BEST PRACTICE
Capacity building boosts sustainability

INDEPTH NETWORK

Achieving all the aims for longitudinal research described in the main GLORI report is both a daunting prospect and an exciting challenge. The following study exemplifies many of the best practices described in the report.

Vitamin A supplements, insecticide-treated bed nets, cholera vaccinations. The effectiveness of these tools – now part of standard health practice – was first demonstrated through longitudinal tracking at health and demographic surveillance system (HDSS) sites in the global South.

These HDSS research centres have formed the INDEPTH Network to leverage their valuable information and build their scientific capacity. The network, which started 15 years ago, now encompasses 45 local research centres operating 52 HDSS field sites.

All told, these centres are tracking the lives of almost 4 million people in Africa, Asia and the Pacific subregion.

The power of linking researchers in a network is clear in an INDEPTH cause-specific mortality study. In late 2014, INDEPTH published the world’s largest dataset of individual deaths recorded on the ground. The data, collected by hundreds of researchers over two decades, are the first meaningful community-based information about cause of death in countries where individual deaths are not recorded automatically by national governments. The dataset records more than 110,000 individual deaths and their causes across 13 countries, including Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Vietnam. It highlights the fluctuating burdens of HIV, malaria and childhood mortality.

INDEPTH’s hub is in Accra, Ghana, with satellite offices in India, Kenya and South Africa. While the network partners with researchers and funding organizations from the global North, it remains very much in the control and under the leadership of scientists in the global South. Its results influence programmes and policies worldwide and each new study strengthens capacity in the South to conduct studies.

“The lack of a reliable information base to support the identification, prevention and treatment of health problems is a major hurdle to addressing the high burden of disease in low- and middle-income countries,” explains INDEPTH’s Executive Director, Osman Sankoh.

“INDEPTH generates the kind of longitudinal health and demographic information on populations in the South where civil registration and vital statistics systems are not well developed.”

The Network provides high-quality longitudinal data about the lives of people in low- and middle-income countries and about the impact that development policies and programmes have on those lives.

The member centres use their platform and ongoing efforts to collaborate with other Network centres on essential studies, as well as contributing to the ongoing Network data repository (www.indepth-ishare.org/) and its associated data visualization website, INDEPTHStats (www.indepth-ishare.org/indepthstats). These enable scientists and policymakers from across the global South and elsewhere to leverage that data for their own research.

www.indepth-network.org