

REGIONAL NETWORKS FOR RESEARCH CAPACITY AND WHY THESE ARE NEEDED TO BE PREPARED FOR DISEASE OUTBREAKS

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Introduction:

During the Ebola and Zika outbreaks research findings were needed in rapid response in order to determine how to best treat the disease and prevent their spread. This was acutely evident during the Zika outbreak where even less was known about this disease than Ebola. Here data was needed immediately on areas such as transmission, disease pathology and all types of studies where needed, from social science to vector biology through to observational clinical research. However, this outbreak occurred in regions where there was little research capacity. This grave situation showed why local research capacity and experience is important.

Aim:

To build research capacity development networks that through skill and experience sharing could enable locally-led research that would be addressing everyday health challenges. Thereby creating lasting capacity that could respond to outbreaks.

Methods:

Two networks were created, one in Africa and one in Latin America, which bring together experienced research organisations and connecting them through locally led research capacity activities to raise research awareness, skills and experience. These networks would be coordinated locally and have a vibrant presence online that would serve to connect the members and deliver ongoing access to tools, resources, training and each other.

Results:

The REDe and ALERRT networks are vibrant communities of practice for knowledge sharing and research capacity development. Thousands of researchers are accessing online training, hundreds have registered onto the Professional Development Scheme. Over 15 workshops have delivered research skills training and networking opportunities to over 2,000 frontline health workers such as nurses, community health workers, laboratory staff and pharmacists. Regional activities are raising participant retention in studies, raising research standard and improving community engagement.

Conclusion:

It is possible to deliver research capacity to areas where currently there was little research experience. However, this has to be done in a sustainable way with a long-term view. Therefore having the focus on gaining evidence to tackle the everyday health burdens is a viable approach to create lasting capacity that can then be taken up and used to deliver a locally-led research response in the event of an outbreak.