# REPORT SUMMARY Humanitarian health research: Operational challenges, impacts and mitigation strategies

## BACKGROUND: ABOUT THIS REPORT

Humanitarian health research funding opportunities have increased in recent years, and with this a general consensus that implementing health research studies in humanitarian contexts can be operationally complex. Generating and sharing learning from the growing experience of our R2HC funded research teams carrying out humanitarian health research can help to maximise the potential and impact of future studies in similar contexts.

Our previous report, published in 2017, aimed to qualitatively illustrate the breadth of operational challenges faced by R2HC grantees.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, to our knowledge, there are currently no published reports that describe these challenges, nor their impacts or solutions, quantitatively. Certainly, none that do so for a large and diverse group of research studies covering a wide range of humanitarian health topics.

Our portfolio of studies provides a unique opportunity to understand the breadth of these operational challenges and how they are addressed in diverse humanitarian contexts. We reviewed study progress reports submitted to the R2HC between 2014 and 2018, then conducted a thematic analysis where we identified and quantified key themes relating to challenges of conducting humanitarian health research, their impacts and solutions. We also extracted themes about enabling factors that positively influenced study implementation.

Our aim is to provide current and future study teams an understanding of common potential risks when planning and implementing research and to inform how teams and study activities could be structured to address challenges as they arise. Therefore, this report aims to contribute towards filling this gap in three ways:

1. To quantify common operational challenges described by our grantees; this includes quantifying both the impact of these challenges and how they were addressed
2. To describe which factors positively impact the ability of research teams to address risks and challenges as they arise,
3. To synthesise knowledge of both positive and negative operational factors into recommendations for teams designing future studies in similar contexts.

*This Review was commissioned by Elrha’s R2HC Programme and conducted by Maysoon Dahab.*

*Ethics for this study was provided by the King’s College London ethics board.*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE REPORT

* + - * There are a high number and broad range of operational challenges faced by our funded studies (111 reports from 31 studies identified 136 unique challenges). These challenges can be grouped into four broad themes: ***study components, setting, partnerships, community/study population.***
* For each challenge the mitigation strategies identified were relatively limited. Whilst some solutions are more commonly used to address key challenges than others, none of these was found to be a one size fits all solution for any of the challenges identified.
* Some factors are identified that positively influence a team’s ability to predict threats and/or address them successfully. These include fostering an equitable engagement between partners; developing a clear communication plan; ensuring clarity around roles and responsibilities within the study team.
* Recommendations are made to help mitigate operational challenges. For the study planning stages these include: developing risk preparedness and communication plans; dedicating time for piloting and pre-testing study tools and procedures; developing plans for engagement with stakeholders and affected communities.
* For the study implementation stages these include: regularly updating risk preparedness and communication plans; continuing engagement with stakeholders and communities; being transparent about the impact that required changes will have to the study on the original research objectives.

## KEY Recommendations FOR RESEARCHers FROM THE REPORT

## **Study planning stages**

* Develop a risk preparedness plan that takes into account common challenges
* Develop a clear communication plan that defines how partners working in different countries and sites would stay informed about study progress, identify problems and discuss solutions, all in real-time. This should include:
  + Plans to bring new partners and/or staff up to speed
  + Back up plans when internet services are weak.
* Dedicate appropriate time to engage partners meaningfully, and to foster a strong sense of ownership of study activities and a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.
* Dedicate time for piloting and pre-testing study tools and procedures, as well as management and logistical processes.
* Map stakeholder and communities affected by the study and plan engagement sessions throughout the study cycle.

## **Study implementation stages**

* Update risk and communication plans appropriately
* Continue to engage stakeholders and update the communities’ involved
* In challenging times, the study design and/or procedures may need to be simplified to prioritise the most essential study activities. Where this is the case, it is essential that teams be transparent about the effect of these changes on the study findings, including the introduction of any additional biases.

1. Dahab, M. (2017), Operational Challenges of implementing health research in humanitarian settings. Cardiff, UK: Elrha [↑](#footnote-ref-1)