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Feature

EMPHNET Broadens Collaborations with Lebanon for Health Systems Strengthening



In 2022 EMPHNET signed an MOU with the Ministry of Public Health to initiate collaborations in Lebanon with national stakeholders, partners from the region, and the larger public health community. The focus of this partnership is to address lingering health challenges which have been exacerbated by an unprecedented economic crisis and the ramifications of a pandemic. In less than two years, this newly inked partnership has impressively progressed. The country's first Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) has been established, several multi-disciplinary research projects into priority areas have been launched, and a collaboration to strengthen the routine immunization program has been initiated.

Expanding the Public Health Workforce



The health system in Lebanon has been particularly suffering in the past two years from the COVID-19 pandemic, socio-economic instabilities and the unprecedented high turnover and immigration of medical personnel.

Lebanon's First Field Epidemiology Training Program is Launched

In the wake of COVID-19, EMPHNET developed the Public Health Empowerment Program (PHEP)-COVID-19, a customized version of its PHEP-Basic Field Epidemiology (PHEP-BFE). This is a training program tailored to address the peculiarities of the pandemic and created in response to countries' requests to organize specialized training for their health professionals, focused on areas of surveillance at points of entry, case tracing, risk communication, infection control and outbreak investigation. In Lebanon, PHEP-COVID-19 was implemented with special modification to address country's requirements targeting 15 residents and 5 mentors. The three-month program comprised online self-paced learning followed by field training.

Following the launch of PHEP-COVID-19, the program became a member of EMPHNET's network of FETPs and its director a member of the EMPHNET's FETP Board of Directors. The program is partaking in EMPHNET's initiatives in support of FETPs, among which are plans to ensure the sustainability of FETPs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR).

Establishing Community-based Surveillance of Acute Flaccid Paralysis at the Borders

A well-functioning acute flaccid paralysis (AFP) surveillance system is central to both polio eradication and sustaining polio free status because surveillance of AFP is the gold standard for polio surveillance. In Lebanon, strengthening AFP surveillance at the national level and in silent areas is becoming a critical need. The detection, reporting, and adequate investigation of AFP cases have been challenged, evident in declining surveillance indicators. This has been primarily attributed to the high turnover of healthcare workers from different sectors, including frontline vaccinators, physicians, nurses, and epidemiologists.

Building on its successful relevant investments across the EMR, EMPHNET is supporting Lebanon in strengthening AFP surveillance. A collaboration is capitalizing on the community's role in improving in detecting and reporting AFP cases, especially in their engagement in disease surveillance under community-based surveillance (CBS). A team of trainers has been created from the central, provincial, and district levels of the Ministry's Epidemiological Surveillance Unit who later trained 60 community focal points from across the country. This expanded community engagement is expected to strengthen AFP surveillance toward improved and early interventions against suspected polio cases.

Supporting Research for Public Health Action



Relying on its experience in using research to impact public health action, EMPHNET is working with the Ministry of Public Health, the academic sector, and international partners in conducting evaluative and implementation research.

Assessment of COVID-19 Vaccination Uptake to Prioritize Interventions for Increased Vaccine Access and Demand

In Lebanon and as part of a multi-country assessment, EMPHNET collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a study to understand determinants of demand for COVID-19 and other vaccines among priority populations, particularly the role of rumors and misinformation on behavior, with a secondary focus on studying the challenges in vaccine service delivery faced by healthcare workers (HCWs) and program administrators. They also evaluated ongoing regional, country-level, and subnational planning efforts to introduce COVID-19 vaccines to high-priority populations.

EMPHNET and the Ministry of Public Health shared the assessment's recommendations in a dissemination workshop that convened national stakeholders and international partners. Discussions ensued on means to inform immunization demand programming engage local authorities and community leaders in proposing priority interventions to address COVID-19 vaccine demand factors.

Assessment of Providers’ Attitudes on Oral Anti-Viral for COVID-19

In mixed-method research, EMPHNET is supporting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is assessing providers’ attitudes on Oral Anti-Viral for COVID-19.

Demand for Oral Cholera Vaccine in the Context of COVID-19 in Lebanon: A Rapid Community Assessment and Vaccination Awareness Campaign

In response to the cholera outbreak in Lebanon, EMPHNET is supporting the country in planning and implementation of the preparedness and response plan through conducting Rapid Community Assessment (RCA) on the oral cholera vaccine (OCV) and raising the awareness and education on OCV in the context of COVID-19. The study is assessing the knowledge and attitudes towards cholera to identify potential barriers to OCV uptake among individuals aged 18 years and above residing in 296 cadasters in 5 districts in the surrounding areas where outbreak risk is foreseen. The study is expected to come up with findings to inform the second phase of the national OCV campaign.

Home-Based Care Pulse Oximetry project (G20) in Lebanon

The CDC, with support from EMPHNET, is evaluating the use and impact of facilitated pulse oximetry in home-based care settings administered by nurses or other designated caregivers. The evaluation’s findings will help the Ministry of Public Health in designing policies and measures to provide more comprehensive assistance for COVID-19 patients recovering at home and to make enhancements for pulse oximetry support at home, especially in detection of hypoxia in COVID-19 patients and referral to a higher level of care.

The Eighth EMPHNET Regional Conference

“Advancing Public Health Preparedness and Response: Challenges, Opportunities, and Ways Forward”

October 22 - 25, 2023 | Amman, Jordan



ANNOUNCEMENT



Mark your Calendars for EMPHNET’s Eighth Regional Conference in October 2023

We are pleased to announce that the Eighth EMPHNET Regional Conference will be held between October 22 and 25, 2023, in Amman, Jordan. With the central theme of the conference being “Advancing Public Health Preparedness and Response: Challenges, Opportunities, and Ways Forward”.

Keep an eye on our social media channels for the abstract submission announcement.

[Read More](#)

In Focus

EMPHNET Pioneers Implementation and Operational Research for Public Health



Operational and implementation research are two different approaches to conducting research in public health.

Implementation Research (IR) in public health is a type of research that focuses on the different aspects affecting the use, uptake, and implementation of an evidence-based public health intervention in real-life settings. It is inter and multi-disciplinary in nature as a collaborative scientific study of the processes used to implement interventions and policies and an analysis of contextual factors that influence the implementation of these interventions and policies. Closely related to IR is another type of research, known as **operational research (OR)**. OR is similar to IR in that it studies a problem and provides a solution. However, the scale of the problem in OR is a clearly defined local context, mainly an operational issue within a specific program. In the context of public health, OR provides program managers with information to improve program performance. Information is always operations-focused.

In line with its strategy, EMPHNET is working to lead and advance high-quality IR and OR in support of innovative solutions and use of information and communication technology to improve public health in the EMR. EMPHNET is pioneering this effort alongside ministries of health, universities, research entities, and the private sector. In several projects, EMPHNET is implementing IR and OR projects, building relevant capacities, and integrating the use of information technology tools to support research activities. This effort has been rewarded with success. Several projects have been completed, offering recommendations for better operations as well as alternative implementation of effective programs, strategies, and policies.

Implementation Research

For Collaborative NCD Response in Humanitarian Settings

In Jordan, EMPHNET conducted implementation research to generate evidence for the advancement of the Integrated NCD-Humanitarian Response, a project being implemented by the Royal Health Awareness Society and the Ministry of Health, among other partners to strengthen NCD care and prevention services by raising awareness on NCDs within communities in a humanitarian context. This research offered recommendations for the extension of the project's activities beyond its proposed scope to guarantee an efficient future implementation.

For Better Management of Hypertension

An implementation research project adapted and implemented the HEARTS technical package for cardiovascular disease management in primary health care settings. In the first four months of its implementation in health centers of northern Jordan, the implementation of HEARTS has proven to be successful. It achieved better control of the blood pressure of the enrolled patients. Based on this success, the project recommended integrating evidence-based strategies for hypertension control that are listed in the HEART technical package into routine care to achieve better control of hypertension in the general population.

For Comprehensive Primary Health Care Services

EMPHNET is supporting an innovative approach to modernize Primary Health Care (PHC) services in Jordan. In collaboration with the MOH, it is leading an initiative to develop a roadmap for modernizing PHC services. An enhanced, comprehensive Family Health Teams (FHT) approach will be introduced. The FHT is an innovative approach that creates a partnership between physicians at the PHC, family medicine physicians, nurses, community health workers, and other health service providers to coordinate the highest possible quality of care for patients. Based on the FHT approach, a roadmap has been developed by a committee comprising members from the MOH, universities, Jordanian Nursing Council, and the private sector.

For Maternal, Reproductive, and Sexual Health of Vulnerable Communities

A multi-country project implemented in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (the first of its kind in the Middle East) developed a **psychosocial-infused Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) intervention** to improve the use of SRH services during humanitarian crises. Going by the name SEEK Trial, short for [The Effect of Increased Self-Efficacy and Knowledge \(Using an Innovative Psychosocial Package\) on Improved Sexual and Reproductive Health Service Use among Adolescent Girls and Young Women Refugees](#), the project was implemented in Jordan with support from EMPHNET where a culturally acceptable package was developed to address the needs of Syrian women and adolescent girl refugees living in the country. This SRH package is expected to enrich the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for SRH in humanitarian crisis settings among adolescent girls and young women.

In another implementation research project, EMPHNET collaborated with the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Jordan to improve the health of women of reproductive age by introducing a sustainable intervention, **a harmonized Reproductive Health Registry (hRHR)** that will influence the access and use of reproductive health data to support program planning, policy development and decision making at all levels of the health system. Created initially for Al Mafraq governorate, the hRHR allowed personalized care information throughout pregnancy and childbirth to be easily accessed during antenatal visits, labor, delivery, and postnatal visits, thereby improving care provision. The project is intended by the MOH to be rolled out to include more governorates in Jordan.

In another multi-country implementation of technology in support of public health services, EMPHNET and the American University of Beirut are **using mobile phone technology, as well as enhanced counselling, to improve family planning (FP) among Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan and Lebanon.** The overall goal of this project is to develop, implement, and evaluate contextualized, culturally sensitive, data-driven, and evidence-based strategies to encourage the adoption of quality FP services. The project aims at developing and evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of an intervention aimed to encourage contraceptive use through high-quality, effective couples counseling and the use of digital technologies.

Operational Research

For Better Surveillance for TB, HIV, STD Programs

Jordan’s Ministry of Health, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and EMPHNET implemented operational research studies to promote informed decision-making for better programming and policies about TB, HIV, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). These studies were implemented in Amman, Irbid, Mafrqa, and Zarqa to understand the knowledge, attitude, perception, satisfaction, and practices of TB and HIV in the country and to assess the surveillance systems for these diseases. The studies recommended evidence-based results for interventions whereby Jordan’s efforts can be directed to improve the National TB Program and KAP among care providers, patients with TB, and local communities. The studies also provided evidence-based results for interventions to enhance HIV/AIDS-related KAP and to develop surveillance, healthcare providers’ capacities, and screening, diagnosis, and management of HIV/AIDS.

For Improved Response to COVID-19

EMPHNET launched the EMR Operational Research Studies Mini-grants opportunity, targeting FETP residents and graduates and other public health professionals in priority countries. The main aim is to build a knowledge base intended at improving national health systems in general with a focus on Expanded Programs on Immunization and COVID-19 response. Three operational study proposals received for this grant have been accepted and are being implemented with assistance from EMPHNET. Currently implemented studies from this mini-grant opportunity explore: (1) PPE-related SARS-COV 2 infections among healthcare workers in isolation wards of major hospitals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (2) A multisectoral approach to the pandemic in Sudan and (3) Impact of COVID-19 in Somalia from the perspective of health professionals and displaced populations.



The Experts

Professor Omar Elahmer

A medical laboratory scientist from Libya with over four decades of experience focused on medical microbiology, immunology, and virology.



Professor Elahmer holds a Ph.D. in Medical Microbiology from Edinburgh University where he also completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Department of Infection and Immunity. Professor Elahmer studied for his undergraduate degree in Libya and earned a BSc in Medical Laboratory Technology from the Higher Institute of Technology.

In Libya, he is a leading figure in medical laboratory education. He has been serving as a professor of medical technology at Tripoli University for ten years, having taught there for over twenty years. Off-campus, he has been active in facilitating training workshops for national, regional, and international audiences. He regularly gives training in biorisk management and laboratory quality management, while also taking part as a facilitator of courses focused on emergency response planning, early warning alert and response, health information systems, chemical security programs, and health security systems strengthening.

His academic career has been enriched with success in practical laboratory work that culminated in his appointment as the Director of Public Health Laboratories Directorate at National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and Head of Public Health Reference Laboratory his role was to ensure that PHRL capabilities to detect infectious agents in events of pandemic and outbreaks according to International Health Regulations (IHR) requirement. Professor Elahmer's laboratory experience is focused on medical microbiology, virology, immunology, and molecular biology. He is skilled in various diagnostic techniques: Immunofluorescence techniques, Flow cytometry, Tissue culture, Virus isolation, Haemagglutination inhibition, Immunodiagnosis of different viral infections, HCV Genotyping, Rotavirus Genotyping, Molecular biology, Host cell receptor detections, and Pulse Field Gel Electrophoresis.

Professor Elahmer also serves as member of several national committees. Internationally, he is a member of the American Society for Microbiology and the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases. He is also the IHR National Focal point for Libya. In this capacity he supervised all the process to conduct the Joint External Evaluation (JEE) which is one of the instruments used for voluntary monitoring and evaluation of IHR capacities following the development of the guidance for conducting a JEE in countries in crisis situation leading to development of a national action plan for health security (NAPHS) which is been conducted by national expertise with the external team from the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO).

Professor Elahmer shared his contributions in the field through various means. He co-authored over 40 papers what have been published as articles in virology journals, and papers presented at conferences. He also took part in conferences and meetings organized at the local, regional, and international levels.

With EMPHNET, Professor Elahmer's contributions have been important in projects pertinent to biomedical waste management. In fact, recently he was awarded a best poster award for a study based on an EMPHNET project titled *Biorisk Management to strengthening laboratory Capacity for Sample Management and Inventory: A north Africa regional Collaboration* at the Third Scientific Conference on Acute Respiratory Infections in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

With his wealth of experience and knowledge, Professor Elahmer will continue to contribute to medical laboratory science in Libya, the region, and the globe at large.



Project Updates

Iraq Disseminates Mass Gathering Policy Briefs to Stakeholders Focusing on ‘Lessons Learned’ from the Arba’een Mass Gathering

EMPHNET, in collaboration with the US Department of State’s International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction ISN/CTR Iraq Program, supported the development of three Policy Briefs focusing on mass gathering areas related to chemical and biological threats and the adoption of threat mitigation best practices during the Arba’een MG. Attendees reviewed and discussed the following policy briefs:

- **Policy Brief (1): Institutionalization of real-time surveillance during the Arba’een mass gatherings in Iraq and its integration into the national system.**
- **Policy Brief (2): Promoting multi-sectoral collaboration among relevant governmental and non-governmental sectors for a concerted and coordinated effort to respond to potential threats.**
- **Policy Brief (3): Develop and operationalize a mass gathering emergency plan to prepare for, detect, and respond to potential chemical, biological, or radiological threats/casualties posed by WMDs**

Focused Efforts to Strengthen Rapid Response Teams in Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan

EMPHNET, in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), utilizing a systematic approach to building emergency response capacity, supported these countries to establish Rapid Response Teams’ (RRT) management programs at the national level. This included a rapid response management training and development of RRT Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure sustainable and effective RRT program operationalization.

Intervention to Increase Access and Demand for COVID-19 Vaccines in Pakistan

EMPHNET supported an assessment to determine the factors affecting demand for COVID-19 and routine immunization to address the issue of vaccine hesitancy. The assessment detailed the social and behavioral factors that affect the acceptability and under-vaccination of COVID-19 and other Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) vaccines among high-priority populations in the EMR. In Pakistan, ideation workshops were conducted in four provinces and a national workshop in the Federal capital to share assessment results and discuss priority areas that require attention to increase vaccine demand.

Pakistan Uses Routine Immunization Microplanning to Expand Coverage in Remote Provinces

EMPHNET has been supporting Pakistan in achieving increased and equitable immunization coverage through improved Routine Immunization (RI) [microplanning](#). In continuation of this support, the Department of Health Services at Baluchistan and EMPHNET are working to enable district officers to plan comprehensively for immunization services by applying suitable strategies, and to have the skills to build the frontline workers' capacity to plan for immunization service in their catchment areas.



Somalia Invests in Routine Immunization Microplanning to Expand Vaccine Coverage

EMPHNET has been supporting the Ministry in its focus on developing routine microplanning. This support focuses on strengthening the knowledge and skill of vaccination workers on strategies to deliver immunization services. A Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop on microplanning for routine immunization was conducted between January 15 and 19, 2023 for 25 EPI staff from the state level. The main topics discussed during the workshop were specific to microplanning at the local management level, plan development, supply calculation, management plan, and planning for immunization sessions among other topics related to routine immunization activities.



Afghanistan Proposes Incentivization Mechanism to Strengthen Immunization Services

To address challenges facing the national immunization programs, the Ministry of Public Health, with support from EMPHNET, proposed an incentivization mechanism to improve the quality of immunization services and increase coverage at the grassroots level in targeted provinces. The incentivization mechanism involves offering performance-based incentives, such as money or material goods, to immunization frontline workers, including vaccinators and provincial supervisors, who achieve predetermined performance targets. EMPHNET, in close coordination with the Ministry and the National Expanded Program on Immunization (NEPI), developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and implementation guidelines for the incentivization process. To ensure the incentivization mechanism is effectively implemented, EMPHNET and the NEPI staff organized a National Incentivization Workshop for EPI managers and supervisors of 34 provinces in Afghanistan.



With Partners



EMPHNET and Africa CDC Explore New Collaborations for Positive Change

EMPHNET welcomed a high-level delegation from Africa CDC for a visit focused on strengthening the two parties' already established partnership and finding new avenues for collaboration using shared strengths, expertise, and knowledge. Discussions centered on collaborations in several areas including workforce development, public health programs, enhancing public health laboratory performance, and emergency preparedness and response in the African continent.



EMPHNET and US CDC Collaborate to Strengthen Immunization Programs in the EMR

To discuss a five-year cooperative agreement with the US CDC on building the capacity of national immunization programs in the EMR, a team from the CDC's Polio Eradication Branch at the Global Immunization Division visited EMPHNET's headquarters.



International Academy of Public Health Partners with Cheikh Khalifa Ibn Zaid Foundation to Enhance Training Services at Mohammad VI University of Sciences and Health

EMPHNET’s academic arm, the International Academy of Public Health, signed an agreement with Cheikh Khalifa Ibn Zaid Foundation of Morocco’s Mohammad VI University of Sciences and Health to have joint programs with a view to enhancing performance, increasing the effectiveness of training courses and improving the educational process.



New EMPHNET Profile Published

ANNOUNCEMENT

In an updated organizational document, EMPHNET is providing an overview of its leading support for better health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and beyond for over a decade in advancing applied epidemiology, supporting public health programs, advancing public health research, and empowering communication and networking for improved public health practice while collaborating with stakeholders across the public health system including ministries of health, public health agencies, relevant ministries, universities, community organizations, research institutes, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, UN agencies, among others.



[Read More](#)

GHD|EMPHNET: Working Together for Better Health

The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) is a regional network that focuses on strengthening public health systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and beyond. EMPHNET works in partnership with ministries of health, non-government organizations, international agencies, private sector, and relevant institutions from the region and the globe to promote public health and applied epidemiology. To advance the work of EMPHNET, Global Health Development (GHD) was initiated to build coordination mechanisms with partners and collaborators. Together, GHD|EMPHNET is dedicated to serving the region by supporting efforts to promote public health policies, strategic planning, sustainable financing, resource mobilization, public health programs, and other related areas.

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