Reviewer's report

Title: Health Equity Research Gauge to assess the capacity of low and middle income countries for equity-oriented research: international survey

Version: 1 Date: 29 November 2005

Reviewer: Ole Norheim

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper is a report from a multi-disciplinary (and multi-cultural) team collecting data on various aspects of equity oriented health research in 12 countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa and central and Eastern Europe.

The method used is the so-called Health Equity Research Gauge (HERG), which is a questionnaire (or check list) with items related to five dimensions of relevance to equity oriented research. The team developed the check-list by a modified Delphi technique, and collaborated with key-informants in each country to access the information needed.

The main results are that few of the countries examined have clear national research priorities and that there is “limited use of research to solve operational problems, address country priorities (particularly equity issues) or influence policy.” The study also shows variation in the degree of funding of equity related research, the capacity for knowledge production, completion and publication of research and impact.

The strengths of the paper are its comparative perspective and the way it collects information from various sources and put it together under a consistent analytical framework.

The study addresses a highly relevant and important issue and deserves to be published if some further revisions are made. The recommendations seem to be well founded.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The main weakness of the paper is related to the choice of methodology. Although it is called a survey (in the title), the identification of key informants is more typical for qualitative interview studies. The number of informants is not provided, and we are not provided with enough background information to assess whether the informants are representative or not. In short, the study is presented as a survey or questionnaire study, but uses methodological techniques from qualitative studies (without being systematic and explicit on the choices made). The paper can be improved if the HERG is presented as a qualitative instrument used for assessing a number of topics of relevance for equity related research. The methodological section and discussion should be revised accordingly.

Moreover, semi-accurate data on total amount spent on health research are presented in table 3. Presumably, these figures are provided by informants, but no sources are listed. The same point applies for item 9, table 2.

Moreover, it is concluded that: “In countries with a higher HDI, there was evidence of greater
capacity (human resources, research institutions, publications, financial resources) but no greater link to equity-focused research, alignment of research with health priorities or use of research for policy-making. This raises a question about the relationship between national health research investment and human development indicators. The result is presented as if statistical tests have been performed, while this is not the case. Due qualifications should therefore be taken.

The same point applies for table 6 on the relation between HDI and research publications. The text states that “We found a trend in number of publications by country, according to the HDI, using an electronic search in Medline in 1999”. This does not hold for Africa, and should have been discussed.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

P 1: Paragraph starting with “The project was funded by COHRED…” Remove (was stated in first sentence)

P 6: First paragraph “Feasibility of data collection”. Should be revised and moved after presentation of main results.

P 13: Paragraph starting with “The World Health Organization…” is outdated and should be removed.

P 14: Paragraph starting with: “Our data suggest…..” can be removed (does not add any value)

P 14: Sentence starting with “In conclusion, we recommend….capacity for research…” This sentence (and the paper as well) does not properly distinguish between research in general and equity related research. This makes the information provided difficult to interpret.

- The reference list includes some codes that should be removed

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.