



OPERATIONAL RESEARCH TO BUILD HEALTH

How can research in the field be best integrated with health planning in developing countries? How can we bring the different actors in this area into dialogue? CUAMM talked about these questions with its international partners at an event on the occasion of CPHIA 2023, the *International Conference on Public Health in Africa*.

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A STRATEGIC RESOURCE

Last November 22, the meeting "Operational Research and Civil Society Contributions to Enhance Universal Health Coverage: The Experience of Doctors with Africa CUAMM" was held. The side event was planned by CUAMM as part of the official program of the African International Conference on Public Health – CPHIA 2023¹. The event involved over 50 participants with different backgrounds – doctors, institutions, NGOs, stakeholders, and students. It alternated moments of in-depth study and active dialogue between participants to highlight the role of operational research from different perspectives.

This was an excellent opportunity to discuss a topic to which CUAMM is dedicated. CUAMM sees research as a strategic tool and planning to be essential to support actions on the ground, as proven by the over 240 publications in scientific journals that it has contributed to since 2013. This is also why we consider it key to give growing space to the voice of operational research in strategic decisions and building health policies that are truly effective, lasting, and fitting the specific qualities of the contexts for which they are intended.

SHORTCOMINGS AND CRITICAL ISSUES

However, we know that talking about operational research in low-resource countries is far from simple. There are many structural shortcomings to deal with and overcome by acting systematically with a medium-term perspective. As Giovanni Putoto, CUAMM's research and programming manager, noted, several critical issues become clearer in a general analysis: the need to involve local communities and stakeholders in operational research; the importance of making the transfer of knowledge between researchers and practitioners more effective; scant consideration for the experiences and needs of those working in the field in defining research priorities; lastly, the need to make the available health tools and data more usable and accessible. These are critical aspects that fit into already complex situations. They can suggest possible directions in which to act and the private and public players to be involved to work together in this process of change.

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE FIELD

It is a long, complex path to contribute to operational research even more incisive and integrated, as described by the representatives of Makerere University in Uganda, UNICEF Mozambique, and CUAMM in a panel discussion on these topics. A first, agreed-upon answer emerged, highlighting the need for local communities, practitioners, and academics to dialogue to define lines of action. To these ends, it is key for the players involved in planning and implementing research to meet in technical working groups to share approaches and priorities. Only by strengthening such a network can operational research find its own space and contribute to developing systems and actions for the benefit of everyone's health.

Another significant aspect that came out during discussion is that non-governmental organizations can play a key role in operational research by providing evidence and bringing it to the attention of universities and Ministries to improve guidelines and policies. They may have platforms, contacts, and advocacy skills that put them in a good position to unite other stakeholders in the countries. For example, this already happens in Uganda where there are "technical boards" in which organizations contribute to developing national research agendas in the realms where the organization works.

NEW PERSPECTIVES AND TOPICS

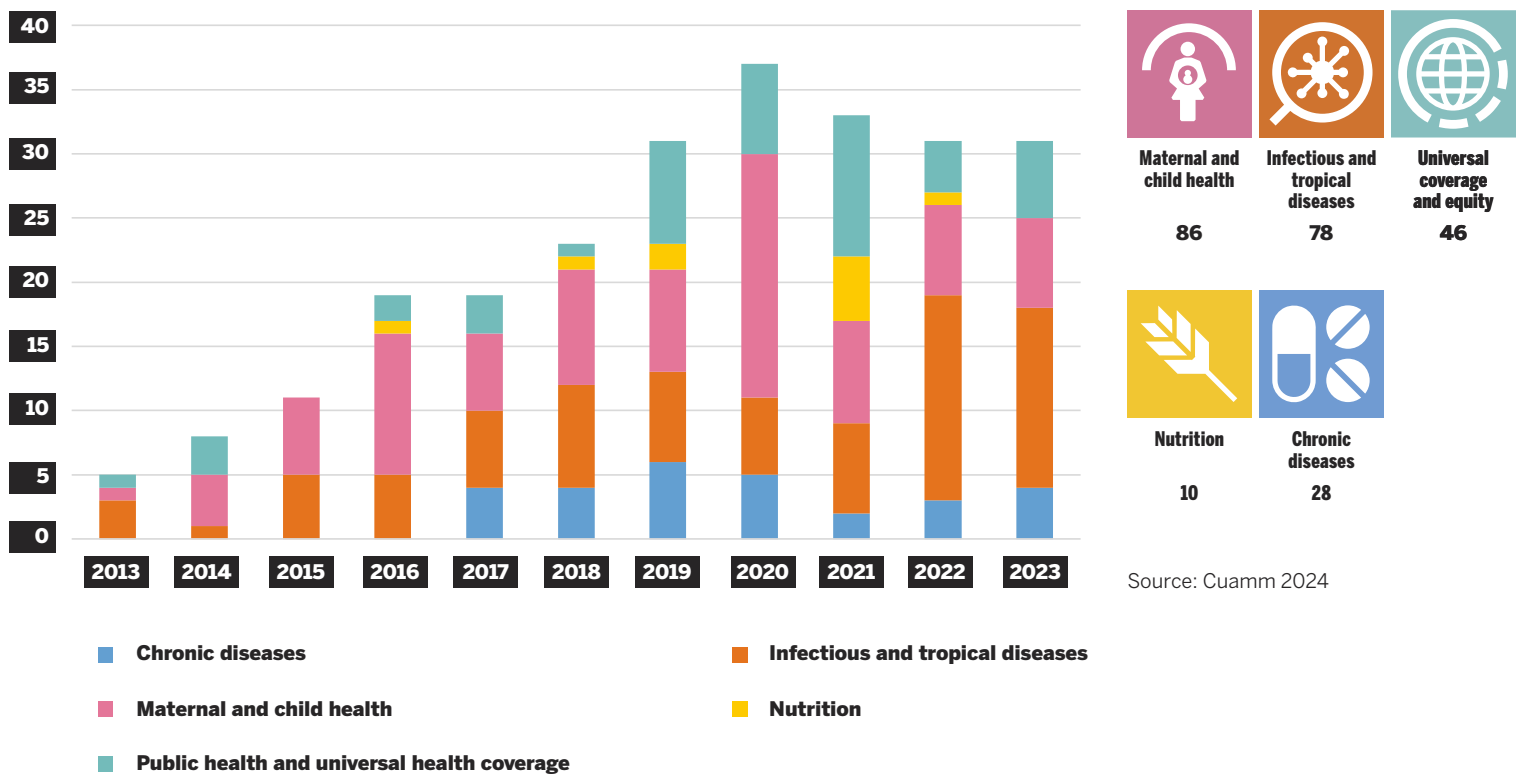
The contributions shared by participants during the work groups of the side event were also of great interest. Starting from several critical points and three specific areas – infectious diseases, mother and child health, and chronic diseases – possible solutions and best practices were discussed to increase the impact of operational research in low-resource countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Within the topic discussion, we tried to bring to light the possible research interest to further develop in different realms, and the modes and practical approaches to be adopted to make operational research increasingly effective in improving the health of the people. Among the research topics emerging most clearly were: gender-based violence (GBV) and mental illness and their

impact on the sphere of maternal and child health at all stages of pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum; the need for a multidisciplinary approach in NCDs; the need to understand social-cultural determinants that guide behavior and its change. We then discussed the need to involve community and field practitioners, i.e. health workers in primary care from the early stages of planning and the definition of research questions. Later on,

these same figures should be made active players and spokespersons to spread the results at various levels (hospitals, districts, and ministries). This is all to make operational research an even more incisive tool to facilitate dialogue between different stakeholders and contribute to true improvement in health services.

FIGURE / CUAMM OPERATIONAL RESEARCH 2013–2023 – TOPIC AREAS



Source: Cuamm 2024

NOTES

1 Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA 2023) - <https://cphia2023.com/>