

A Comprehensive Strategy for Capacity Strengthening

The Impact Approach

Background

The ability to carry out good health research and use the resulting data at the country level is essential for making health policy decisions. Research can and should contribute to policymaking, from setting priorities to implementing and evaluating programmes.

Too often when international researchers from the developed world leave the developing countries where research is being carried out, local researchers at the “field sites” are left with inadequate skills to carry out their own research or effectively use the resulting data. To create a mutually beneficial relationship, strengthen national research capacity, and promote evidence-based decision-making, Impact, a global research initiative, made capacity strengthening its main objective in its three focus countries—Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Indonesia.

Impact’s capacity strengthening focussed primarily on building the research skills of its partners at the country level, and, in Burkina Faso and Indonesia, enhancing decision-making capacity at the Ministry-of-Health (MOH) level. Impact also wanted to strengthen the relationship between research institutions and the MOH.

The key objectives of capacity strengthening for research institutions were to ensure organizational autonomy, enable country partners to generate evidence, and translate research findings for decision-makers. The key objectives for the ministries of health were to facilitate access to and use of information in different contexts, strengthen relationships with researchers, and enable the MOH to commission research.

Findings

The involvement of the country technical partners in Impact has improved national research capacities.

When a country’s technical partners got involved in Impact’s global research initiative, skill-building activities helped develop committed and experienced teams. As a result, the country’s research capacity grew. Impact

encouraged the country partners’ management teams to recruit researchers by offering a competitive salary and good working conditions. Additionally, it gave researchers the chance to work in an international programme with renowned experts who would coach and mentor them, to travel and attend international conferences, and to network with colleagues abroad. All these factors facilitated the creation of committed teams.

At the ministerial level, however, the results of capacity-strengthening activities were much more limited, because contact with MOH staff was restricted and Impact was just one of many actors involved in the safe motherhood policy arena. In Burkina Faso and Indonesia, the goal of increasing the MOH Safe Motherhood programme managers’ capacity to use evidence in programme and policy design was partly met. A key condition of this success proved to be the presence of a committed leader and a sufficiently long capacity-strengthening relationship. However, rapid turnover of MOH personnel, difficult working conditions, and low salaries contributed to relatively low morale and commitment.

Key policymakers and stakeholders must be involved in setting health and research priorities and translating results.

Involving stakeholders in the process of setting health and research priorities helps all parties better understand the issues and aids in developing practical, context-specific recommendations for policy-makers and health professionals. Impact demonstrated that this participation is feasible through a consultative process that involved all key stakeholders, including local researchers, the MOH, health service personnel, and donors. In each focus country, Impact spent a considerable amount of time working with key stakeholders to determine the primary research question that national policymakers and stakeholders felt was most important to evaluate. In Burkina Faso, they decided to examine the impact of facility-based skilled attendance at birth on maternal death. In Indonesia, stakeholders wanted to explore the effect of a village midwife programme on maternal death.

Capacity-Strengthening Challenges

Impact encountered several key challenges, including:

- **Balancing the objectives of the international research programme with the long-term interest of the country in which it works.** Through its joint priority-setting exercise, Impact showed that relevant research questions can be defined in a consensual manner and that partners can maintain research ownership by deciding the format of evidence to be disseminated.
- **Managing the tension between the need for fast results and the need to establish new competencies.** Impact found there was tension between meeting donor requests for fast results and building in-country capacity. Developing capacities of research staff to the level of full expertise for interpretation of results and translation of those results into policy recommendations requires a medium- to long-term approach. Setting achievable goals with all partners within realistic timeframes is crucial to developing new capacities.
- **Balancing the short-term need of the research programme to complete the research with the long-term need of partner institutions for sustainability.** Inevitably all international programmes end, and the long-term survival of partnerships must be addressed. Support should be given to partner institutions not only to build research capacity, but also to aid dissemination of research results and establish linkages with and encourage the accountability of decision-makers.
- **Developing capacity-strengthening activities based on the needs of all staff members.** Consultation with staff at all levels was essential to ensure that they felt their needs were being addressed. It was necessary to customize the capacity strengthening for different country and regional contexts.
- **Moving beyond the standard format of formal training and workshops.** Impact found a comprehensive approach, from formal training to mentoring, to be the most effective means of capacity strengthening. All exchanges between senior and junior researchers and between local and visiting researchers were opportunities for capacity strengthening.



A capacity-strengthening workshop in Ghana sought to build attendees' skills.