On the gains of seeding tobacco research in developing countries

W Maziak, M Arora, K S Reddy, Z Mao, on behalf of researchers from developing countries participating in the Fogarty International Center’s “International Tobacco Research and Capacity Building Program”

The gains from building local research capacity and generating local data are critical, both for knowledge translation (that is, identifying cost-effective and culturally appropriate ways of applying available knowledge in the specific context of each country), and new knowledge generation (that is, addressing critical information gaps that act as barriers to the initiation and implementation of tobacco control policies).

Equally important for developing countries is that successful collaborations in tobacco-control research and building of skilled local capacity can sprout new research in other health areas, thus broadening the impact of such initiatives on the public health landscape in developing countries. Indeed, as work progresses in the projects funded by the Fogarty initiative we see data generated on cardiovascular health, environmental health, social and behavioural sciences, to name but a few. Other than branching to other health research areas locally, this initiative has led to new cross-projects collaborations. An example of such emerging collaborations is the Research Assistance Matching (RAM) project developed in partnership between the Syrian Center for Tobacco Studies and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to help researchers in developing countries connect and collaborate with experts in their field. Noticeably, training of local personnel under this programme was not confined to research methods, but involved research support as well. Abiding by international standards for research involving human subjects, institutional review board approval of research protocols, and staff training and accreditation in human subjects’ protection, was a novelty for most developing countries’ researchers going into this programme. In essence, activities arising from this single initiative have in many instances laid down the foundation for the culture of standardised research and evidence-based public health in participant developing countries.

Gains of such initiatives, however, are by no means confined to the developing countries. Knowledge generated in developing countries can be relevant to large immigrant...
populations in developed countries, as well as to the study of emerging public health issues that may be difficult to evaluate fully within developed countries (for example, the worldwide emergence of waterpipe smoking, the export of bidis from India to the USA). Given the commitment with which many developing countries have begun implementing the World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), research evaluating the progress of national tobacco control programmes can also provide useful information to developed countries that are slow to ratify or implement the FCTC. Another area where partnerships with developing country researchers could be especially productive is the research related to tobacco industry documents. Insights provided by these documents, enhanced by inputs of local researchers on the activities of the tobacco industry in different societies, can help to expose and thwart industry’s deception.

Last but not least, in a world rushing to re-galvanise along ethnic, cultural, and ideological fortifications, such initiatives build bridges for sorely needed dialogue and understanding between people and nations. Making peace through cooperation is far less costly than any war or conflict.

The impressive successes of this programme notwithstanding, its impact is critically threatened of being short-lived if not sustained further. Given the slow process of knowledge accumulation and spread, it takes time to reach a momentum whereby new knowledge is endorsed by the public and used to influence policy. So despite the five-year length of the funding cycle of the Fogarty initiative, the fact that most of the initiated projects started from scratch means that this period is invested mainly in training, establishing operations, and generating baseline data. This limits the created research groups’ ability to influence policy as well as achieve self-sustainability. Transforming these research seeds into self-sustaining research centres/programmes that can continuously inform policy, as well as provide a model for research excellence in their respective countries/regions, will certainly require more resources, time and commitment.

While the prospects for sustainability of this programme remain in the realm of the future, the delight of friendship it has generated is an everyday reality that we intend to cherish as time goes by.

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