
- Lack of funds to attend seminars, workshops or conferences where results could be presented;
- Time constraints inhibiting many researchers from preparing results in time for dissemination;
- Many researchers lack the writing skills to prepare user-oriented material;
- Limited avenues for dissemination of data. There is a lack of local journals where data for local consumption can be disseminated. The lack of subscriptions to current international journals also makes it difficult for researchers to know where to publish, and the requirements for international journals (such as the pay-per-page journals), make it difficult for researchers to publish in such journals;
- Only a few institutions have outreach programmes to disseminate research findings to the communities where data was collected.

Lessons Learned

- Dissemination of research findings to stakeholders including the communities where research data was collected is a big challenge. UNHRO aims to develop capacities for researchers to package results for relevant stakeholders, including workshops on results writing and seminars. The capacities which need be developed include:
 - proposal writing skills
 - grants seeking skills (funds seeking skills)
 - data analysis skills

- dissemination skills (including publication writing skills, skills for presentations at workshops and seminars/conferences, and report writing skills).

Workshops will be organised to pass on these skills to young researchers (whenever funds can be obtained).

- Research output is low. Local funding and funding to local researchers is very low. More researchers should be funded by both local and external sources, and Ugandan researchers should be given money directly instead of passing it through bureaucratic channels. There should be both research money and incentives (allowances) in the research package. UNHRO should assist in identifying these funds.
- Many researchers in Uganda are young and inexperienced. and need assistance from UNHRO to develop their careers. In addition to the above workshops, young researchers will be encouraged to develop research programmes in collaboration with more experienced researchers. UNHRO will try to assist in fundraising for such programmes.
- Research institutions and libraries have limited capacity for subscription to journals. Thus, there is limited access to relevant publications. We should aim at the use of electronic connectivity to external libraries where relevant information can be searched.

There appears to be great potential for health research in Uganda if capacities were strengthened, an enabling environment was maintained and if financing was improved and international partnerships strengthened.

Conclusion

UNHRO needs to periodically update itself on the current situation in health research for development and determine steps to foster nationally relevant research in the country. An accurate assessment of the success or failure of a country in implementing ENHR is of great value both to those locally planning the next step and to others elsewhere ready to learn

from the experience of others. Health research institutions form an important component in fulfilling the ENHR strategy. There is a need to know whether there is a critical mass of researchers to undertake health research; there is need to periodically assess information gaps and existing research efforts, and develop a responsive national agenda. The lack of this information makes it difficult to effectively plan and fulfil the health research for development agenda. By evaluating the engines that drive health research in a country, it is possible to measure the effectiveness of the country's mechanism for supporting health research.

Information for further reading:

- An analysis of Institutions Doing Health Research in Uganda - Year 2000. UNHRO Secretariat, September 2000, Uganda.
- The 10/90 Report on Health Research 2000 by the Global Forum for Health Research, 2000, Switzerland, ISBN 2-940286-01-9.
- The ENHR Handbook. A guide to Essential National Health Research. COHRED Document 2000.4, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Health Research for Development: the continuing challenge. A discussion paper prepared for the International Conference on Health Research for Development, Bangkok, 10-13 October 2000.

For further information please contact:

Prof. Raphael Owor
Director,

Uganda National Health Research
Organisation

Plot 2, Berkeley Lane, Entebbe

P O Box 465 Entebbe, Uganda

Phone/Fax: + 256 41 321 766

Email: unhro@infocom.co.ug

These learning briefs are published by the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) as part of the ENHR Handbook. To receive a free copy of the Handbook, and any forthcoming learning briefs, please contact:

COHRED

11, Rue de Cornavin
1201 Geneva
Switzerland

Phone: +41 22 591 8900

Fax: +41 22 591 8910

Email: cohred@cohred.ch

Website: <http://www.cohred.ch>

Designed by the Press Gang, Durban (pressg@iafrica.com)