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IAPB Briefing Paper

First Global Symposium on Health Systems Research



International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness



The purpose of this document is to inform IAPB members and others about a recent Symposium which considered the research necessary to underpin new approaches to health systems strengthening, in the development of eye health services for **VISION 2020: The Right to Sight**.

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Abstract:

Health systems strengthening has become a new buzzword in international health. There is now considerable debate over whether “vertical” disease-specific health interventions overburden national health systems generally. And there is a general consensus that more research is needed. In this paper Dr Haroon Awan summarises the recommendations that emerged from the first Global Symposium on Health Systems Research.

Some 1,200 participants from over 100 countries gathered in Montreux, Switzerland, during 16-19 November, for the First Global Symposium on health systems research. The symposium was sponsored by the WHO with financial assistance from various NGOs. Under the theme “science to accelerate universal coverage”, the Symposium reviewed state-of-the art research, and discussed strategies for strengthening the field of health systems research. The symposium provided five days of keynotes, plenary, concurrent sessions, satellites and informal discussions, and debates.

The specific objectives of the symposium included:

- share state-of-the art research on universal health coverage;
- develop a global agenda of priority research on accelerating progress towards universal health coverage;
- facilitate greater research collaboration and learning communities across disciplines, sectors, initiatives and countries;

- strengthen the scientific rigor of the field of health systems research including concepts, frameworks, measures and methods;
- identify mechanisms for strengthening capacities – individual, institutional and infrastructural – for research on health systems particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

An eye health session was run concurrently with other sessions on 17 November. The purpose of this session was to highlight examples of health systems research in the field of eye health as related to health systems and primary health care reform; and to identify potential areas for further research. The session was co-chaired by Dr. Pararajasegaram and Prof. Ekanem Braide. Key presentations were made by invited speakers and included the following topics:

- **Prof. Clare Gilbert of the International Centre for Eye Health** presented key highlights of a systematic review of eye health and health systems research; and a case study on ocular morbidity and its implications for primary health care reform.
- **Dr. Haroon Awan of Sightsavers** highlighted examples of vertical programming in eye health with horizontal health systems strengthening and emerging health research needs.
- **Dr. Uche Amazigo of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control** shared best practice of health research in a global health initiative in eye health and its relation to policy and intervention.
- **Mr. Ravila Thulasiraj of Aravind Eye Hospital System** demonstrated how research and development in technology has had an impact on access and coverage in eye health and the gaps that need to be addressed.

During the session, **Dr. Caroline Harper, CEO of Sightsavers** launched a new policy research report by Sightsavers called “Strengthening Eye Health – a Focus for Health Systems”. Various eye health professionals and experts in prevention of blindness attended the symposium and participated in several non-eye health sessions.

The session concluded with the following recommendations:

In view of the global significance of the burden of visual impairment, of blindness both as a cause and consequence of poverty, and its importance to programmes for water and sanitation, non-communicable diseases, neglected tropical diseases, primary health care and mother and child health, it is In view of the global significance of the burden of visual impairment, of blindness both as a cause and consequence recommended that:

1. Policy makers, health researchers and development practitioners collaborate jointly to address challenges faced in health systems strengthening – innovative solutions like forming national health policy forums may need to be instituted.
2. Further health systems research is needed to determine the synergistic and catalytic roles that single health interventions (e.g. eye health) may have on broader health systems strengthening. These may include the following:
 - *What impact do these initiatives have on addressing health inequities and service utilization inequalities.*
 - *What role do such interventions play in health workforce development, deployment, retention and distribution of health workers.*
 - *How do these programmes address the challenges of a burgeoning marketized health economy on one hand and crises in capacity and quality of publicly funded health services on the other.*
 - *What impact will integration of eye health with other health programmes have on improving coverage and equity.*

3. Health systems research needs to be viewed in the context of a continuum; people- centred services, an enabling health policy, and political commitment. This would require that:
 - *Studies on community perceptions and perspectives of health care delivery become a vital component of health systems research.*
 - *Operational research be a major component of disease control strategies - to monitor, evaluate and enhance the impact of interventions.*
 - *Current donor funds on global health be increased to accommodate research on community health systems.*
 - *Donors allocate at least a specific proportion (e.g. 5%) of project funding for explicitly strengthening health systems to ensure that project goals are met.*
4. Inadequate access is often the cause for under-performance of health systems. There is an urgent need for developing the evidence base through health systems research for designing effective approaches to improve access.
5. Further health systems research is needed on localization of medical products/equipment and process development, and its impact on cost reduction of health goods and services to promote access and coverage.
6. Given the rapid technological advancements, there is a pressing need to study the use of affordable technology to strengthen health information systems and detection and referral pathways by appropriately trained and skilled health personnel to enhance universal coverage.

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VISION 2020: The Right to Sight is the joint global initiative of IAPB and the World Health Organization for the elimination of avoidable blindness