

National Health Research Systems

in Pacific
Island
Countries



**World Health
Organization**
Western Pacific Region



**Health Research
Council of the Pacific**



COHRED
Council on Health Research for Development

National Health Research Systems

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As has been recognized by the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Health Research (WPACHR) and the Health Research Council of the Pacific (HRCF), health research in Pacific island countries and areas (PICs) has been chronically underdeveloped. While these deficiencies are well recognized, the response to address these challenges has been insufficient. As shown by the results of this mapping, many PICs have no recognizable national health research systems (NHRs), and those that do would benefit from further development.

All PICs need the successful translation of research outputs and knowledge into policy and health care practices that address priority health issues—the goal of NHR development and research capacity strengthening in the Pacific. And as noted by HRCF, this aim encompasses a vision of Pacific research by and for Pacific people.

The main objective of the mapping was to provide baseline information on PICs' NHRs for consideration and discussion at the Regional Office for the Western Pacific's (WPRO) October 2007 meeting, "Consultation on Strengthening Health Research Capacity in the Pacific". The other objectives were to: (1) unite key country-level NHR information into a single, accessible document; (2) facilitate discussion among national and regional stakeholders on gaps, challenges and opportunities for strengthening their NHRs and research capacity; and (3) facilitate learning among PICs on issues related to NHRs and research capacity strengthening.

The methodology adopted for this activity was designed to obtain a sufficient overview of the current status of NHRs in 15 PICs. An NHR mapping template, developed by the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) was adapted for use as the basis for structured key informant interviews, which were the primary method of data collection. The data collected were mostly qualitative and consisted of a series of questions to guide a standardized description of an NHR in the key areas of governance and management institutions engaged in research for health, key stakeholders involved in research for health, and available literature and data review. Subsequent to the consultation, the preliminary findings were returned to the respective PICs for validation.

The mapping revealed that:

- Melanesian and larger Polynesian PICs generally have a more developed NHR structure and management processes than the smaller Polynesian and Micronesian PICs.
- a clearly articulated policy on health research is lacking in all PICs except Vanuatu.
- Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tonga have invested in dedicated personnel and/or units responsible for development in health research and evidence-based policy and practice.
- most PICs can demonstrate fairly well-defined national health priorities; however, only the Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu have developed national health research priorities
- PICs generally have no formal system for the monitoring and evaluation of health research.
- all PICs, with the exception of Nauru and Niue, have established processes for ethical review of research proposals.
- in most PICs, efforts to bring research and information to PIC policy-makers are ad hoc and individual-dependant. The Cook Islands, Fiji and Samoa, however, are taking more proactive efforts to incorporate the policy-making environment.
- ways in which policy-makers stay informed about advances in health and medical care are largely opportunistic, piecemeal and are frequently linked to involvement with meetings, workshops or conferences covered by a United Nations organization or the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).
- all PICs have relatively well-developed processes for routine health data collection.

- most PICs have limited capacity to regulate new health technologies, with many dependent upon indications of regulatory approval from high-income partner countries.
- key stakeholders for health research are usually quite limited and are dominated by the involved ministry of health, the World Health Organization (WHO) and SPC.
- available literature on research for health in the PICs mostly involves local ministry of health reports; local census, demographic and statistical reports; and summary documents from WHO and SPC.

This report highlights significant gaps in the foundations of PICs' NHRSSs, in particular, in governance and management, policy formulation and priority setting. In addition, many PICs lack a clear vision of what role health research has in efforts to improve health and health equity and to drive national development—a crucial question when designing effective NHRSSs. The mapping, however, identified structures, processes and policies (e.g. routine information systems, ethical and technical review capabilities and well-articulated health priorities) on which strengthening efforts can build.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and aim

This mapping of national health research systems (NHRs) in Pacific island countries and areas (PICs), was undertaken by the Health Research Council of the Pacific (HRCP) after being commissioned by the Regional Office for the Western Pacific (WPRO) of the World Health Organization (WHO). The Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) provided technical advice. The goal of this mapping is to provide baseline information on PICs' NHRs for consideration and discussion at the October 2007 WPRO meeting, "Consultation on Strengthening Health Research Capacity in the Pacific". This mapping is also consistent with HRCP objectives, and its results will be useful to HRCP's future work.

1.2 Definition of PICs

The 22 PICs are greatly diversified in terms of their geography, populations, cultures, economies and politics. Based on their ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences, PICs are categorized as shown in Table 1. The seven italicized PICs are territories of France, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) or the United States of America (USA) and are not included in the mapping. The remaining 15 PICs are either fully independent nations, independent states in free association with either New Zealand or the USA, or a self-administering territory of New Zealand. As such, they are internally responsible for their NHRs.

Table 1. Pacific island countries and areas

Subregion	Country or area	Status
Melanesia	Fiji	Independent
	<i>New Caledonia</i>	Territory of France
	Papua New Guinea	Independent
	Solomon Islands	Independent
	Vanuatu	Independent
Micronesia	<i>Guam</i>	Territory of USA
	Kiribati	Independent
	Marshall Islands	Independent in free association with USA
	Federated States of Micronesia	Independent in free association with USA
	Nauru	Independent
	<i>Northern Marianas Islands</i>	Territory (commonwealth) of USA
	Palau	Independent in free association with USA
Polynesia	<i>American Samoa</i>	Territory of USA

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