Strengthening national health research systems (NHRS) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: an intervention development study

Study team/collaborators:
Brunel University London; WHO Regional Office for Europe; WHO (Global Observatory on Health R&D); WHO/TDR, Relevant institutions in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine (DAC-list)

Background:

High-quality health research has been recognised as one of the important contributors to improving population health and wellbeing and achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Countries that have strong health systems also have strong national health research systems (NHRS), i.e. a network of stakeholders, institutions and activities working together to organise, conduct, fund and use research to improve population health outcomes. The WHO Regional Office for Europe and WHO Special Programme TDR collaborates with several Eastern European and Central Asian countries (Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine) to strengthen NHRS in these countries through the European Health Research Network (EHRN). EHRN was established in 2017, following the decision of WHO European Member States to adopt the European Action Plan to strengthen the use of Evidence, Information, and Research for Policy-making in the 66th session of the Regional Committee for Europe. At the recent EHRN meeting in November 2019 in Vilnius, several evidence gaps related to "research into NHRS" were identified to prioritise the development opportunities in the EHRN member countries. These include: (a) what interventions to establish/strengthen NHRS work in countries with very weak NHRS; (b) what type of data/indicators would be suitable to monitor the progress in the development of NHRS and how to collect them; and (c) how to leverage existing and new sources of funding for health research (e.g. from taxation) to build and sustain research capacity in a given country.

Aims and objectives:

The aim of this study is to generate evidence on how to establish and strengthen the functional structure and dynamics of national health research systems (NHRS) in four LMICs (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine) with overall low NHRS capacity. Specific objectives are to:

a. describe the existing NHRS structure and dynamics in these countries to identify and develop interventions that would strengthen and improve NHRS in these four LMICs;
b. develop a system of effective data collection that would allow countries to monitor and learn from progress made in strengthening NHRS;
c. identify ways in which countries were able to, or hindered in building their research and knowledge translation capacity to support strengthening of their NHRS, positively impacting on health policy and systems

The evidence provided would be of direct relevance to the national governments involved and wider stakeholders in the Eastern European/Central Asian region, and more broadly, and would link NHRS with defined outcomes (e.g. health systems development, population wellbeing and economic development).

Methods: Multi-method approach

Objective	Design/Data/approach to analysis	Expected outputs
a	a) Delphi to shortlist interventions identified in a recent Health Evidence Network Review (in press) to meet local needs b) Adapt, roll out, and evaluate shortlisted interventions in the four countries using implementation research methodology	a. Shortlist of interventions b. Evidence on what works in NHRS c. Decision-support tools and policy briefs
b	Qualitative studies, complemented by Best-Worst Scale Survey and SORT IT, to identify the most important barriers to and facilitators of collecting data on WHO framework for Global Observatory on Health R&D	Data collection tool adapted from the Observatory Framework
c	Country roundtables, complemented by pre- and post-event online surveys to identify a shortlist of health research and knowledge translation capacity building approaches in each country and cost these approaches (EQUIPT methodology)	a. Policy briefs for countries b. Publications based on SORT IT approach