Operational research takes an in-depth look at the coverage and quality of healthcare and helps to strengthen systems and deliver more effective programmes with the aim of improving global health. Sometimes known as the ‘science of doing better’, operational research helps to identify the constraints around healthcare programmes and find practical solutions to overcome them. This in turn helps healthcare providers and humanitarians to create new knowledge to improve health outcomes, assess the feasibility of new strategies or interventions, and determine how to best implement interventions in new settings or how to best advocate for changes in policy and practice.

**VISION**
To promote and use operational research to improve health system performance and health outcomes for people living in low- and middle-income countries.

**GOAL**
To conduct, publish and use operational research in low- and middle-income countries to promote evidence-informed decision making and to improve the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

**STRATEGY**
- Support countries and institutions to conduct operational research around their own priorities
- Build sustainable operational research capacity, and make evidence-informed decisions for strengthening health system performance.
- Foster sustainable leadership and funding for operational research through research fellowships, networking and by maintaining and expanding strategic partnerships.

“The operational research fellowship and the national SORT IT course has played a key role in building capacity within the TB and HIV department at the Ministry of Health and Child Care. Collecting good data and relevant operational research improves implementation of national programmes and impacts health outcomes.”

Dr Owen Mugurungi
Director AIDS/TB Programmes, Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe
THE STRUCTURED OPERATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING INITIATIVE (SORT IT)

In 2009, The Union’s Centre for Operational Research (COR) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) Operational Research Unit (LuxOR) developed an output-oriented training model for operational research.

After several highly successful courses, the model was adapted and in 2012, evolved into the Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative (SORT IT) – a global partnership-based initiative coordinated by the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) hosted at the World Health Organization (WHO) and implemented with various partners.

SORT IT AUDIENCE AND APPROACH

Focused on implementers, the training teaches the practical skills to conduct and publish research and foster evidence-informed decision making. There are three modules that sequentially include protocol writing (module one), quality assured data capture and analysis (module two) and manuscript writing for publication (module three). Continuous mentorship and support for peer-review is an integral aspect of the SORT IT cycle.

Each training participant benefits from close mentoring by two experienced researchers and has to meet several pre-defined milestones after every module.

The SORT IT model is adaptable to various geographic contexts, different thematic areas and research methodology. Examples include malaria elimination, Ebola and health systems, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and expanded research designs like mixed-methods and qualitative research.

EVALUATION AND REVIEW

The SORT IT model has been widely promoted and positively reviewed by an independent evaluation commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID); the ESSENCE Good Practice Guidelines; the World Health Report 2013; the WHO Global Action Framework for TB research in support of WHO’s End TB strategy; and the 2017-2020 action plan to strengthen the use of evidence, information and research for policy-making in the WHO European Region.

OPERATIONAL RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS

In order to create institutional capacity for operational research in public health programmes in low- and middle-income countries, SORT IT promotes and supports an operational research fellowship programme. The programme provides training and mentorship to selected public health professionals who want to build a career in operational research. Promising public health professionals, often embedded within Ministries of Health or other public programmes, are identified and mentored to become champions for operational research.

IMPACT: TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Research published through the SORT IT programme has led to national policy change and improved health systems. Some examples include:

• Following the publication of several operational research studies on the feasibility and effectiveness of screening tuberculosis (TB) patients for diabetes, the Ministry of Health in India updated its policy to screen all 2.8 million TB patients for diabetes annually. Every year, this screening identifies more than 100,000 people with diabetes who would otherwise go undiagnosed.

• A perspective paper led to the national strategy of implementing ‘HIV test and treat’ activities in pregnant women in Malawi in 2011 and has contributed to more than 700,000 people receiving antiretroviral therapy in the country. The success of this strategy underpinned World Health Organization’s recommendations for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

• Several operational studies examined routinely offering HIV testing and counselling to all patients with presumptive TB in India. This practice now provides an opportunity for HIV testing to approximately eight million people with presumptive TB visiting health facilities in India every year.

“Successful use of operational and implementation research gives the answers, ways and means to solve bottlenecks in health systems.”

Dr Kyaw Zin Thant
Director General, Department of Medical Research, Ministry of Health and Sports, Myanmar
SORT IT COURSES (2009–2018)

TOTAL: 61 courses with 648 participants from 90 countries.

SORT IT courses have assisted in bolstering health systems and research capacity in 90 countries since its inception in 2009. These intensive operational research courses consist of three six-day modules spaced out over nine to 12 months.

Through this training, participants develop the practical skills for conducting and publishing operational research.

“I use the SORT IT model with my students to guide them through the development of manuscripts and policy briefs and have supported two SORT IT workshops within the Ministry of Health. I have also used my training to author or co-author over 50 peer-reviewed manuscripts.”

Dr Rose Jepchumba Kosgei
University of Nairobi, Kenya
Photo shows course participants and faculty at the First National SORT IT course in Zimbabwe, 2017–2018.