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Academic Global Health

Antoine Flahault

”The future we want needs to be invented; otherwise we will get one we don’t want”.
Joseph Beuys

Worldwide, and complex

Health globally faces a variety of challenges and barriers that need to be tackled. Global Health is a new discipline which considers (i) health of people in all nations worldwide as a consequence of globalisation (horizontal issues) and (ii) the complex influences of social determinants of health as comparable for all people (vertical issues). Academic global health approach recognises that interdependencies are increasingly relevant, while territorial boundaries become increasingly irrelevant, and that to understand both health challenges and needed solutions, the complexity of globalisation influences that transcend, or are oblivious to, territorial boundaries are beyond the capacity of individual nation states’ domestic institutions to address[1].

The main concern is placed on the impact of globalisation process on social determinants of health, creating health burdens for and affecting the majority of people worldwide, regardless of geographic location. To fully explore and understand the factors modulating health globally trans-disciplinary approaches are essential. The global health approach is used to move away from a narrow single-issue focus in research and education, and to move towards a vision that can align different sectors under an umbrella of common values and principles.

Consequently the global health approach embraces global interconnectedness of systemic issues, confirming the heuristic power of cross-sectoral collaborations, and combines different disciplines, including social sciences, epidemiology and public health, economics, politics, ecology, engineering, ethics and law while drawing from social movements and corporate management. In a trans-disciplinary manner modulating factors influences beyond medicine and health will be explored and understood, for example: urbanisation; migration; climate change; social movements; global trade; information communication technologies; national and transnational governance and regulation.

Overall Objective

Academic global health aims at a better understanding of health both locally and globally to eventually influence local and global policies with a multidisciplinary cooperative approach. It includes, and develops creative minds of people to research and educate students and researcher in a transformative way to improve health in our complex interconnected and interdependent globalised world with news ways of analysis and understanding.

MD, PhD, Professor, Institute of Global Health, University of Geneva, Switzerland, and Centre Virchow-Villermé, University of Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité, France.

In the internet age, where knowledge is more distributed than ever, systems thinking will be used to understand complexity and work successfully with highly interconnected global issues. Global health research and education is value-based, with clear outcome- and action-oriented goals focussing on health improvement and equity. It fosters lateral thinking beyond the traditional bio-sciences silos and offers opportunities for engagement.

Developing a new research paradigm: systematically interconnected on three levels

The complex interplay and downstream effects of globalisation on the living conditions of communities and population health is analysed to identify factors, processes, pathways and their relations, beyond the perspective of high-risk groups, typically targeted by epidemiological research on individual risk. Complex pathways, maybe modulated by national or global level factors, such as availability of health care, national health policies, or even the national economic integration into the global market and their associations are likely to be highly complex and multidirectional. Established epidemiological methods and solution are rethought in a more integrative innovative manner blending e.g. cultural, social, political and economic sciences with health research under a global perspective.

For analysing these different social determinants of health with a global perspective, three levels are suggested as central[2]: (i) Community-level factors such as life-style, physical environmental, social services, and availability of health services, (ii) national-level factors, such as employment, economic development and income growth, population density, and national health-related policies and (iii) global-level factors including access to global markets, diffusion of information, population movements or environmental change.

At the community level, e.g. individual data on the treatment outcome is used and link to "micro"-social determinants of health data, e.g. data on socioeconomic status, physical environmental, social services and population heterogeneity, gathered in collaboration with civil society organisations and national institutions. At the national and the global levels, readily available macro-social determinants data from national and international institutions is used for analysis, e.g. unemployment rates, income growth rates, climate change data, population movement and population density or policies to analyse their impact on population health (e.g. tuberculosis treatment default rate, cardio-vascular disease rate).

This research paradigm is particularly adequate to study population health in combination with development issues, as well as addressing innovative field methodologies, on the three levels outlined above. Further on it can be used to test and clarify the relationships between health, population dynamics, and poverty in low-, middle- and high-income countries alike. For instance the community level is crucial and is carefully addressed precisely because anthropological and cultural factors strongly influence human behaviour.

Research-to-Policy

Research results are vital ingredient for policy and governmental decision making to break the vicious cycle of disease in populations, especially amongst the impoverished. Identifying how, to what extent and which determinants impact population health therefore needs to be understood. Global health research, perceived as a multi- and trans-disciplinary field, blending perspectives from natural and social sciences to understand the social relationships, biological processes and technologies has the potential to help adapt policy on global level to improve health worldwide. Global health research helps to understand factors on different levels, their complex interplay, and provides opportunities for interventions that can influence the population wide distribution of risk to improve health of populations. However, to ensure that results are used by the right people in the right way for the right purposes is not straightforward at all. Increasingly research are requested to develop a theories of change to help think through how they can do and communicate the results of the research in a way that will maximise the value of the research for policy and practice.

In the health field, in particular in medicine, public policies based on scientifically-rigorous research results have produced extraordinary advances in health over the past 50 years. By contrast, in most areas of social policy

– such as education, poverty reduction, or social welfare – government often implemented programs with little regard to evidence, costing huge amounts of tax monies and yet often failing solve social problems.

The rigorous trans-disciplinary global health research identifies effective program models and strategies to bring rapid progress to government policy, similar to those which transformed medicine. Outcomes of this research is used to inform governments to increase their effectiveness through the use of evidence about "what works". Its researchers engage with decision makers to see that results from their research will be used to build better policies and programmes. They go beyond just making evidence available and instead take on a broader role of engaging with decision makers throughout the research process to engage into complex systematic feedback loops to support the use of their research.

Collaboration 2.0

Multi-disciplinary initiatives, which go beyond individual interests of sectors, like the annual World Health Summit conference, the international journal Public Health Reviews, and the European Academic Global Health Alliance are embraced and further developed to constitute such platforms for research and policy interaction.

Research-to-Education

Research in global health contributes to renewing medical training in two ways, firstly by promoting both the horizontal and vertical global health approach; secondly by sensitizing medical students to the importance of competencies from other sciences, i.e. social sciences, development studies, demography and human geography, to build a more holistic understanding of the health problems of the populations they serve and their future patients are suffering from.

In the best interests of our future we need to structurally harness all the talent, energy and commitment to explore the potential of inter-professional and multi-sectoral teamwork, to analyse and teach the global health idea.

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