



Concept & Advocacy Note

Establishing a multi-stakeholder, international network to support evidence-informed research capacity strengthening in low- and middle-income countries

The Centre for Capacity Research (CCR), Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, is committed to improving the quantity, quality and relevance of available evidence to inform research capacity strengthening (RCS) initiatives in low- and middle-income countries. Establishing and growing a network of RCS researchers, RCS stakeholders, and research end-users is essential to achieving this goal. This concept note advocates for the proposed network, details CCR activities towards establishing a network and invites expressions of interest for joining and/or supporting an RCS network.

Introduction

Research Capacity Strengthening has been defined as ‘the ongoing process of empowering individuals, institutions, organisations and nations to: define and prioritise problems systematically; develop and scientifically evaluate appropriate solutions and share and apply the knowledge generated’ [1]. In recent years, international development donors and governments have strengthened their commitment and spend on RCS initiatives in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) [2,3] on the basis that greater research capacity leads to socio-economic growth through evidence-informed policy and practice, improvements in human capital and pro-poor products/technologies [4].

The total global investment in RCS has yet to be calculated; however, 8-12% of DFID’s £120 million budget was spent on capacity building in 2006/07 [5] and the United Kingdom’s total aid spend on research is predicted to rise to £1.2 billion by 2021 [6]. Despite the scale of investment, **the knowledge-base to support evidence-informed RCS in LMICs is poorly developed**. A recent scoping review of health-related RCS research identified 172 publications in this subject area between 2000-2016, over half of which were commentary papers and none of which presented a robust, long-term

evaluation of an RCS initiative [7]. Nevertheless, clear growth in RCS as a study of scientific interest was evident (Figure 1).

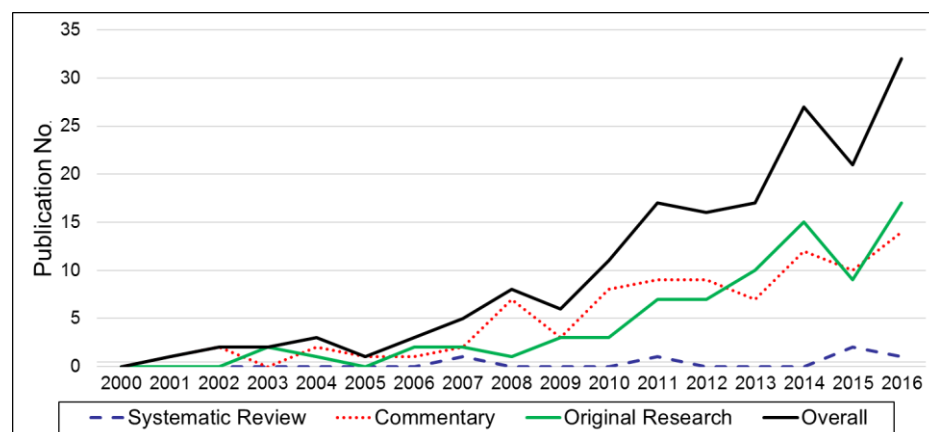


Figure 1. Number of health-related RCS publications per annum, 2000-2016 [7]

Why is a network needed?

The small but growing number of researchers working to inform evidence-based RCS typically do so opportunistically, often siloed within their own broader disciplines/research environments and with limited means to identify and connect with other RCS researchers or stakeholders. **At present, there is no recognisable or readily accessible 'community' of RCS researchers nor is there a common platform by which RCS researchers can connect with each other or with research end-users.** This isolation compounds the fragmentation already evident in this fledgling field and limits the potential to develop an evidence-base that usefully informs effective RCS programmes and interventions in a timely, strategically driven, and context appropriate manner. **Establishing a multi-stakeholder, international network to support evidence-informed RCS in LMICs would address this gap.**

What impact could a network achieve?

A network would provide a forum for exchanging experiences and learning, sharing of methodology, tools and frameworks, and facilitating stakeholder informed RCS research collaborations (for example for funding applications). Such a network would be the first of its kind for research capacity strengthening. **Ultimately, the network would serve to improve the effectiveness, impact and value for money of current and future RCS implementation activities in LMICs by facilitating a more productive, higher quality RCS research output, better aligned to the needs of RCS stakeholders.** The network could achieve this by:

1. Fostering a cohesive, accessible community of RCS researchers
2. Connecting RCS researchers with RCS stakeholders and research users
3. Promoting standardised RCS-related definitions and terminology (i.e. a common language)
4. Supporting the development of a needs-based RCS-specific research agenda and defining research priorities
5. Advocating for evidence-informed RCS implementation and funding to support RCS-related research
6. Generating robust research evidence to support evidence-informed RCS implementation

Membership of the proposed network would be broad and inclusive of researchers, research users, funders, programme managers, and strategic national partners.

Developing the proposed network

The Centre for Capacity Research at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine is actively committed to growing an RCS network. Recent initiatives taken towards achieving this goal include: convening a satellite session at the Health Systems Global Symposium, Liverpool, October 2018, to gauge interest in establishing the proposed network - 25 participants from 14 countries attended, all of whom endorsed the concept; participating in an RCS network development scoping meeting convened by the African Academy of Sciences, Nairobi, May 2019; and through submitting grant applications to support the development of an RCS network to various funders.

For further information regarding how you or your organisation could support an RCS network, or to register interest in joining an RCS network, please contact the Centre for Capacity Research via email: ccr@lstm.ac.uk.

References

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