

Scaling up inclusion of urban poor in healthcare through media involvement in urban health research: reflections from four low- and middle-income countries under the CHORUS Urban Health Consortium



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Background

Urban health is fast becoming topical in global health due to rising inequities caused by the growth and expansion of urban slums, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Urban slums have become home to a significant fraction of the urban population and are exposed to high disease burdens due to living arrangements, a dearth of health infrastructure, and being under-served by the government. To address these inequities and forge inclusion for slum residents, the six-year Community-led Responsive and Effective Health System (CHORUS) Consortium has found an effective use of the media in communicating urban health research evidence to stimulate public advocacy and policy interest. This study documents our processes and outcomes.

Method

In 2023, media engagement activities – workshops, training sessions, sensitization meetings and boot camps were conducted in Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, and Nigeria, strategically designed and implemented by CHORUS partner institutions. In the four countries, 100 journalists were engaged. These events aimed at stimulating media understanding, reporting, and use of urban health research for media reports. Strategic communication plans were discussed for policy audiences and the public, as well as tracking mechanisms of success. The research uptake leads across the four countries documented the progress and challenges in reflexive notes, which were discussed intermittently, coded, thematized and interpreted.

Result

- Urban health issues received minimal attention in the reporting trends across Bangladesh, Nepal, Ghana, and Nigeria.
- Journalists in the four countries primarily focused on patients, diseases, the functioning of facilities, and the health workforce, usually in well-off urban places.
- The concept of urban health and the health inequities faced by urban slums were not adequately prioritised by the media actors.
- The interest of the media actors in the uptake of research evidence were weak, as they reported that research articles were too academic-centred and not accessible due to technicalities, especially in the language used and subscription restrictions.
- These challenges were addressed during and after the formal events that led to (a) the formation of a media-research network for easy communication between urban health researchers and the media (b) the publication of at least 20 news articles on urban health on various media platforms (c) publication of evidence-based journal article on urban health and (d) increased interest and attendance of journalists in urban health symposiums, webinars, and seminars particularly those organized by CHORUS.



Workshop on effective use of the media to promote urban health for better outcomes in Ghana



Journalists take photo with placard with urban health messages during Nepal workshop.



Boot camp between researchers and media persons in Nigeria.



Workshop on media's role on health messages dissemination in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Journalists perceived health reporting as relatively more complex than other beats. Journalists' news concentration was minimal on urban health topics due to other priorities within health. Limited capacity to interpret scientific terms and complex language was found as a major gap for the journalists. Capacity strengthening and follow-up engagement activities in each country such as providing the journalists with news in comprehensible language, and increased collaboration between journalists and research organizations had potential for increased coverage of urban health topics. Media engagement initiatives are expected to further transfer knowledge to the public and inform health systems in respective countries. Our findings suggest that the media holds significant power to shape public opinions and policy actions for pro-poor action in health.