

Empowering Communities through University Partnerships in Public Health: Comparing Approaches and Perspectives from Nepal and the Philippines

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This report provides a comparative perspective on the findings, methods and outcomes of the Medical Research Council-funded Public Health Intervention Development (PHIND) project in Nepal and the Philippines (from March 2023 to August 2024). It should be read in conjunction with the separate country research reports and the literature review. It incorporates reflections from informal interviews with the project team and a comparative analysis of country-specific findings.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| CBR | Community-Based Research |
| CERID | Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development, Tribhuvan University |
| CEU | Community-University Engagement |
| CLC | Community Learning Centre |
| CORTH | Centre for Cultures of Reproduction, Technologies and Health, University of Sussex |
| CURA | Community -University Research Alliances |
| CURP | Community University Research Partnerships |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| FMS | Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, University of Santo Tomas |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| IoM | Institute of Medicine, TU |
| MBBS | Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| PAR | Participatory Action Research |
| PE | Patient Engagement (PE) |
| PHIND | Public Health Intervention Development, UK Medical Research Council funding stream |
| PI | Principal Investigator |
| PPI | Patient and Public Involvement |
| RA | Research Assistant |
| RCSSED | Research Centre for Social Sciences and Education, University of Santo Tomas |
| SU | University of Sussex |
| TU | Tribhuvan University |
| UST | University of Santo Tomas |





Glossary

Barangay

Filipino word for the smallest government unit that usually oversees the operations of a local community but is often referred to also as the community

Biomedicine

allopathic or Western medicine

Dalit and Brahmin

lower and higher caste groups in Nepal

Magar

indigenous ethnic group in Nepal

Palikas

Nepali word for municipalities

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

is a qualitative research methodology in which researchers and communities collaborate to investigate social issues and take action towards social change.

Photovoice

a participatory photography method

Ulat sa barangay

general assembly or community meeting in which the UST university teachers and students consult, treat and give medicines to community members

Vlog

a social media account where someone regularly posts short videos

Note: all quotations are extracts from the Nepal and Philippines research reports, apart from those which come from interviews with named individual team members.



Figure 1: Team members listening to doctor from UST in Manila fieldsite.

Executive Summary

Overview of the Project

In Nepal and the Philippines, communities have had little voice in public health initiatives. Health providers often take a top-down approach, telling families about how they can live more healthy lives and ignoring their everyday realities. Effective health promotion is however dependent on approaches that recognise local health knowledge and beliefs and build on existing community resources. With their key role in educating future public health workers, universities can contribute directly to transforming attitudes towards marginalised communities.

Bringing together two institutes of medicine - at Tribhuvan University (TU) in Nepal and University of Santo Tomas (UST) in the Philippines - this project aims to contribute understanding of the range, scope and perceptions of community-based learning in public health courses. The Medical Research Council PHIND funding scheme



Fig 3: View over the Gandaki Province, Nepal
Credits: Sushan Acharya

system of medicine, dating from 5000 years ago, is now being professionalised through degree-level programmes.

The partner medical institutions offered a valuable comparative dimension, given their different approaches to community-based learning in public health. Whereas Tribhuvan University focuses on what students can gain educationally, the University of Santo Tomas has an additional aim of offering service to the community. Public health and community medicine are essential elements within the UST medical degree, but are not stand-alone degree courses as in TU.

In each country, a field site was selected from areas where the university medical or public health students regularly or previously visited for community placements. UST students now work with partner communities in the heart of Manila in Sampaloc, which is very close to the university campus. Many of the residents are informal settlers, living in small rented rooms with several of their extended family and earning within or below the daily wage rate. In Nepal, Sahid-Lakhan

Rural Municipality in the middle hills was selected - around a day's road journey from Kathmandu. The majority Magar community here have their own language, culture and health practices related to Shamanism and herbal medicine.

The contrast between the urban (Philippines) and rural (Nepal) field sites emerged as significant, not only in terms of food and health practices observed, but in shaping the nature of community engagement by students in these communities. TU public health students were immersed intensively in a remote community for a thirty-day residential stay, whereas UST medical students were regularly visiting a community just next-door to their campus where the department was able to sustain a long-term relationship.

Methodology

The project was designed around five stages, informed by a participatory action research (PAR) cycle. This began with reconnaissance (investigating the current situation of community-based



health learning, within the universities and communities), moving to action/implementation, and concluded with evaluation (including final dissemination/development of this approach with stakeholders).

Interviews and focus group discussions were held with faculty and public health/medical students who had experienced community placements. Ethnographic research, involving participant observation and informal discussion in a range of community spaces and households, explored how people engaged with health knowledge and how they viewed university interactions. As the main actors involved in food preparation and production, women were positioned centrally in the research process, through a community-level intervention focused on nutrition. Through photovoice activities, they shared local food practices related to community health and co-developed ideas for future action with the team.

Comparative analysis took place throughout the project, including team visits to Nepal (April 2023) and the Philippines (April 2024), to learn from each other's context. An international hybrid conference was held at UST with over 3,000 participants being introduced to the project findings and approaches to community-university partnership. At local level, community members who had acted as co-researchers through the photovoice

activities also presented their analysis to government officials. The teams facilitated workshops with key stakeholders in the health sector at national and local levels, and with university faculty and students, to take forward the project findings in relation to curricula and more formalised partnership agreements.

Key Findings

Food and Spaces

In the urban community that UST partnered with, the main space for preparing and cooking food was not a kitchen. Rather, it was streetside and food carts, as most people relied on street vendors for daily meals. The differences between the urban setting of Manila, with poor quality housing and little space for cooking, contrasted with the intergenerational kitchen environment in rural Nepal. Here, women took charge of the cooking space and with this came knowledge and solidarity. When they presented at the municipal offices, this breaking out of the kitchen space, for the women to share their knowledge and have that recognised and valued was what the TU team saw as most empowering. The UST team's observation of the structural inequalities, including clean and safe spaces to cook, influenced their decision to

develop a longer-term partnership with this community.

Who is learning what from whom?

The project facilitated and captured learning and flows of knowledge on different levels – within the community, within the university and within the research team (including across cultures and disciplines). From the analysis of student and faculty interviews around the current public health curriculum, it appeared that knowledge was viewed as either ‘academic’ (belonging to the students and faculty) or as ‘everyday’ knowledge (belonging to the community). Whilst both parties were sharing this knowledge with each other to some extent through the conventional community placements – including through a survey – the static binaries of formal academic versus informal everyday knowledge prevented deeper collaboration. Through PAR, a concept of knowledge as co-constructed and owned by both community and university began to emerge, which had potential to reshape relationships between the community, researchers and university staff/students.

Responding to Change

It was clear that communities recognised major transformations taking place in their lives – whether through technologies, governance structures, migration or beliefs around health and food. In relation to the university public health curricula however, changes are just starting to take place after a long period of conducting community placements in a routinised way. In both



Fig 4: Local food and Refreshment
Halo-halo stall in Sampaloc, Manila

universities, the MRC project coincided with an opening up after the COVID-19 pandemic when community placements had had to be paused. This sense of change – whether welcomed or not (as in the case of the pandemic) – influenced how our project was implemented and received by the university departments and the communities.

both medical schools are already revising the modality of community placements to draw on these methods. Both country teams considered that photovoice was more effective in reshaping the university-community relationship than their previous approach of conducting a survey. They also plan to establish longer-term agreements with the communities to formalise their relationship and provide a framework for articulating expectations from both sides.

Project Outcomes

This PHIND project provided the partner universities with hands-on experience of facilitating a new kind of partnership with local communities through ethnographic and participatory research. We had not expected to embed these approaches in the public health curricula during the short timeframe of this project (18 months). However, the initial outcomes indicate that

An unexpected outcome of this project was the depth of interdisciplinary and intercultural learning facilitated – for both the educational faculty and public health researchers. A key impact is the greater visibility and importance attached to public health within both universities. The partner institutions valued the unusual opportunity to work together across disciplines within their universities and will be looking for possibilities to extend this collaboration in future.



Fig 5: PAR: Photovoice preparation with community in Sahid-Lkhan rural municipality

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