

Shaping public health education, research, and policy in the Arab world

The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program supports the generation of new knowledge to help inform policies and programs that are low cost but can have a high impact on reducing the non-communicable disease (NCD) burden and improving overall population health in low- and middle-income countries. NCDP funds research focusing on the main risk factors for NCDs: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, alcohol misuse, and physical inactivity.

The challenge

Arab countries often face multifaceted health challenges, including gaps and weaknesses in population health status and spreading inequalities among and within countries. Research for public health can contribute to the enhancement of people's health and livelihood when it serves as a tool to expose social injustices and health inequities and as evidence to inform health and social policies. However, one important challenge in the Arab region is the fact that research productivity in the region is low, and plays a small role in guiding national and regional development initiatives.

Schools of public health, if well founded and supported, can play a critical role in filling this gap by educating the public health workforce as well as conducting relevant and action-oriented research.

The Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) proposes a comprehensive and long-term initiative to strengthen health research, partnership building, and public health education in the Arab world. Its aim is to increase the level of research productivity, improve public health practice, and encourage evidence-based policymaking in the Arab region.

The research

This joint project of three IDRC programs (NCDP, Governance for Equity in Health Systems and Ecosystems and Human Health) will strengthen systems and institutions for research and education in public health and facilitate opportunities for inter-disciplinary collaboration on critical health issues across institutional and geographical boundaries. FHS will develop and promote a model for public health schools based on three collaborating academic Centers. The existing Center for Research on Population and Health will become a hub of regional networks on interdisciplinary research and capacity development coordinating and strengthening two

existing research networks, the Reproductive Health Working Group and the Tobacco Control Research Group. It will also establish a new network on Agriculture, Environment and Health. Exploration of additional research themes will also be supported. Two new collaborating Centers will be created: the Center for Knowledge Translation for Health and Equity and the Center for Public Health Outreach and Stewardship. The first will address policy dimensions; the second will monitor and assess public health needs and resources in the region, and prepare public health professionals to better meet those

Expected results

The project aims to:

- enhance the capacity of local researchers to carry out studies and publish their results;
- improve the ability of research to influence policies, encouraging evidence-informed decision making in the Arab region;
- implement an alternative institutional model for public health based on a systems approach, enhancing synergy between research, knowledge translation, policy impact, and practice.

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The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program is part of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), a Canadian Crown Corporation supporting research in developing countries to promote growth and development for more than 40 years.

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