IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH IN HEALTH

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

David H. Peters, Nhan T. Tran, Taghreed Adam

Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research

World Health Organization

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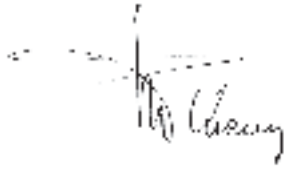
PREFACE

One of the greatest challenges facing the global health community is how to take proven interventions and implement them in the real world. Research on health systems, such as implementation research, is crucial to meeting that challenge, providing a basis for the context-specific, evidence-informed decision-making needed to make what is possible in theory a reality in practice.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has long played a leading role in promoting health policy and systems research (HPSR)—including implementation research, with notable recent initiatives including the 2011 report: Implementation Research for the Control of Infectious Diseases of Poverty and the 2012 publication of its first strategy on HPSR called 'Changing Mindsets', which advocated for greater embedding of research into decision-making and called for more demand-driven research. With this Guide, WHO continues its support for this area, offering an introduction to the often challenging field of implementation research.

Because implementation research is a relatively new and somewhat neglected field, there is a need to bring it into sharper focus, defining exactly what it is and what it can offer. As such, this Guide presents an introduction to basic concepts used in implementation research and describes the range of approaches and applications that it can be used for. The main aim of the Guide is to support the development of and demand for implementation research that is problem-focused, action-oriented and above all aligned with health system needs.

Research on implementation requires the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders and draws on multiple disciplines in order to address complex implementation challenges. As this Guide points out, at its best, implementation research is often a collective and collaborative endeavor and in many cases it is people working on the front line of health care, whether running specific programmes, or working in health systems, who ask the questions around which it is built. It is therefore essential that all stakeholders understand the importance of collaboration in the implementation research endeavor. It is our hope that this Guide will encourage that collaboration, and facilitate the coming together of stakeholders across the broad spectrum of health systems, all of which, on a daily basis, wrestle with the challenge of implementation.



Marie-Paule Kieny
Assistant Director-General
Health Systems and Innovation Cluster
World Health Organization

FOREWORD

Interest in implementation research is growing, largely in recognition of the contribution it can make to maximising the beneficial impact of health interventions. As a relatively new and, until recently, rather neglected field within the health sector, implementation research is something of an unknown quantity for many. There is therefore a need for greater clarity about what exactly implementation research is, and what it can offer. This Guide is designed to provide that clarity.

Implementation research engages a wide range of interventions in a health system, and for the purposes of the Guide we consider a wide variety of policies, programmes, as well as individual practices and services intended to improve people's health. Regardless of the way these interventions work – be it through the prevention of disease, promotion of good health, or treatment and/or palliation of illness – research on their implementation is crucial to understanding how they work in the real world.

Intended to support those conducting implementation research, those with responsibility for implementing programmes, and those who have an interest in both, the Guide provides an introduction to basic implementation research concepts and language, briefly outlines what it involves, and describes the many opportunities that it presents. The main aim of the Guide is to boost implementation research capacity as well as demand for implementation research that is aligned with need, and that is of particular relevance to health systems in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Research on implementation requires the engagement of diverse stakeholders and multiple disciplines in order to address the complex implementation challenges they face. For this reason, the Guide is intended for a variety of actors who contribute to and/or are impacted by implementation research. This includes the decision-makers responsible for designing policies and managing programmes whose decisions shape implementation and scale-up processes, as well as the practitioners and front-line workers who ultimately implement these decisions along with researchers from different disciplines who bring expertise in systematically collecting and analysing information to inform implementation questions.

It is also our hope that the Guide may appeal to educators who teach implementation research, to funders of health research and health programmes who may be interested in supporting this type of research, and to civil society groups interested in health programmes and research who may want to use this evidence to promote good clinical and public health practice.

While for the sake of simplicity we refer in the Guide to implementers and researchers, we recognize that these are notional groupings, and that many people play both roles. Indeed it is one of the core contention of the Guide that the interests of implementation research are often best served where there is active participation by people working in the field, since it is those people who see where implementation is going wrong and who are therefore likely to ask the most pertinent questions. We encourage implementers to ask those questions, and to take a lead in demanding better research. We also encourage researchers to be more practical in their work, focusing on the issues that matter to implementers. If research is to improve implementation, research design needs to reflect the specific implementation problems implementers are addressing as well as the contexts in which they occur.

The opening chapters make the case for why implementation research is important to decision-making. They offer a workable definition of implementation research and illustrate the relevance of research to problems that are often considered to be simply administrative and provide examples of how such problems can be framed as implementation research questions. The early chapters also deal with the conduct of implementation research, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and discussing the role of implementers in the planning and designing of studies, the collection and analysis of data, as well as in the dissemination and use of results.

The second half of the Guide detail the various methods and study designs that can be used to carry out implementation research, and, using examples, illustrates the application of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method designs to answer complex questions related to implementation and scale-up. It offers guidance on conceptualizing an implementation research study from the identification of the problem, development of research questions, identification of implementation outcomes and variables, as well as the selection of the study design and methods while also addressing important questions of rigor.

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