

NCD and Poverty Research Network

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between non-communicable diseases and poverty



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INFORMATION AND OPPORTUNITIES

** New [WHO study](#) shows no improvement in global levels of physical activity since 2001. This leaves almost 1.5 billion adults at risk of disease from insufficient physical activity.

** Check out Walk21's recent position paper on [Women and Walking](#). Its website also offers updates on walking innovations around the world, as well as information about upcoming events related to walking and urban mobility.

** The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC) [website](#) has recently been launched. Based in Thailand, the GGTC website offers a wide range of resources, news, tips, strategies and tools to counter tobacco industry interference and promote policy coherence in tobacco control at the national, regional, and global levels.

** Two new SEATCA reports have just been released: The [Tobacco Control Atlas - ASEAN Region, Fourth Edition](#) and the [First Asian Tobacco Interference Index 2018](#).

** Smoke-free Cities Asia Pacific Network ([SCAN](#)) will host its 6th Smoke-free Cities Regional Workshop in Hoi An, Vietnam, 20-21 November 2018.

** Check out the NCD Alliance's [Civil Society Resource Library](#). It provides a regularly updated selection of tools and guidance, advocacy materials, and case studies.

** **Reminder:** Have you checked out the [#EnoughNCDs](#) hashtag on [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#) yet?

** You can also follow [The Defeat-NCD Partnership](#) on Twitter [@DefeatNCD](#)

** Another Twitter hashtag of interest: [#WomenForWalking](#)

** For other updates and upcoming events, please see the NCD Alliance news and events sites: <http://www.ncdalliance.org/news-events>.

Generating NCD&P Evidence and Translating It into Action and Policy

Numerous organizations around the world engage in research that can be used successfully to support policy makers to enact and enforce better policies to reduce the global risk and burden of NCDs. Various kinds of evidence are needed to do so. Epidemiological studies, for example, focus on the relationships between risk factors and disease patterns in specific places or among specific groups of people. They can help policy makers to see that exposure to tobacco, excessive alcohol, air pollution, poor diet, or lack of physical activity among their local populations are key risk factors for NCDs. Although extensive international evidence already exists in many cases, specifically local studies can bring these results closer to home.

Policy-oriented research, by contrast, focuses on generating local evidence of a need or problem that policy change could help to solve. Local evidence of the population groups most affected by NCD risk factors, for example, can be useful for demonstrating that some type of policy change is needed. It can also suggest policy solutions and help to generate popular support for those policies: are children able to walk to school in all neighbourhoods? If not, why not, and what can be done to improve the situation? Are people able to access fresh fruits and vegetables? What barriers do they face and how might obstacles to healthy diets be removed? Does local infrastructure (or lack thereof) hinder people's mobility? What improvements can be made to public spaces, public transport, and sidewalks/footpaths? A better understanding of the particular combination of risk factors that local populations face, whether social, economic, infrastructural, or behavioural, can thus be used to inform policy planning and decision-making.

Policy-oriented research can thus paint a powerful picture of a local problem and point to the needed solutions. For example, it may reveal what percentage of people eat less than the recommended daily portions and why this is the case; or, it may examine the obstacles that people face in being physically active. Policy-oriented research results are best presented in a simple, clear, and easy to understand manner that makes good use of the research and its results but that does not get lost in the details.

In this newsletter, we offer suggestions about what kinds of activities are best suited for policy-oriented research, and how research findings can be used to influence policy. We provide examples from around the world...and would love to hear about some of your local success stories!



Policy-oriented research provides local evidence of the need for policy change to solve problems., and can generate popular support for such policies.

Policy-Oriented Research

From start to finish, the development and implementation of public policies that address NCDs and poverty pass through a number of stages. Each of these stages can be guided by locally-relevant evidence:

- ✂ identifying an issue;
- ✂ recognizing that there is a problem associated with that issue;
- ✂ accepting the postulated cause of the problem;
- ✂ accepting that the problem can be tackled and remedied;
- ✂ identifying the resources necessary to tackle the problem;
- ✂ winning acceptance for the proposed solution;
- ✂ gaining political commitment to the solution;
- ✂ implementing the solution; and
- ✂ evaluating the implementation.¹



Before designing a research project, researchers must think about what stage of the policy process they are going to tackle. What issue should be addressed, which solutions and policies might be promoted, and what messages are needed to sway both political and public opinion? What evidence might convince decision makers to pass and enforce better policies, especially knowing that various industries — motor vehicle/fuel, fast food, sugary drinks, tobacco and alcohol — may be pressuring them to keep taxes low on their products and policies weak that would restrict their use? Policymakers subject to industry lobbying may need to be convinced to act in the interest of public health. Also, a different kind of evidence might be needed to get the public on board with proposed solutions/policies.

Research that contributes to the evidence base is essential. It is easy for decision makers to turn away unprepared advocates with a few simple questions: Is this really a problem in our country? Would people support a policy change here? What other places have already implemented this solution and what are their results? The first step, then, is for researchers to be prepared — know the basics about the local country or community (gather existing data from the WHO and elsewhere), undertake some targeted research, and learn about the successes of international model policies.

1. Ron Johnston and Paul Plummer, “What is Policy-Oriented Research?” *Environment and Planning A* 37 (2005): 1521.

Generating Data to Support Positive Policy Change Is Step One

It is the rare policymaker who will do as a researcher requests after simply reading or hearing about their results. Even if a researcher has already done some basic research—such as on sugary drink ads that target children, or the level of popular support that exists for a surcharge on sugary drinks, or the low percentage of children who travel actively (by foot or bicycle) to school—having this evidence is just a start. Next they need to set their study into the larger picture, and turn their evidence into a powerful advocacy tool to show what kind of policy change is needed, how it might be developed, and what impact it will have on reducing NCD risks and burdens.

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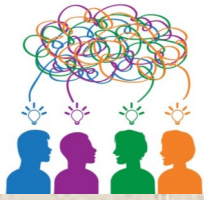
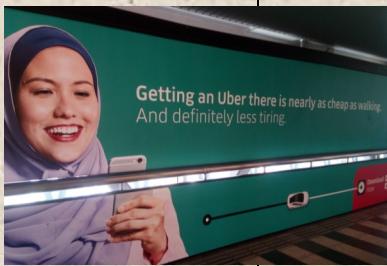
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Policy-Oriented Research, continued

Look at international studies and use them to frame the research; replicating or adapting another country's study for one's own setting can be powerful. There is [ample evidence](#), for example, showing that improving conditions for walking and cycling not only [increase physical activity](#) levels and help to reduce NCDs, but also lead to [other benefits](#), such as fewer traffic-related deaths and injuries, less congestion, cleaner air, and lower transport expenditures. The connection between NCDs and poverty is important to emphasize: the less disposable income that people have, the greater the opportunity cost of spending on unhealthy products such as junk food, SSBs, alcohol, and tobacco. The poor benefit the most from better conditions for walking and cycling and from improved and subsidized public transit. A solid research study, then, can build on existing international studies by gathering the local evidence necessary to convince decision makers that policy change in their jurisdiction is necessary. The following table provides examples of policy-oriented research that could be used for advocacy.

| Type | Method & Target | Sample Policy-Oriented Research Questions | Policy Change |
|--|---|--|---|
|  Quantitative Research (can often include qualitative components too) | Polls: Public Support for Policy Changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What percentage of the public supports a new (or an increased) tax on SSBs/ alcohol/tobacco? ❑ What percentage of the public supports the enforcement of smoke-free places? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Apply surcharge on SSBs/ alcohol/tobacco ❑ Ban smoking in public places |
| | Polls / Questionnaires: Knowledge/Belief | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What percentage of the public is aware of at least four key NCD risk factors? ❑ What percentage of the public believes that agricultural chemicals fresh fruit and vegetables unsafe? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Advertise health messages with surcharge funding ❑ Support organic farming initiatives with surcharge funding |
| | Polls / Questionnaires: Practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What percentage of the public is physically active least 30 minutes daily? ❑ How many kids walk/cycle to school? ❑ What percentage of the public eats 5 daily servings of fresh fruits & vegetables? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Enforce car-free hours near schools to make active transport safe ❑ Encourage fresh food markets and vendors |
|  Qualitative Research | In-depth Interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What obstacles do people face in being physically active every day? ❑ What obstacles do people face in eating a healthy diet? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Enact pedestrian first policy to encourage cycling and walking over car use ❑ Encourage fresh food markets and vendors |
| | Observation  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What is the prevalence of and types of marketing used to advertise unhealthy foods & motorized transport? Does it target children? ❑ What are the conditions of local public spaces, footpaths, and cycling routes? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Ban/limit marketing of unhealthy foods, tobacco, alcohol, motorized transport ❑ Ensure equal time for health messaging ❑ Ensure quality public spaces in all neighborhoods; ❑ Ensure that people can safely walk and cycle in the city |

Designing Policy-Oriented Research, continued

A well-conducted research study enables one to state with confidence and evidence what people may already know anecdotally: in just one generation, transport to school has shifted from active to passive; in many cities, few people dare to walk or cycle for fear of injury or death; people no longer have access to attractive, safe, and free outdoor public spaces for physical activity; families are eating more processed and less fresh and healthy food; corporation and media marketing of unhealthy foods target children. Sometimes, though, research reveals a few surprises: even young children know the [names of cigarette](#) brands; some children think spaghetti is a vegetable or don't realize that milk comes from a cow. When presenting research results, include qualitative anecdotes, case studies, or images to add tremendous emotional impact to the findings.

Some recent examples of policy-oriented research by HealthBridge and its partners include:

- ✎ Tracking [junk food/SSB marketing to children](#) in India and Nepal
- ✎ Analyzing pedestrian environments around [schools in Bangalore](#) and in the [city of Thrissur](#)
- ✎ Identifying unused urban spaces convertible to [public “pocket” spaces](#) suitable for active recreation in Dhaka
- ✎ Analyzing the status and quality of [beaches as safe, vibrant public spaces](#) in Kerala
- ✎ Tracking changes in [alcohol affordability, advertising, and opportunity costs](#) in Vietnam
- ✎ Assessing the [pedestrian environment](#) and the [availability of parks](#) in Niamey



Record Time: Responding to a Youth Smoking Prevention Campaign in Bangladesh

Many years ago, British American Tobacco (BAT) announced a new youth smoking prevention campaign in Bangladesh. It planned to get the government to sign on as a partner. However, since preventing youth smoking would also prevent BAT from establishing a new and potentially life-long customer base, it seemed unlikely that they were actually committed to encouraging young people not to smoke. WBB Trust managed to get copies of the BAT campaign materials. It organized a focus group discussion to study and comment on the materials. It also conducted a small survey in a school. Its analysis of the materials and discussion emphasized that people could not even decipher what the campaign messages were supposed to be, even after being repeatedly exposed to them. WBB Trust then launched a press conference to publicize those findings. Based on this research, the Government of Bangladesh refused to join BAT's campaign, and the initiative failed. WBB Trust knew that it had limited time to act, as delaying the research would mean that results could be released only after partnership contracts had been signed. How quickly did it work? The gap between first learning of the campaign and holding the press conference was just two weeks. Effective policy-oriented research thus need not be long and extensive! And, it can as easily seek the development of new policies as their prevention.

Changing the Paradigm: Tobacco & Poverty

Today there is broad understanding of the relationship between tobacco and poverty. Less than twenty years ago, this connection was less clear. HealthBridge's current Regional Director teamed up with a number of colleagues at the newly founded Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB) Trust to conduct a simple study that blended national statistics on expenditures for tobacco and food with interviews of low-income workers. The study's main finding was that a shift in spending by the poor from tobacco to food could save 10.5 million children from malnutrition. The study results were published in the journal [Tobacco Control](#) and thus far the article has been cited more than 250 times. Many other studies have followed, further elucidating the spending on tobacco that detracts from purchases of food and other necessary items. Similar research could be conducted on expenditures for alcohol, junk food/SSBs, and transport.

Translating Research into Policy

Once a research study has been completed and generated evidence, the next step is knowing how to use it. Having the right evidence is just the beginning. It is the rare policymaker who will do as a researcher requests simply because they have provided an abundance of good data. Keep in mind that policy makers are often being heavily lobbied by corporations that stand to lose financially if policy changes succeed. Well-equipped advocates have succeeded, though, in convincing policy makers to develop, pass, and enforce policies that can help to reduce NCD-related risk factors. Below are some tips.

Presenting research results:

✎ Reports for policymakers need to be succinct, clear, and visual. They should avoid technical jargon. The most important sections are the abstract/summary, recommendations, and conclusion. It is important to have a full report that details the study's methodology and findings, but that keeps the language simple and the paragraphs short. A visually pleasing factsheet that summarizes results and lays out policy recommendations may be the best way to present research findings to policy makers.

Use the media:

✎ Even the best research is of little use if no one sees them. Getting media attention is critical for reaching decision makers, informing a wider audience, and showing policy makers that the issue cannot be ignored. If policy makers are to address the issue at hand — the need for better sidewalks, for bicycle lanes, for a surcharge on sugary beverages, or for new car free public spaces — then researchers need to make it a “burning issue.” And nothing grabs attention like extensive media coverage! Journalists prefer a clear and succinct press release that highlights a study's main findings and the changes that it aims to effect. To generate media attention, researchers can organize a seminar or press conference to disseminate their findings; they can ask a major newspaper to co-organize a seminar; they can offer the information as an exclusive item to one journalist or editor; or they can organize a colourful demonstration and send a one-page research summary along with photos of the demonstration to media houses.



Network:

✎ Research conducted in collaboration with a university or research institute increases its credibility. Working with others also helps researchers to expand their reach. Policy makers may pay more attention to an alliance, coalition, or other network more than they could to an individual or a single organization. Networking often requires reciprocity: supporting another organization's campaigns, attending some of their events, giving their leaders places of honour, inviting their younger staff to training opportunities, etc. Maintaining a strong network is well worth the effort.

Direct advocacy:

✎ At some point, researchers must make their case directly to policy makers. This is a process that could involve letters, phone calls, invitations to seminars, mailing newspaper clippings, and direct meetings. When the time comes for a direct meeting, preparation is essential. Discussion points should be clear, confident, and succinct: **Diabetes kills x% of our citizens each year and already y% of our population is diabetic. One big risk factor for diabetes is consuming sugar-sweetened beverages like sodas and juices. Other countries have successfully reduced diabetes and health care expenditures through a surcharge on sugary drinks. We strongly recommend you do the same here.** The results of direct meeting may not be fully satisfactory, but do not give up. Repeat some of the earlier steps as needed: organize more demonstrations, have another press conference/seminar, write more letters, engage networks, gain more media attention, and once again approach the policymaker directly.

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Successful Translations of Policy-Oriented Research

Saving Markets in Vietnam: In its attempt to redesign Hanoi as a “more civilized, modern city,” the Hanoi government decided to bulldoze existing traditional markets and replace them with shopping malls. The decision was based, in part, on a belief that traditional markets are unhygienic; real estate developers also saw traditional markets as “wasting” large pieces of lucrative real estate and lobbied for their removal. HealthBridge Vietnam was concerned about this practice because of the negative effect that it would have on NCDs, poverty, and urban liveability. In response, it conducted research on the impact that the policy would have on the availability of fresh healthy food and jobs; created a large network of like-minded organizations, officials, and professionals; made clear policy demands; engaged the media (traditional, online, and social); and interacted regularly with policymakers. The strategy succeeded, and [the practice was cancelled](#).



Improving Public Spaces in Uganda: The number of safe, accessible and enjoyable public spaces in Ugandan cities is steadily decreasing, while the public increasingly demands that governments create and maintain public spaces. Without a clear strategic vision, many city governments lack the resources and capacity to develop public spaces to meet these demands. HealthBridge and its local partner Advocates for Public Spaces (APS) conducted [two studies](#) to assess the availability and



quality of parks and informal spaces for active recreation in Uganda's capital city, Kampala. They found that informal open spaces are critical components of residents' access to recreational space throughout the city, but especially in outlying areas and slum

settlements. Informal open spaces are similar to parks and other kinds of publicly accessible open spaces, and exist in privately owned yards, empty lots, alleys, or other forms of open space. The studies recommended a public dialogue on how to improve the infrastructure for active recreation in different kinds of spaces, and consequently the health and quality of life for city residents. As a result of those studies, the city government has agreed to participate in multiple park pilot projects using a community engagement strategy.

NCD AND POVERTY RESEARCH NETWORK

The NCD and Poverty Research Network is a virtual network of researchers, advocates, and other individuals interested in exploring the links between non-communicable diseases and poverty.

Initiated in 2009 as the Tobacco and Poverty Network, the network includes members from countries throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In 2013, its focus expanded to include non-communicable diseases.

The purpose of the network is to provide a collegial forum through which researchers, advocates, and others working in NCD prevention and control can share research results, ideas, experiences, challenges, and solutions for exploring and addressing issues related to NCDs and poverty.

The network is moderated by HealthBridge. Network members may distribute information to the network by sending an email to Lori Jones, ljones@healthbridge.ca

We look forward to your contributions and feedback!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Do you have any announcements that you would like to share with the network? Let us know by sending an email to Lori Jones ljones@healthbridge.ca



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