

COUNTDOWN

Calling time on Neglected Tropical Diseases

“Never stop building our capacity”: Findings about capacity strengthening from an international, interdisciplinary research programme

The COUNTDOWN research consortium, led by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), conducted multidisciplinary research on neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) from 2015-2021. With institutional partners in Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria, the COUNTDOWN consortium members include senior-, mid- and junior-level researchers, with NTD program managers, health care providers, and policy makers among them. The programme’s goal- to produce evidence on scalable, sustainable, cost-effective solutions to control and eliminate the most common NTDs- united researchers from different backgrounds. Through experiences collaborating and drawing on the strengths of its members, COUNTDOWN developed capacity strengthening approaches that helped staff at all levels to grow their knowledge, skills and abilities related to research.

In Spring 2021 COUNTDOWN conducted an assessment among all consortium members to draw out lessons learned as well as best practices and areas for improvement in capacity strengthening. Individual programme members all reported that they had grown in several areas, and most people had increased their research outputs and developed professionally during COUNTDOWN. In dialogue sessions, individuals and teams described new skillsets that they learned and are able to pass on to others, especially new research methods, data analysis skills, and research uptake skills like stakeholder engagement and writing papers, blog posts, and policy briefs.

Background

COUNTDOWN research offered unique opportunities for capacity strengthening by embedding studies within NTD programmes to examine the implementation of new approaches. The project conducted ground-breaking social science research on the effects of NTDs on vulnerable populations using participatory research methods that had rarely been used in NTD research before. To accomplish its goals, COUNTDOWN engaged high level programme managers and academic partners, ensuring that research was always coordinated with national NTD programmes and designed to meet their evidence needs. With research uptake a high priority from the beginning, teams were creative in engaging local news media, community leaders, social media and scientific communities. Some of the intentional capacity strengthening methods the programme undertook include:

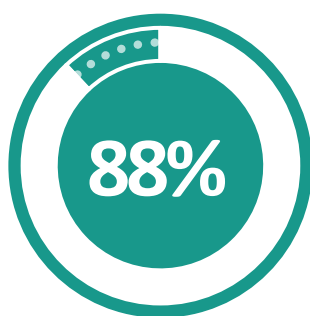
- COUNTDOWN encouraged and mentored its members to write about their research using multiple channels and forms of communication, such as blog posts, case studies, research briefs, presentations and posters at the programme’s annual meeting, in addition to conference participation and manuscript writing.
- Early on, the programme embraced the possibilities of reaching a wide audience through social media, which many members had not previously used for communicating study updates or scientific findings. Twitter accounts for each country and the project as a whole were very active, and a series of webinars was given for staff to learn how to share information effectively online. Social media was a key means of disseminating updates from the field and informing national and global stakeholders when blog posts, case studies, and other communications products were released.
- Participatory research methods including participatory action research, and techniques like transect walks and photovoice, were new to many of COUNTDOWN’s staff as well as the communities and NTD programs that became involved.
- New methods of data collection and analysis necessitated training and mentorship for researchers to gain proficiency.
- COUNTDOWN designed and offered trainings, webinars, and a research fellowship where junior and mid-level researchers were invited to design, propose, and carry out their own research.

Capacity Strengthening Assessment Methodology

COUNTDOWN conducted a cross-sectional mixed-methods capacity strengthening assessment to document individual and institutional capacity strengthening achievements. A quantitative survey about individual capacity strengthening was designed, programmed using Kobo Toolbox software, and distributed to active COUNTDOWN staff in England, Liberia and Nigeria via an online link in November 2020. Domains included outputs produced, in-person and online capacity strengthening opportunities that people benefitted from, and a self-assessment of research capacities, research skills that were strengthened during COUNTDOWN, and research skills that participants would like to further strengthen. Following the individual capacity strengthening survey, a series of group dialogue sessions was held in January and February 2021 using Zoom videoconferencing software. The questions discussed were informed by responses to the individual capacity strengthening survey. In the group dialogues, teams were led in a discussion about their experiences of capacity strengthening through COUNTDOWN, what worked well and what could be improved.

Individual Assessment Results

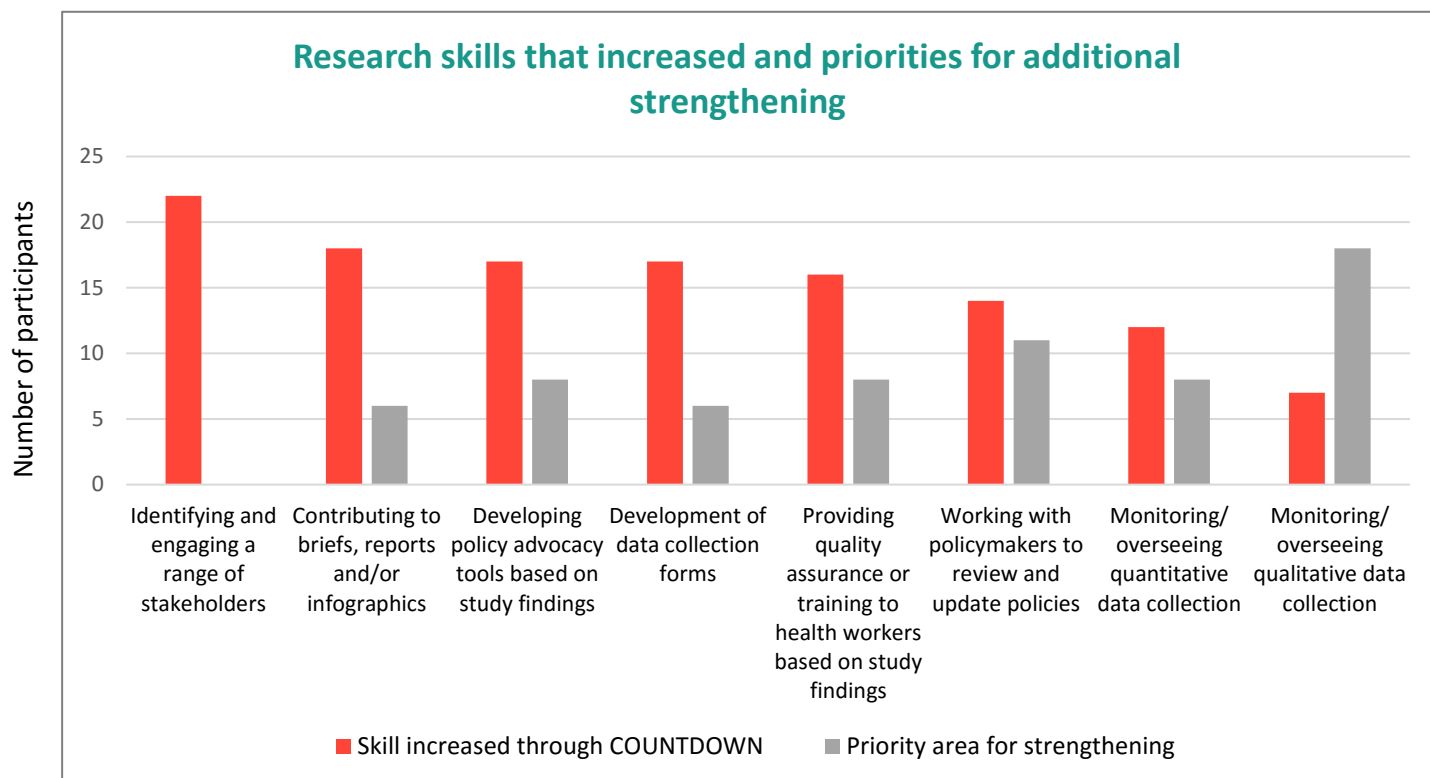
- 25 staff participated in the online individual assessment
- On average, participants had 7.6 years of professional experience, with a range of 1-25 years



Participants say their research skills and their career progressed

"I am not where I was in research proficiency, especially applying best international standards in research. I know there were challenging times, but the immense support from experienced colleagues kept me afloat!"

-anonymous survey response



22 participants from Liberia, Nigeria, and the UK agreed that their both their research skills and their career developed through COUNTDOWN



Key Outcomes

The capacity assessment showed that offering a variety of capacity strengthening opportunities and being responsive to the needs of research consortium members allowed the **COUNTDOWN** programme to meaningfully strengthen skills and advance the careers of its members. Opportunities for learning, co-developing products, and applying skills enabled individuals to progress and thrive in their careers and broaden their scope. Both less-experienced and more-experienced researchers representing all the consortium partners described this growth. Further, the application of expanded skills and approaches while working on embedded research with stakeholders from national NTD programmes and communities affected by NTDs helped **COUNTDOWN** influence programmatic improvements, a key research outcome. Participants in the capacity assessment felt that they had exchanged knowledge and skills with other consortium members to everyone's benefit.

Adapting capacity building during a global pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic required **COUNTDOWN**, like all global research programmes, to dramatically change approaches to capacity strengthening. In-person trainings, mentorship, and teamwork had to be moved to online platforms. **COUNTDOWN** adapted by quickly developing more online opportunities. Consortium members shared their experiences on Twitter, a series of digital engagement trainings was held via Zoom and the recordings shared, and intensive trainings on analysis software were re-worked to be delivered online over several days with lots of time built in for practice and reflection. A fellowship programme was also launched to give early-career researchers within the consortium a funded opportunity for conducting some research of their own, with many of the projects studying the effects of the pandemic on NTD service delivery or programmes.

Research Uptake

Moving from research to practice is an area where participants highlighted remarkable achievement, such as NTD programme implementers adapting their annual planning procedures and introducing new training for health workers, for example. Interestingly, the use or uptake of research findings was a domain where assessment participants reported gaining experience and also wanted to continue strengthening capacities. The largest increases in outputs were for research translation products like blog posts, case studies and policy briefs, and tools for implementers. Skills that researchers most often said they increased included identifying stakeholders, engaging stakeholders in the design and dissemination phases, presenting study findings, and anticipating how results could change policy or programmes. The continued interest in strengthening this area may reflect the stage of the programme, as most research is nearly completed.

Key Recommendations

- ✓ Capacity strengthening needs vary in a large research consortium; therefore, a variety of capacity strengthening opportunities work best, including formal trainings, webinars, and attendance at conferences and workshops as well as through encouraging informal mentoring and collaboration.
- ✓ Capacity strengthening is a continuous process over time, involving opportunities for formal learning, collaboration, and practice or application. Researchers at all levels and representing all partner organizations can gain from one another's experiences.
- ✓ Remote capacity strengthening can be done well when there is time for practice built into the schedule, and multiple communications channels are used to enable everyone to participate. Complex skills like using research software for analysis take multiple sessions over days or weeks.
- ✓ Using a questionnaire to assess research skills and capacity strengthening priorities is helpful for planning purposes and capturing progress. Research consortiums should consider doing this at the beginning to be able to measure changes over time. Complementing this with a qualitative component is helpful for exploring questionnaire results in greater depth and providing participants an alternative channel for sharing their experiences and reflections.