

## Advancing Health Policy and System Research: Lessons for Resilient Health System in Nepal

Pradip Gyanwali,<sup>1</sup> Meghnath Dhimal<sup>1</sup>

The Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) is an apex body of the Government of Nepal (GoN) entrusted with regulating, coordinating, and promoting high quality health and population research in Nepal. As per the mandate of Nepal Health Research Council Act 1991<sup>1</sup>, it has four major decrees: capacity building in health research, health research regulation, evidence generation and promoting use of evidence. As of December 2021, more than 20,000 researchers and policy makers have received different trainings on health research as per their demand. Besides the Ethical Review Board (ERB) at NHRC, 54 Institutional Review Committees (IRCs) are established in different academic institutions in Nepal under the authority of NHRC. Similarly, nearly 3000 research proposals are approved from ERB and IRC each year to facilitate ethical conduction of health research and support evidence generation. In line with the mandate of promoting and disseminating evidence, more than 8000 research papers including some policy briefs are published each year, which shows the establishment of health research ecosystem in the country.

Since 2015, the NHRC has been hosting annual summit of health and population scientists to promote research communication by fostering dialogue between policymakers, researchers, implementers, and development partners. The national summit of health and population scientists is one of the largest events in Nepal and each year it is celebrated on the auspicious occasion of establishment date of NHRC (12 April 1991). Each summit concludes with a summit declaration.

Nepal was severely affected by a mega earthquake of 2015, but it has a track record of successfully managing such disasters and epidemics. Nepal's response to the mega earthquake of 2015 provided lessons to other countries on how a resource limited country protected the health of its people ensuring the timely completion of reconstruction activities.<sup>2,3</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed health systems resilience in all countries.

Nepal's health system has also faced a massive burden due to the pandemic. Despite its limited resources, Nepal responded the pandemic to its ability while ensuring delivery of essential health services, by developing several policies, guidelines, and strategic initiatives. The NHRC also developed a national guideline for 'Strengthening Evidence Generation on COVID-19' with the goal of regulating, managing, and facilitating COVID-19-related researches in order to generate country-specific evidence for Nepal.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, NHRC continued supporting the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) and the GoN in providing contemporary evidence to adapt, improve, and modify policies and practices in response to the COVID-19 challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a critical importance of generating contextually tailored evidence through high-quality health policy and system research and their use in decision making to strengthen health systems resilience in tackling future pandemics, shocks, and stressors to the system. The Eighth National Summit with the theme "Advancing Health Policy and Systems Research: Lessons for Resilient Health System in Nepal" was a continuum of the previous summits as an annual gathering of researchers, academicians, scientists, practitioners, and policymakers to exchange ideas and health research evidence on national health issues and priorities focusing on lessons from Nepal's response to COVID-19 and to previous natural disasters. This year's national summit sought to facilitate discussion on health systems and policy research (HPSR), as well as its advancement to accomplish communal health goals and construct a resilient health system.

NHRC has focused on all types of research: basic science research, clinical trials and health policy and system research (HPSR). HPSR is multidisciplinary by nature which clearly identifies the interconnections between policy and systems, and highlights the social and political nature of the field.<sup>5,6</sup> It also focuses on

**Correspondence:** Dr Meghnath Dhimal, Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC), Ramshah Path, Kathmandu. Email: [meghdhimal2@gmail.com](mailto:meghdhimal2@gmail.com), Phone: +9779851167198.

### Author Affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC), Ramshah Path, Kathmandu.

creating an exhaustive scenario of how collaborative efforts from health institutions, populations and key actors like policy makers and researchers facilitate in building resilient health systems through promotion of evidence-based policy and policy-informed research. The ability to respond effectively to crises, maintain critical health functions during crises, and be aware of potential health hazards is what a resilient health system entail.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has pinpointed the significance of a resilient health system in handling public health emergencies and the consequences afterwards. Furthermore, emerging issues beyond the health sector such as changing demographic patterns, climate change, changing land use including rapid and unplanned urbanization, deforestation, and increased animal-human interface, coupled with increasing population density and globalization are increasing the likelihood of further pandemics or other crises which demands all sectors to work together on health for achieving health for all.<sup>7</sup> As such, evidence from health systems and policy research can play a critical role in identifying and selecting policy solutions to meet the needs of the country at the time of crises and thereby aid in building resilience of the country's health system.

This year's national summit of health and population scientists (10-12 April 2022) aimed to bring health systems researchers, practitioners, program designers and policymakers together to discuss lessons from past emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic and utilize these lessons to improve and transform Nepal's health system to better prepare it for public health emergencies and future pandemics.

The declaration and outcomes of the summit such as evidence synthesis report and policy briefs may contribute for evidence-based formulation of annual work plan and budget as well as development of an accountable and responsive Nepal's Health Sector Strategic Plan 2022-2030.

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