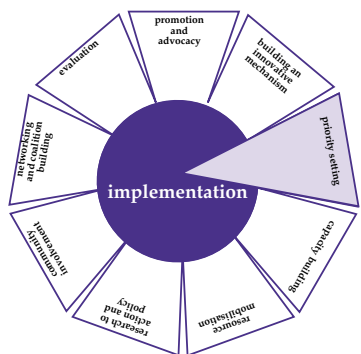


Learning Brief

Developing and strengthening the health research system in Pakistan



The process of strengthening the health research system in Pakistan began in early 2001. The **first** critical step in the process was the organization of a national seminar to develop priorities for health research. The seminar was held in February 2001, with participation from the Health, Population Welfare, and Science and Technology Ministries, health academic institutions, university departments, the private sector and the NGO community. The participants identified broad priorities in the critical areas of health services, maternal and child health, communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, mental health and health systems research. The priorities were based on the values of equity and social justice and led to the development of a generic, relevant and essential national health research agenda. The entire deliberations were framed within the context of scarcity of resources for health in general and health research in particular in Pakistan.

As a **second** step guidelines for action to develop and strengthen the health research system in Pakistan were developed. This learning brief focuses on how this plan was developed, what questions were raised, and the action required to implement such a research agenda. The plan of action aims to guide activities such as the generation of funds, efforts for capacity development, and consultations with national and international partners. The operational plan will also assist in monitoring the progress of the Pakistan Medical Research Council (PMRC) in this enterprise.

During the developmental phase of the plan, the following questions were asked:

- What are the priority areas and types of research identified for Pakistan?
- Which institutions and organizations have the capacity (or interest) to conduct such research?

- What resources (technical, financial, material) are required to conduct this research in the country?
- How can the results of such research influence policy and health development?

Refining research priorities

The broad research priorities defined in the February 2001 workshop need to be further developed and narrowed. Establishing thematic working groups for each of the main themes for health research will facilitate this process. These groups should:

- Define specific essential research priorities within the thematic area using an evidence-based, systematic approach, and using clear criteria.
- Identify national resources for this research, including human, financial and equipment/other technical resources. Assessment of resources available should be done in public, non-profit private and for-profit private sectors, to ensure that national health research is not only seen as a 'governmental' enterprise but as a national mission for all stakeholders.
- List opportunities of international resources, focusing on technical, material and financial resources. Each thematic working group needs to list specific agencies, which have either a history of providing funds in the area of interest, or have the specific topics in their funding priorities.
- As a result of the preceding steps, each thematic group will have an 'operational map' of the research needed for Pakistan, the resources within the country to conduct that research, and the additional inputs required from outside the country. To move forward from here the development of two types of approaches is needed:

- Proposals to seek resources for capacity development and infrastructure development in the specific area
- Research proposals for specific research studies.

Resource mobilisation

Funding is always perceived as the limiting factor for health research. Although this is true it should be realised that the most critical limitation is the inability to convince the world that high quality, relevant research can and should be done in the country. In developing plans for resource mobilisation there are specific characteristics of the process which need to be emphasised:

- The development of a national health research agenda is a positive development: topics listed in such an agenda are considered more relevant and valid by potential donors.
- Use of organisations who will facilitate the process of national health research development such as the Global Forum for Health Research and COHRED. Organisations like these have the capacity to assist in setting priorities, helping locate funds, and providing a platform for regional and global consultations. It is important for funding agencies to see that research plans for Pakistan are being appreciated by other international partners.
- Well developed and precise research proposals that highlight the priorities of the donor agency are critical.
- Careful scrutiny of grants to make sure that there are no conditions which can be regressive to health or health development in Pakistan.
- Dissemination of ideas for research in national and international settings, conferences and meetings generate support for the conduct of specific research.

- Financial accountability will be important to provide confidence to donors that funds will be used as promised. Appropriate accounting systems, flexibility for receiving and moving funds, and the ability to control money will be important for principal investigators of research projects.
- Experienced and published researchers in the country need to play a leading and mentoring role. They need to take the lead in the development of specific proposals and in making sure that they partner with less experienced and younger researchers.

Implementation

The next step will be the implementation of the operational plan with the support of national and international partners. The PMRC will serve as the focal point for essential national health research in the country with a focus on stimulating, facilitating and enabling the conduct of research and the use of research. Participation, collaboration and cooperation of all the different stakeholders will be the central strategy of the implementation process. A strong partnership of individuals, institutions and organisations will be engaged to further health research in the country.

Reference

Pakistan Medical Research Council (2001) *Developing and strengthening the health research system in Pakistan: Guidelines for action and operational plan 2001-2006*. PMRC, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad.

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