



STRENGTHENING CAPACITY TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ON CLOSE-TO-COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS: A CASE STUDY FROM A RESEARCH CONSORTIUM WORKING IN AFRICA AND SOUTH-ASIA

Sadia Chowdhury¹, Laura Dean², Stefanie Gregorius², Beth Hollihead², Ilias Mahmud¹, Malabika Sarker¹, Sabina Rashid¹, Kate Hawkins³, Sally Theobald², and Miriam Taegtmeier²

¹ James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

² Department of International Public Health, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Liverpool, UK

³ Pamoja Communications, UK

RATIONALE

Research capacity strengthening is necessary in low and middle income countries (LMICs) to ensure that health policy and programming are well informed. Within a consortium that focusses on supporting and strengthening the work of close-to-community (CTC) health service providers in sub-Saharan Africa and south-Asia (six partners in Africa and Asia; two partners in Europe) a platform is provided that allows an exploration of the current capacity of individuals and institutions to conduct CTC health service research. Determining existing CTC health service research capacity at the individual and institutional level, and developing bespoke capacity strengthening action plans are crucial components of a systematic research capacity strengthening process.

OBJECTIVES

To explore existing research capacity at the individual and institutional level for CTC health service research in six research institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and south-Asia.

METHODS

The research capacity strengthening goal of the consortium is 'to build a community of researchers, who are able to design, conduct and use health systems research to improve CTC services.' We conducted a literature review to design an optimal capacity checklist, with indicators at the individual and institutional level. Specific themes included: research skills, equity and fairness, human resources, and administrative capacity. We developed both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools to determine the existing research capacity of all institutions (in Africa, Asia, and Europe). This poster presents findings of the six institutions in the global South, derived from 15 surveys and three semi-structured interviews.

RESULTS

- **Research skills:** Our data showed that this consortium has a multidisciplinary research team with both quantitative and qualitative backgrounds. Individual researchers have a wide breath of skills to conduct, access and utilize health systems research. The study also revealed a strong professional conduct and adherence to ethical guidelines. However, junior researchers had limited experience in developing peer-reviewed publications, grant applications and conference presentations.
- **At the institutional level, capacity gaps varied depending on the size of the institution. As each partner country is contextually different, research priorities and experiences within social science research varied across institutions. The majority of institutions have an adequate research infrastructure, e.g. sufficient IT services and office spaces. Areas that need strengthening at the institutional level were effective mentorship and supervision structures, identification of and funding for staff training needs, and career progression structures.**
- **Human resources & equity and fairness:** Most participants highlighted equal opportunities in staff recruitment policies, which seem to be effectively implemented. Most institutions had policies in place that regulate maternity and paternity leave for staff. However, staff promotion policies need to be revised in some cases to ensure equal opportunities for all staff.

- **Administrative capacity:** Most participants noted that their institutions provide clear job descriptions during the recruitment process. They have research support staff that offers assistance in fund management, operation management, and field management. Some participants mentioned that they have trained staff in project management. Most participants have the capacity to assess project budgets. However, there is a lack of reserve funds for financial sustainability of the institutions.

LIMITATIONS

- Data was only collected from researchers directly involved in the consortium. Thus, the perceptions of other research staff in the institutions remain unknown.
- The above 'insider status' of the researchers might have influenced the type of data collected (e.g. some participants might have felt uncomfortable to disclose specific information with other partners).

CONCLUSION

Capacity gaps at the individual and institutional level highlighted the need for a structured career development process of junior researchers. In addition to developing bespoke action plans based on institutional specific needs, we recommend the implementation of personal development plans for each researcher within this consortium. This should be complemented by strengthening supervision and mentorship structures. Systematic capacity strengthening processes within such and similar consortia provide an opportunity to develop strong international networks of CTC health service researchers with a focus on south-south, and south-north collaborations.

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