Editorial

Predicting the Future; Embedding Evaluation in Public Health Programs

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Did the WHO slogan, “Health for All by the year 2000,” proves to be true for Pakistan? At the WHO/Unicef conference in Alma-Ata in 1978 the concept of health for all was accepted as a motivational vision for the world. Out of a list of targets some of them were; “Infant Mortality Rate of 30 per 1000 live births,” “Reduction of maternal mortality by about 50%,” “100% of deliveries attended by specialized personnel,” and “At least 5% of the gross national product is spent on health.” Would we be able to achieve the targets as set out by UN Millennium Development Goals. Some of these Millennium development targets related to Public Health are; “Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate,” “Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio,” “Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS,” “Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases,” “Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation,” and “By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.”

A number of Interventions based program are being run by the Federal Government with implementation arms at the district and provincial levels. Disease specific program include program on Tuberculosis, Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Leprosy, Hepatitis, Blindness and Non-communicable diseases. Other Program include Neonatal, Maternal and Child health, National EPI program, National program for Primary health care and family planning, National Nutrition program and National Mental Health programme.

A vital question that comes in the minds of Public Health personnel is whether we would be able to meet the National and International targets in relation to these Public Health program? A famous saying by one of the prominent management guru; Peter F. Drucker; “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” No doubt the importance of project planning and implementation cannot be undermined, success of these program cannot be predicted unless evaluation strategies are embedded within these program. Setting realistic targets, devising log framework for each objective (Input; activities; output, intermediate outcomes; definite outcomes), setting milestones (date for achieving output or outcome) and devising measurable indicators is the only way to realize these targets and predict the future.
“Evaluation in the Public Health context has been defined as systematic investigation of the merit (quality), worth (cost-effectiveness), or significance (importance) of a Public health program or action.” Evaluation, when embedded or integrated within routine program operations, is said to be informal. It involves all program staff and stakeholders, not just evaluation experts. The importance of this ongoing evaluation is that it helps to refine the program operations. On the other hand, formal periodic evaluation of public health programs which employ evaluation procedures and conducted by evaluation experts are explicit. They may result in drastic changes in the program direction or change the fate of the program altogether. Program evaluation whether formal or informal must be thoroughly discussed with the stakeholders and then integrated with the program from the very beginning. As a result all the stakeholders would be aware what would be the evaluation criteria for the success of the program.

Table. Steps in evaluation practice and standards for effective evaluation.

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<th>Steps in Evaluation Practice</th>
<th>Standards for Effective Evaluation</th>
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<td>1. <strong>Engage stakeholders:</strong> Those persons involved (sponsors, collaborators, funding officials, administrators, managers, staff) in or affected by the program (clients, family members, neighborhood organizations, academic institutions, elected officials, advocacy groups, skeptics, opponents, professional associations) and primary users of the evaluation.</td>
<td><strong>Utility:</strong> Serve the information needs of intended users.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Describe the program:</strong> Need, expected effects, activities, resources, stage, context, logic model.</td>
<td><strong>Feasibility:</strong> Be realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and frugal.</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Focus the evaluation design:</strong> Purpose, users, uses, questions, methods, agreements.</td>
<td><strong>Propriety:</strong> Behave legally, ethically, and with regard for the welfare of those involved and those affected.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Gather credible evidence:</strong> Indicators, sources, quality, quantity, logistics.</td>
<td><strong>Accuracy:</strong> Reveal and convey technically accurate information.</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Justify conclusions:</strong> Standards, analysis/synthesis, interpretation, judgment, recommendations.</td>
<td><strong>Ensure use and share lessons learned:</strong> Design, preparation, feedback, follow-up, and dissemination.</td>
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Effective program evaluation is a systematic way to improve and account for public health actions by involving procedures that are useful, feasible, ethical, and accurate. Program Evaluation framework is a tool designed to summarize and organize the
essential elements of program evaluation. The framework comprises steps in evaluation practice and standards for effective evaluation (Table). These six steps of evaluation starting with engaging the stakeholders, will facilitate an understanding of a program's context (e.g., the program's history, setting, and organization) and will improve how most evaluations are conceived and conducted. The second element of the framework is a set of standards for assessing the quality of evaluation activities, organized into the following four groups: Standard 1: utility, Standard 2: feasibility, Standard 3: propriety and Standard 4: accuracy. These standards will answer the question, “Will this evaluation be effective.” It is pertinent to point out here that Program evaluation must be distinguished from personnel evaluation, which operates under different standards. Evaluation is the only way to ensure successful implementation of the public health programs, improving ongoing programs, directing changes in allocation of manpower and resources, ensuring milestones are met and above all focuses attention on the common purpose of public health programs; whether the magnitude of investment matches the tasks to be accomplished.

REFERENCES

7. MMWR. Framework for program evaluation in public health. 1999/48(RR11);1-40