

The Bamako call to action: research for health

What do you get when you put over 60 ministers of health, science, technology, and education, followed by a host of distinguished ministerial representatives, together in a room for 3 days? Perhaps surprisingly to some sceptics, the answer is concern and commitment, mixed with extraordinary creativity.

Last week in Bamako, the Government of Mali received the Global Ministerial Forum on Research for Health. In truth, the hopes for this conference had been limited. The world is struggling to reach the Millennium Development Goals. New and complex health threats are emerging (chronic diseases and climate change, for example). And the current global financial crisis threatens to curtail the ambitions of those wishing to rescue nations from old and new burdens of disease. Yet ministers showed solidarity and leadership in throwing out an early draft call to action and replacing it with a far more radical and ambitious document. It seemed that by meeting in Africa they were mobilised to ensure that research would be used to transform conditions for future health and human security.

The 2004 Mexico Statement on health research focused on strengthening health systems. The Bamako call to action was a substantial step beyond Mexico, towards a new vision for health equity.

- Bamako brought together multiple sectors (eg, agriculture), all essential to health. Intersectorality is critical if the determinants of health, as well as health itself, are to be tackled. Ministers wanted new tools to promote this intersectoral response.
- The Mali meeting was especially fruitful for bringing together health (represented by WHO, the Council on Health Research for Development, and the Global Forum for Health Research) and education (UNESCO). The importance of primary, secondary, and university level education to create research leadership was at last put centre stage.
- Civil society was recognised as a key advocate and facilitator in the political process of commissioning and applying health research.
- Primary health care was cited as the chief priority in policies for research and innovation to strengthen health systems. The rebirth of Alma Ata continues to gain momentum.
- Knowledge translation was emphasised as an essential priority for governments: to link evidence to

policy and to disseminate widely research results for maximum public use.

- Countries sought the creation of regional alliances and centres of excellence to assist them in strengthening research for health capacity.
- Governments wanted a robust ethical and regulatory framework of standards to protect their populations from harm and to promote public trust in research.
- Ministers wanted an increasingly chaotic global health architecture to be streamlined to create fewer but stronger institutions for research advocacy and capacity building.
- Countries committed themselves to allocate at least 2% of national health budgets to research; and funders were called on to invest at least 5% of health sector aid to research.
- Ministers promised to give greater attention to building health information systems, especially to collect, store, and share data for local analysis and use.

An important focus of the call to action was to ensure that research priorities were determined by countries, not global institutions. To this end, the multilateral contributors to Bamako—WHO, UNESCO, and the World Bank—were asked to promote, expand, and implement research strategies with an emphasis on listening to country agendas and responding to their priorities. The idea of Nov 18 as an annual World Day of Research for Health was proposed as one means to maintain attention on this lever for health improvement.

The Bamako call to action will now go to WHO's Executive Board next January. It will be up to the governing bodies of WHO to devise all possible means to implement these urgent country requests. What was most encouraging about the Bamako process was the way in which politicians and experts engaged in an energetic exchange of serious ideas. Policy makers and scientists too often seem to exist in different worlds, missing every opportunity to learn from one another. In Mali, WHO and its partners succeeded in bringing these two worlds together to forge a remarkable alliance.

Last week's deliberations were an example of what can be achieved through patient and persistent engagement. 2009 must be the year when the promises of Bamako are acted upon. ■ *The Lancet*



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