



Council on Health Research
for Development (COHRED)
Making health research work... for everyone

Partnership to strengthen health research in 15 West African countries

Country dialogue moves toward regional action plans for health research

Ouagadougou-Geneva, January 20, 2010 -- 15 West African countries¹ have taken a decisive step this month toward improving the quality and relevance of their research for health; and toward increasing the capacity of their research organisations to produce evidence that meets their populations' priority health needs. These efforts are supported in a cooperation agreement recently signed between the West African Health Organization (WAHO) and the Council Health Research for Development (COHRED), an international non-governmental organisation.

The partnership kicked-off this month with a regional consultation between policy and research teams from 14 West African countries. The groups reviewed their current structures and approaches to managing health research, shared experiences and started developing action plans to strengthen and finance health research systems in the region.

The meeting brought together – probably for the first time in West Africa – representatives of these countries' health ministries with their science and technology counterparts, national research institutes and some representatives of civil society organisations. Canada's International Development Research Center (IDRC) and the World Health Organization's (WHO) West Africa Regional Office were key participants.

“This dialogue revealed that many countries in our region have useful system components in place for health research – policies and priorities have been set in a number of countries,” says Dr Kambou, Director of Research and Health information WAHO. “But we also learned that improved coordination is needed within national systems. Better links between the different actors – across ministries, between the research and policy levels, and a shared knowledge of the priorities – will ultimately benefit our populations by bringing them better health,” says Dr. Kambou.

Some West African countries have recently emerged from long conflicts, and are rebuilding their government and educational structures from the ground up. While a huge task, this provides an opportunity for regional research cooperation. COHRED and WAHO, with WHO and IDRC will support countries' action plans by providing them with services to strengthen their systems for health research. An important focus will be the development or strengthening of national, policies, governance structures and priorities for health research, to support goals for national public health and economic development.

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo.

Says COHRED Director, Carel IJsselmuiden: “One benefit of our new partnership, illustrated by the Ouagadougou consultation, is that countries have started to share experiences on health research systems, and can learn together. The COHRED-WAHO partnership will support this learning, and will facilitate the transfer of useful information and skills from more advanced countries to those that are just getting started.”

He adds that the goal of system development brings two long-term benefits to countries. “A country with a strong health research system will better manage its research to meet the country’s development goals. It will also be able to engage with donors and research funders on its terms.”

Countries in the region have requested WAHO to serve as the regional hub for system strengthening and linking useful information between countries. COHRED supports WAHO in this role, offering technical assistance, in areas such as health research system and policy development, and in building capacity and skills for research institutes in areas such as research management, communication and developing information platforms, including *Health Research Web* services in the region.

As a practical approach to sharing experience, data and information across the region, partner countries also discussed developing a Health Research Management Information System to facilitate contacts on calls for proposals, project registry, researcher profiles.

For COHRED, this work with WAHO is the latest in a number of strategic regional partnerships that aim to support countries and improve access to health research information across the developing world.

For further information, please contact:

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Highlights of WAHO-COHRED Ouagadougou meeting on health research system strengthening in West Africa.

Each Country should:

1. Create a functional governance mechanism for the coordination of research in general.
2. Create a functional governance mechanism for the coordination of health research.
3. Take action to build institutional and human resource capacities for research; research governance, research management and research utilization.
4. Take action to fulfill their commitments to spend at least 2% of their health budgets and 5% of external project aid on health research. Each country should consider:
 - a. The difference between current expenditure on health research and the expected expenditure based on the commitments by the countries articulated in the Algiers Declaration; and
 - b. The importance of research in decision making to improve the health of the population.

Recommendations for WAHO and its Partners

WAHO with the support of its partners should:

1. Serve as a hub for regional action to strengthen research capacity in ECOWAS countries.
2. Create a mechanism to support countries to establish and maintain strong health research coordinating structures
3. Establish a financing mechanism to support the strengthening of health research capacity in ECOWAS countries
4. Facilitate a health research network in the ECOWAS region to enhance mobilization of resources, information sharing and use of research findings for decision making
5. Create a working group to finalize the regional action plan for strengthening research for health in countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Notes:

What is national health research system strengthening?

Strengthening of national health research systems covers a number of skills and disciplines that countries can apply to use research to ensure health equity and improve population health. These areas include policy development, priority setting, management of research, research contracting, communication and translation of research and assessment of skills and human resource needs.

The West African Health Organization (WAHO) (see www.wahooas.org)

WAHO is an ECOWAS specialized institution for health. Its mission is to ensure the highest possible health coverage for the population of the ECOWAS states by harmonizing health policies and pooling available resources. Its goal is to substantially improve the quality of health system management and health care for the peoples of the region by developing and supporting integrated health policies and programmes. In WAHO 2009-2013 strategic plan, research is one of the 9 programmes with objective to improve operational research in ECOWAS countries

Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) (See www.cohred.org)

COHRED is an international non-governmental organization that supports countries to strengthen their health research systems. COHRED supports countries to use health research to:

- Improve health and reduce health inequities
- Improve health sector performance and accountability
- Encourage donor alignment and harmonization
- Link health research with science, technology and innovation
- Generate economic and social prosperity

Given continuing health inequities, in both the developing and the developed world, COHRED promotes health research that addresses the needs of the disadvantaged. COHRED works with countries to build the skills and systems required for such essential research. We partner with governments, research institutions and local civil society organisations, building on expertise from around the world.

COHRED works through a number of strategic regional partnerships that aim to support countries and improve access to health research information across the developing world.

The COHRED partnership with NEPAD– the New Partnership for Africa's Development – will provide system support to a core group of countries that are intent on strengthening health research based on their national priorities. Other partnerships are under development.

In Latin America with the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) to provide country support and capacity building and the creation of *Health Research Web* Latin America, an interactive platform for the exchange and sharing of health research information across the region.