

OPERATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT: A CASE OF THE EAST AFRICA PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORIES NETWORKING PROJECT

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Outline

- Introduction/ Rationale
- Methods
- Experiences/challenges
- Lessons learnt
- Conclusion/Recommendations
- Acknowledgments



Introduction

- Effective project management revolves around a cycle of planning, implementation, coordination, constant evaluation, and report writing for all the activities.
- Logistics seem simple and straight forward, often the role it plays in scientific undertakings is overlooked. Recent studies indicate that logistics-related activities impact significantly on research undertakings.
- It is usually assumed that research starts and ends in the laboratory, overlooking the fact that for research activities to be successful, requires exceptional planning and monitoring to ensure that the resources are available as per the approved work-plan.
- The aim was to document the project management experiences, challenges and lessons learnt in coordination and implementation of EAPHLNP-Operational Research activities in cross-border study sites in Kenya.

Methods -1

- This was a regional project in which Kenya was give a mandate to coordinate and implement the operational research component of the EAPHLNP.
- KEMRI established an OR Secretariat to coordinate the project activities in Kenya as well as provide leadership to the region.
- The KEMRI project Secretariat involved an administrator whose role was;
 - 1) Participation in preparation of annual work plans and budgets
 - 2) Planning / organizing meetings and study site visits
 - 3) Communication with stakeholders
 - 4) Coordinating local and regional meetings
 - 5) Ensuring that procurement of materials for meetings and site visits was done on time
 - 6) Linking KEMRI research team with study site hospital administration and research teams in the various counties
 - 7) Participation in scientific report writing and documentation of meeting proceeding

Method - 2

- Project activities control mechanism involved use of dairies, ledger books, work plan charts and schedules which were essential in capturing, managing and monitoring the progress of the project activities.
- All this entailed determination of the what, when, who, why and how it was to be done.



Experiences

- Project Management critical stages included; managing the group dynamics during the forming, storming, and norming. This was achieved through soft skills such as diplomacy, persuasion and negotiation.
- Timely and constant prioritization of scheduled project activities was an essential component in achieving project goals.
- Constant communication with study sites personnel and regional partners was critical in ensuring that all parties were updated on the calendar of the OR activities.
- Writing Scientific reports and meeting proceedings was demanding and time consuming.

Key challenges

- Fluctuation of reimbursement of funds resulted into rescheduling of certain project activities at very short notice.
- Group dynamics and conflicts at the OR Secretariat and study sites necessitated impromptu meetings of the parties involved.
- Trained study site staff transfers and rotations without proper handing-over were frequent and threatened to stall the OR Project activities. This necessitated fresh trainings / reorientations.
- Transport challenges to the hard-to-reach areas at times caused postponement/rescheduling of site visit.
- Some members of the research teams at times fell ill e.g food poisoning, malaria/dengue fever and during site visits hence requiring emergency care.

Lessons Learnt

- Interpersonal skills (influence-without-authority) were essential at all stages of the project (e.g. Olololunga - Narok, & Nyahururu).
- Timely and constant communication with study sites coordinators and prioritization of scheduled project activities was critical in ensuring all parties were kept informed on the progress of the OR activities.
- The use of dairies and schedules provided the necessary feedback at administrative level on project performance and at research level by providing information in user-friendly formats.
- Having a control mechanism such a ledger books, workplan charts and schedules were essential in monitoring the progress of the project

Conclusion / Recommendation

- Successful project management of the OR Project required an administrator on a full time basis to coordinate the utilization of the available resources such as capital, human and time.
- This will enhance best practice in coordination of projects especially in surveillance activities.



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