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Situation Analysis:

Implementation Research of Swiss NGOs Working in the Field of International Health Cooperation

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List of abbreviations

AHPSR	Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research
HSPR	Health System and Policy Research
IOV	Implementation Outcome Variables
IR	Implementation Research
IRP	Implementation Research platform
ISPM	Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MMS	Medicus Mundi Switzerland
MSF	Médecines Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OR	Operational Research
PCM	Project Cycle Management
r4d	Research for development, joint program of SNSF and SDC
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SNSF	Swiss National Science Foundation
TDR	Special Programme on Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank)
WHO	World Health Organization

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Abstract

AIM: The study provides a qualitative overview of existing strategies, practices and capacities on how *Implementation Research* (IR) is done by members of the network Medicus Mundi Switzerland (MMS). It also formulates a set of recommendations for the further work in this field.

BACKGROUND: MMS's strategy describes the importance of IR for its network. MMS initiated a study about IR to provide (i) a qualitative overview and (ii) a learning process to promote NGO led research. IR is a scientific inquiry into questions concerning the act of fulfilling or carrying out a practice or an intervention. IR is a young, ambitious research field gaining importance in the context of the *Sustainable Development Goals*. This increased evidence-based general direction within international health cooperation calls i.e. for sound cooperation between NGOs and research institutes. IR and *Operational Research* (OR) are often used as synonyms. Different definitions and concepts exist around IR and OR, and distinctions to related terms and research fields are sometimes confusing. Translations of IR into other languages are not coherent, which complicates the appropriate use and communication in Switzerland. However, IR/OR is perceived as a promising answer to overcome the *know-do gap*, which remains a hindering phenomenon in translating research to practice, in bridging the gap between service deliverers and researchers. IR/OR is especially considered to have a high potential in the context of scaling up of projects.

DESIGN: Adapted mixed methods approach.

METHODS: We chose four core methodologies: (i) a concise review of international recognized IR concepts and standards; (ii) a survey addressed to all MMS members comprising a questionnaire with qualitative and quantitative questions, accompanied by a factsheet about IR; (iii) semi-structured interviews with selected MMS members and relevant IR stakeholders; and (iv) analysis of documents received from MMS member organizations.

FINDINGS: We collected data from 23 entities. NGOs are generally interested in IR and in applying evidence-based knowledge. We detected high implicit understanding of IR; contrarily, the definition and concept of IR are poorly understood. There is a certain level of confusion around IR concepts. We found that mentioned and applied concepts are only partly "*real*" IR concepts. One quarter of the survey respondents has IR/OR in its strategy, but the majority does not yet implement IR projects. We received few examples of IR projects *per se* (meeting standard IR criteria), but got other valuable documents (e.g. guidelines) that support the process of research project planning. NGOs face many questions when considering IR projects. NGOs are perceived as service deliverers and not as researchers; this requires intensive efforts in order to convince other stakeholders of the role NGOs can play in research. The biggest obstacle to conduct an IR projects remains the lack in understanding the roles and responsibilities of all involved stakeholders. Moreover, the *perfect match* does not exist. Aside from the challenge to establish an equal partnership between a NGO and a research institute, IR is constrained by lack of resources both human (e.g. IR skilled employees) and financial (lack of adapted funding mechanisms). Considerations from external stakeholders (institutions, corporates, foundations) in regards to IR by Swiss NGOs are low, whereas the expectations of member organizations towards MMS and its IR platform are high. As projects are often not set up as IR projects, funds are usually not sufficient to develop research projects on the implementation of activities, programs or policies. Last but not least, many organizations gave us appreciating feedbacks about the learning process and supported the initiative to conduct this analysis.

CONCLUSION: IR is a dynamic, scientific approach to better understand how and why program's activities work. IR questions should come from the ground and contribute to major implementation improvements. However, IR is ambitious and not every project is suitable to conduct IR.