

MMI Research Policy

This policy document of the Medicus Mundi International Network is rooted in the overall MMI Network Policy and describes the Network's approach to generating, accessing, sharing and using reliable evidence. The document reflects an analysis undertaken by the Executive Board of MMI and results in a set of specific mandates for the Network.

To accomplish their mission in the field of international health cooperation in a more rational – and finally more sustainable – way, the non-governmental organisations which are members and partners of the Medicus Mundi International Network are in dire need of reliable evidence on “what works and what does not”.

On the other hand, undertaking advocacy and sensitization activities at an international level, which is the other main activity of the MMI Network and its members, also needs to be rooted in reliable evidence.



Public health issues such as the health workforce crisis or the integration of private not-for-profit institutions into the national health system cannot be tackled without a clear understanding of what they are all about. Political slogans without supporting reliable and convincing facts, figures and experiences will not be taken seriously.

Last but not least there is a mounting pressure from public opinion and funding agencies to make NGOs more accountable. But many NGOs struggle to determine the level of evidence needed to assess the impact or effectiveness of their programs and strategies.

How to generate, access, share and use reliable evidence is therefore a crucial issue for the MMI Network and its members.

Considering the importance of the World Health Organization as the reference institution for setting norms, standards, and to some extent priorities in international health, the MMI Network takes up some of the goals of the WHO research policy and translates them into its own institutional context:

- Organisation: strengthen the reflexive and learning culture.
- Capacity: strengthen capacities to generate, access, share and use reliable evidence.
- Research priorities: take the own research needs and priorities in line with the national and international research agenda.
- Translation: strengthen the links between policy, practice and products of research

The challenge for the MMI Members – as for all non-governmental organisations – related to dealing with research can be expressed in two simple slogans: “Get evidence into NGO policy and practice!” and: “Get NGO practice into research!”

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Get evidence into NGO policy and practice!

Access and implement existing research results

The international agenda for health system research is highly relevant for the MMI Network members which all of them are interested to get more evidence on issues such as:

- developing and assess key interventions and policies to address the human resource crisis in the health sector;
- impact and cost-effectiveness of existing health programmes;
- feasibility and community effectiveness of innovative intervention packages for maternal and new-born health in Africa;
- financing models for accessible health care.

There is a wealth of already available research findings related to these issues, and most of it can be accessed via existing channels (scientific literature, websites...). There is however no culture within the MMI Network nor in most of its member organisations to actively search for such knowledge. Nor have they the capacity to do so.

And if an organisation undertakes the effort of identifying relevant research findings and translating them in its policy and practice, the results do not always pay off. Knowledge is difficult to translate into action (“implementation gap” or “know-do gap”). Tangible results at institutional, organisational and services levels are often lacking or doubtful.

Therefore, MMI Network members and their partners sometimes work without applying state of the art interventions; more frequently, they know what works, but they don’t know how to apply the evidence in relation to specific circumstances and contexts; not infrequently they are able to adopt effective program strategies, but these are not documented, advocated and scaled up.

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On the other hand, research results are too often presented in a way that they are not easily digestible for non-researchers. There is also a lack of downstream research relevant for the health systems as a whole and/or addressing specific operational problems.

What type of research are NGOs interested in?

A useful distinction is the one between “development oriented research” and “science driven research”: only the former is really relevant for the members of the MMI Network and other NGOs.

In more concrete terms research must be linked to the problems and issues non-governmental organisations and their partners are dealing with, to their need to find out ways to overcome technical and organisational constraints that impede local health care systems to deliver high coverage, equitable and quality health interventions, particularly at community and district level.

The overall objective of this kind of “operational” or “action research” is to significantly improve access to effective interventions by developing practical solutions to common, critical problems in the implementation of these interventions.

Learning organisations

The Medicus Mundi International Network and its members consider themselves as learning organisations which critically analyse their past actions in order to adapt future policies accordingly. Nevertheless, this learning and reflective attitude and culture still needs to be structurally rooted in each organisation via appropriate documentation systems and the development of a comprehensive and accessible institutional memory. This is “homework” for

every member of the Network. MMI itself shall strive to become the institutional memory of the whole Network and its joint activities and programs and, regarding the structural implementation of learning and reflection, a benchmark for its members.

In addition, the MMI Network shall help its members to share strategies and tools for “evaluative research” or outcome monitoring. To compare and contrast outcomes within the Network and problems would also greatly benefit the learning expectations of the Network members.

Get existing evidence into NGO policy and practice: Mandate of MMI

- Facilitate the Network members’ access to existing research results.
- Foster the translation of existing evidence into proposals for the policy and practice of the Network members.
- Develop an appropriate documentation system and a comprehensive and accessible institutional memory of the Network.
- Provide platforms for Network members to share strategies and tools for monitoring outcomes and implementing the lessons learnt.

2 Translate NGO practice and problems into research and policy!

Limited capacities to undertake research

The members of the Medicus Mundi International Network – all of them NGOs working in the field of international health cooperation and advocacy – have none or only limited capacities to take themselves the lead in research, depending certainly on their size and profile. A striking contrast to that is the wealth of untapped experience and knowledge within the Network, but also in the wider international health arena.

Within the MMI community, there is some individual and collective experience related to all stages of the research process: priority setting, ethical assessment, resources mobilization, knowledge generation, utilisation of research findings and advocacy. Despite this, in order to start conducting research as an NGO, there are serious obstacles to overcome:

- *Lack of time.* Network members and NGOs in general are primarily interested in delivering basic health services to vulnerable populations, improving health outcomes and strengthening

health systems in resource poor settings. In this context research often takes a back seat to daily concerns of programs implementation and management.

- *Lack of competencies.* Staff may find it difficult to formulate specific research questions. Formulating these questions, crafting study designs and choosing research methods that are feasible within the programmatic context and human resource constraints, present many challenges. High-level expertise in epidemiology, health metrics, and development and behaviour sciences is rare within NGOs.
- *Lack of financial means.* Research is not a cost free exercise. It demands additional resources and staff time, thus increasing the overall organisation costs.

Nevertheless the proximity of the MMI Network members to the operations puts them in a unique position to feed policies from the bottom to the top.

Ask the right questions

The MMI Network is a largely unexploited goldmine for developing and testing research questions in the area of health care delivery systems. Close to the difficulties and problems of translating the “big” approaches into daily life, MMI members have a huge insight and are in an excellent position to ask the “right” questions, which could then be translated into appropriate research.

Short and long terms partnerships of the Network and its members with academic institutions are therefore a realistic option.

Contribute to research capacity building

It is consistent for MMI and its members, and in line with its guiding principles and values, to contribute to strengthen the capacity of academic institutions (carrying out research and training activities) in the South, to the extent that these institutions have a mission-vision that is compatible with the one of MMI and its members.

Provide access to research sites

Within the MMI Network, there is an enormous body of potential sites (“fields”) available, where relevant research questions could be addressed. This is becoming increasingly a scarce resource, in particular for northern hemisphere research institutions.

Some fields where MMI members are working are particularly conducive for conducting operational research since some enabling factors are at hand such as: a defined population; presence of a comprehensive health care delivery system (referral hospital plus fixed and mobile health units); good knowledge of local service provision, utilization, coverage and sometime population behaviours; well established working relationship with local stakeholders and communities; contacts with national research institutions; efficient logistics including transport and communication facilities.

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These fields may offer a lot of opportunities for research: e.g. to investigate health seeking behaviours of vulnerable groups (e.g., poor and marginalized people, hard to reach people such as nomads) in order to improve access and equity; to test the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of innovative health care delivery strategies (e.g. community case management); to participate to small and large scale programme evaluation (e.g. quality of MNCH interventions).

Nevertheless, any brokering activities between potential research sites and academic institutions undertaken by the MMI Network has to be largely demand driven (Network members and their partners playing an important role in identifying and prioritising the research questions to be addressed), and not be exclusively in the hands of the research institution. A priori, evaluative and operational research would deserve a central place in such a research involvement of MMI and its members, because of its immediate relevance for the local actors and for the community.

Commission research to produce new evidence

In some exceptional cases, the MMI Network and its members may wish to commission research (or meta-research resulting in the form of “digested” best practices), to the extent that an issue - a potential research subject - highly relevant for them is unlikely to be investigated by existing academic institutions. In other instances, the MMI Network and its members may decide to join research consortia if and when they believe that this serves their interests.

When the Network decides to commission research, it will follow the rules and conditions for any joint Network projects activities (demand driven, task and outcome oriented, subsidiarity, availability of means) as defined in the overall Network Policy. Using internal resources for funding the research should be considered exceptional while searching for external funding

should be the norm. In addition, a set of standards and administrative procedures regarding the selection and mandating of an appropriate academic partner will have to be developed.

Disseminate program results and research finding

Finally, the MMI Network is in a good position to facilitate and encourage the dissemination of research findings and program results and of its members. In order to influence health policy, research findings and recommendations must be provided to policy-makers, program planners, and other audiences at the local, national, and global level.

Translate NGO practice into research and policy: Mandate of MMI

- Building capacity among MMI members regarding the research cycle, including identification of research needs and priorities; addressing herewith the challenge for NGOs to ask the right questions, to have an understanding of what they can expect, and equally important what they cannot expect from research.
- Support research partnerships between Network members and academic institutions which are focusing on health systems strengthening. Advise and accompany Network members in establishing a mutually beneficial and productive working interface with research institutions.
- Act as a broker between Network members which are interested and able to open up their operations and academic institutions which are interested in getting access to research sites.
- Eventually commission research to produce new evidence in key Network issues.
- Integrate research findings and program results into advocacy and policy.



*MMI Research Policy adopted by the Executive Board of the Medicus Mundi International Network, 25 September 2009. The mandate for the MMI Network contained in this Policy will be translated into **more specific operational guidelines** and considered in the **future strategic planning** of the MMI Network.*

*As a first step towards the implementation of the Policy, the Executive Board of the Medicus Mundi International Network decided to set up an **advisory group (think tank)** within its governance structures which shall:*

- *advise the MMI Executive Board and Assembly on the research and evidence process within the Network and the implementation of the Research Policy;*
- *link with interested research partners, particularly also from the South;*
- *encourage members to identify research areas and help them in translating these areas to specific research questions;*
- *screen the international scene for potentially attractive funding sources.*

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