Priority setting and coordination of research agendas: lessons learned from COVID-19
Draft workshop agenda

Virtual workshop to be held on 4-5 October 2021 by Zoom
All participants need to register prior the meeting (register here).

Summary
The workshop will explore good practices and challenges in different national contexts and consider what policies can be implemented before, during and after a crisis to optimise the scientific response, using the COVID-19 pandemic as the reference. What are the main challenges that need to be addressed in developing and implementing effective research to respond to crises and what policy actions are required to facilitate this? The workshop will have a particular focus on non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI) research and policies.

Aim: to explore key challenges and good practices from the science response to the COVID-19 pandemic and identify policy actions that can enhance the preparedness of research systems for future crises.

Meeting chairs: Trygve Ottersen (Institute of Public Health, Norway) and Tozama Qwebani (Vaal University of Technology, South Africa)

Day 1

12.00-12.10
Introduction

12.10-13.20
Session 1: Priority setting for research and data collection in the early crisis phase
In the early, chaotic phases of a crisis uncertainty looms large while both time and resources are scarce. It is critical to optimally prioritise resources for research and data collection early-on. This presented a challenge for every country during the COVID-19 pandemic, as knowledge and data were required to inform policy across a range of sectors.

The panel will examine priority setting for research and data collection in the early phases of the pandemic in different countries. The basic question is who prioritised what, for whom, how, and with what result? On the “who” it is interesting to go beyond traditional funders and to also look at priorities set – and not set – by ministries, by advisory bodies, by private funders, by the management of research institutions, and by individual research groups.
The panel will discuss what did and did not work and the appropriate balance between tightly specified research to address policy needs and research on more loosely defined thematic priorities. On “with what result” it is interesting to look at what questions, what areas, what time horizons, and what disciplines were prioritised. With respect to the latter, it is important, for example, to examine the role of social sciences in the initial phase of the pandemic. Whilst the focus is on priority setting, it will also be interesting to discuss how the adopted priorities were implemented in a timely manner (noting that the issues around coordination of research agendas will be the focus of session 3. Finally, the panel will discuss how the situation can be improved so that countries are better prepared to set priorities when the next crisis hits.

**Outcomes:** Better understanding of how to best establish and address priorities for research in the early phase of future crises

Case presentations (12 mins each)

- **Steven Hoffman** (Scientific Director, Canadian Institutes of Health Research): *Initial priority setting at Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)*

- **Virginia Murray** (Head of Global Disaster Risk Reduction, UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA)): *Adopting an “all-hazards approach” for early response to pandemic and the GloPID-R and UKCDR COVID-19 tracker*

- **Charles Wiysonge** (Director, Cochrane South Africa, South African Medical Research Council, SAMRC): *Overcoming hesitancy in the early pandemic phase*

- **Gregory Armstrong** (Director, Advanced Molecular Detection Programme, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US): *The emerging role of pathogen genomics in guiding response to a pandemic*

Moderated discussion (25 mins)

13:25-13:40  *Break*

13.40-15:00  **Session 2: Development of the evidence-base for social interventions**

One of great shortcomings of the research response to COVID-19 has been the limited number of experimental or otherwise robust studies on the effects of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) or public health interventions. These interventions include lockdown measures, social distancing restrictions in different settings, border restrictions and use of face masks. Whilst rigorous experimental evidence on the effectiveness of NPIs is the ideal, there has also been a gap in evidence on population attitudes and behaviours to inform policy action as the pandemic has progressed.

The panel will identify, assess and discuss barriers to research on NPIs during the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss how to overcome them. Barriers can relate to priority setting and coordination processes, but also funding, legal issues, ethical review processes etc. The panel will also explore how research agendas have incorporated analysis of crisis spillovers or secondary effects that may have long-term impacts, for example on the environment. Coordination or alignment between the timing of research and the policy cycle is an important aspect of this.
Outcomes: An overview of the barriers to research on NPIs during this pandemic and ideas for how to overcome these barriers, at both national and international levels. This could lay the foundation for experimental studies on NPIs during the next pandemic. It is also likely to improve the response to other crises and is applicable for many of public health challenges where NPIs and behavioural change can play a critical role, including challenges of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and climate change.

Case presentations (15 mins each)

- Atle Fretheim (Research Director, Norwegian Institute of Public Health): Developing robust studies on public health and social interventions (non-pharmaceutical interventions) during the COVID-19 pandemic (video recording)
- Jan Brauner (Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford, UK): Lessons learned from studies on the effect of government intervention on COVID-19 pandemic
- Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz (School of Health and Society, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia): Is The Cure Worse Than The Disease – COVID-19 And 'Lockdowns'
- Susan Michie (advisor to the British Government via the SAGE advisory group): Behavioural compliance with government regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Moderated discussion (20 mins)
15:00- 15:10

Concluding remarks

Day 2

12.00-12.10

Introduction

12:10-13:30

Session 3. Priority setting and coordination as a crisis evolves

Decision makers and their advisors have often been frustrated by the lack of reliable knowledge or by the diversity of contradictory information when major decisions have had to be made. This has contributed to divergent policy decisions between countries and between national and local authorities. Scientific evidence is conditional and evolves over time and some diversity is inevitable, but better priority-setting and coordination can help to address evidence gaps and reduce uncertainties in a more timely and effective manner.

This panel will examine successes and failures in evidence provision from the perspective of decision makers and their advisors. This will include priority setting and coordination among the users of knowledge, among the producers of knowledge, and between the users and the producers. In particular, how to overcome sometimes conflicting policy decisions between local and national levels, how do the knowledge users communicate their needs to the producers and how do the latter respond. The panel will discuss how to improve priority setting and coordination for the remainder of this pandemic and for future crises.
Outcomes: Better understanding of how to improve priority setting and coordination in order to respond to decision makers’ needs

Case presentations (15 mins each)

- Balthazar Nunes (Portugal National Institutes of Health): Lessons learned from epidemiological studies and the evolution of priority setting as the COVID-19 crisis evolved in Portugal
- Camilla Stoltenberg (Director General, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Oslo, Norway): Openness and community participation during the pandemic
- Joseph Wu (School of Public Health, LKS Faculty of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR, China): Nowcasting COVID epidemics to inform policy priority setting in Hong Kong
- Byeongwon Park (Research Fellow at STEPI, Korea): Policy priority setting during extreme events: the case of Covid-19 in Korea

Moderated discussion (20 mins)

13:30-13:45 Break

13:45-15:15

Session 4 International cooperation and priority-setting: improving preparedness for the next crisis

Many countries have limited capacity to conduct thorough priority setting processes during a crisis. Early on in the pandemic, the WHO developed a coordinated global research map but capacity and resources were required to effectively translate this into specific national contexts. Overall, there has been a lot of duplication in research efforts across countries in some areas, while in other areas the evident knowledge gaps have been left unaddressed. This is true for primary research as well as for systematic reviews or evidence synthesis and includes broader health topics such as zoonoses, mental health etc.

The panel will discuss the role of international initiatives in supporting national priority setting and international coordination during this pandemic. The panel will discuss the unmet needs – including on the basis of the preceding panel sessions – and what needs to be done going forward. Specifically, the panel will explore how global and regional initiatives and cooperation can improve pandemic preparedness and response.

Outcomes: A better understanding of what international support countries have received, what needs that have been left unmet, and practical steps to improve on the situation going forward. In particular, one expected outcome is a better understanding of how international priority setting and coordination can be integrated with initiatives to improve pandemic preparedness and response. Lessons learned are likely to go beyond pandemics and be relevant to other crises as well as research cooperation more broadly.

Short (5-7 min) interventions by the panel

- Boitumelo Semete-Makokotlela (CEO, South African Health Product Regulatory Authority)
- Devi Sridhar (Professor of Global Public Health, University of Edinburgh, and adviser to the Scottish government of COVID-19)
- Yazdan Yazdanpanah (Head, French national agency for emerging diseases)
- Osamu Aruga (Director for International affairs, Secretariat of STI Policy, Cabinet Office, Japan)
- Ezekiel Emanuel (Vice-Provost, University of Pennsylvania, former adviser to President Biden on Covid-19)

Moderated discussion (45 mins)

15:15- 15:30

Concluding remarks