

## **POVERTY, EQUITY AND HEALTH RESEARCH**

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What are the essential roles of health research in supporting efforts by governments, donor agencies, research institutions and other actors to:

- identify health needs and inequities, including those based on biological, environmental, social and other determinants
- create appropriate knowledge, tools and processes to address these
- develop and implement evidence-informed and priority-linked policies to improve health
- increase the effectiveness of targeting health programmes and services to address issues of poverty and equity in health
- promote health?

What mechanisms can be developed to increase the resources (financial, human, institutional) applied to health research (encompassing the spectrum of biomedical, health policy and systems, social sciences and behavioural research) to meet the needs of people everywhere and especially the poor and marginalized?

Despite unprecedented gains in life expectancy in many countries during the last several decades, there is a growing crisis of ill health, whose dimensions include global threats from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases; rapidly increasing levels of noncommunicable diseases and injuries in developing countries; and widening health gaps within and between countries. Many of these challenges can be met by improving health systems and by accelerated and more determined application of known and proven interventions.

However, more health research - to create new knowledge and technologies; to increase our capacity to apply these equitably and effectively in different contexts and settings; and to understand how health is influenced by a range of social determinants - remains vital if we are to achieve the goals of narrowing the gaps and improving global health.

Health research encompasses the spectrum from the biomedical sciences (such as creation of affordable and accessible drugs, vaccines and diagnostics) to health policy and systems research, social sciences, political sciences, health economics, behavioural and operational research, and research into the relationship between health and the cultural, economic, physical, political, social and policy environments.

### *Research on social determinants of health*

Research is yielding important insights into factors that have a major bearing on the health of individuals and groups - poverty, inequities and other social determinants. What lessons can be drawn from this research, how can it be applied to improving health, and what further investigations are needed to support implementation?

Health inequities are those inequalities in health status and outcomes that are both unfair and avoidable. They reflect people's different positions within social hierarchies - including but not limited to the hierarchy of poverty and wealth. Epidemiological evidence shows that most of the global burden of disease and the bulk of health inequalities between and within countries are caused by social and economic factors: the social determinants of health. The most important include poverty; social exclusion; health systems; environments; food security; water and sanitation; children's early life

environment; education; housing; employment and working conditions; and the effects of community and social structures ('social capital') on health.

Today health equity gaps are growing between and within countries, even as medical technology makes unprecedented strides. Indeed, some technological advances have the potential to widen the health gaps between the world's haves and have-nots. Overcoming health inequities and breaking the cycle of poverty and disease are urgent challenges for global health. To tackle health inequities and address the health needs of poor and vulnerable communities requires action on the broader social determinants of health.

Health research has a crucial role to play in this process. The great challenge today is to move from describing the problems to acting upon them - and then accurately measuring results.

#### *Research on health systems*

Health systems everywhere face major challenges in resources (financial, institutional and human), organization and management and in their responsiveness to policy and to the health needs of the populations they serve. Research plays a key role in providing evidence on what works, how to scale up systems and how to narrow equity gaps in access and in health outcomes.

Research is vital to understanding and improving health policies, health systems and the relationships between them. A well-functioning health system therefore needs to incorporate research activities on a continuous basis.

#### *Research and development of technologies for health*

Despite the fact that the world now spends more than US\$ 100 billion every year on health research, there are still insufficient priority and resources devoted to addressing many of the global health challenges and especially those that predominantly affect lower income countries.

The changing patterns of disease burden are presenting new challenges to global health. At the same time, a range of major scientific advances in the last decade offer exciting opportunities for prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

#### *Build national capacity for health research in all countries*

Forum 9 encourages the sharing of country experiences in building national health research capabilities.

It will examine:

- Successes and failures
- Methods and approaches
- The influence of political will on building and effectively utilizing research capacity

It will also critically look at the capability of developing nations to:

- Conduct research into social determinants of health
- Engage in effective health systems research
- Develop technologies and products that respond to national health priorities.