



THE ESSENTIALS OF ESSENCE

Revised – April 2020

Opening declaration

Members and partners of the **ESSENCE on Health Research**¹ initiative are committed to working together and bringing changes that will allow us to fulfil our objective to strengthen research capacity for health within effective, accountable and sustainable health research systems in low- and middle-income countries.

*This document has been developed and approved by the members of the **ESSENCE on Health Research** initiative and updated as necessary.*

¹ In its inception meeting, ESSENCE was agreed as the name of the initiative which stands for Enhancing Support for Strengthening the Effectiveness of National Capacity Efforts. Subsequently, members agreed to rename the initiative to **ESSENCE on Health Research**.

I. Introduction and background

Over the past several decades the amount, effectiveness and impact of funding for health research has been given increasing importance by all partners. The result has been a sharp rise in uncoordinated and fragmented funding of an increased number of initiatives and projects.

Recognizing that such fragmentation and lack of coordination wastes time and effort, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) agencies and others made a commitment to harmonize their funding strategies. They also encouraged recipient governments to use funds in a more focused and coherent manner. The Paris Declaration and subsequent Accra and Busan Plans of Action² have had mixed success but did try to require mechanisms to make funding more effective. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that with donor/funder help, many nations are gradually using development funding more effectively.

II. Harmonizing and aligning research for health funding

ESSENCE on Health Research is an initiative that aims to allow donors/funders to identify synergies, bring about coherence and increase the value of resources and actions for health research. It promotes better strategic cooperation between partners, particularly among bilateral development agencies, funding organizations, international health programmes, research councils and universities. Since its inception in 2008, ESSENCE has achieved remarkable progress in facilitating dialogue among all partners and piloting a number of innovative approaches to achieve its goals. This progress was acknowledged by a review conducted in 2015, which motivated continuation of this unique initiative.

Although proposed activities are based on solid experience, lessons from the field and research evidence, **ESSENCE on Health Research** is a strategy to increase impact rather than a theoretical tool to understand the factors that affect capacity strengthening.

² <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm>

III. Values and principles

ESSENCE on Health Research is guided by the principle that good health is an essential foundation for social and economic development. Knowledge is a crucial element of health improvement, and the attainment of self-reliance in research and development in low- and middle-income countries is key to sustainability. Scientific and development cooperation should aim to enable low- and middle-income countries to develop their own national health research agendas, educational systems and institutional frameworks, rather than have them rely on the purchase or import of technologies. Thus low- and middle-income countries will be self-sufficient in efforts to reduce the burden of disease and of health inequalities and to increase population well-being.

IV. Focus

ESSENCE on Health Research focuses on the following:

- Research for health that can be improved through coordinated efforts in research capacity strengthening
- Low- and middle-income countries, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa

V. Goal

The goal of **ESSENCE on Health Research** initiative is to increase the impact of support provided for research capacity strengthening for health in low- and middle-income countries, underpinned by the principle that research and utilization of knowledge that is generated lead to better health.

VI. Expected outcomes

- Enhanced policy dialogue between funders of research for health to align voices for strong advocacy.
- Better mechanisms and innovative platforms for alignment of funders (as well as between funders and research initiatives in low- and middle-income countries) with the aim of coordinating, harmonizing and aligning funding and activities with countries' agendas.
- Innovative approaches to harmonization and optimization of resources, including development of good practice publications that take into account successes and failures in order to promote the development and implementation of national strategies for research, and related country-based pilot models of collaboration between programmes.
- Improved methodologies, monitoring and evaluation indicators, strengthening of research management to track the input, process, outcome and impact of investment in capacity development at individual, institution, systems, research environment levels.

VII. Operationalization

An agreed upon biennial workplan is established for the initiative that aims to achieve the outcomes and take into account needs, interest of members and availability of resources.

VIII. Governance and financing

ESSENCE on Health Research members are advised by a Steering Committee (SC) to provide external technical input into the planning, implementation and review of the an bienial workplan and individual activities. This committee may also be involved in selecting and recommending projects or activities for funding, if requested.

The SC includes up to three ESSENCE members led by the ESSENCE Chair plus the Coordinator of the Secretariat who is based at the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases of the World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland (WHO/TDR). The term of the committee is two years and is eligible for reappointment for additional term of two years. Whenever possible, to maintain continuity of membership of the SC, the expiration of the initial terms of office of SC members will be staggered. Members can either nominate themselves or be nominated by other ESSENCE members for the committee. If there are many nominations, a vote will be required. Only one vote from each agency is permitted and will be counted. The members then select the ESSENCE Chair from the members of the SC. The term of ESSENCE Chair is two years and is eligible for reappointment for additional term of two years. The Coordinator of the Secretariat is a permanent member of the SC.

The SC ensures that ESSENCE operates through a broader group of funding partners who share the same objectives for health research capacity strengthening and who will work towards harmonization of support and alignment with countries' priorities.

There shall be one face-to-face business specific meeting of ESSENCE members per year hosted by one of its members and its organization is to be led by the SC.

There shall also be up to two meetings a year where ESSENCE members will meet face-to-face at the side of major events and conferences to which the majority of ESSENCE members attend. Representatives of other groups (such as universities, research institutes, ministries of health, NGOs, etc.) will be invited to participate in ESSENCE meetings. If two face-to-face meetings are not possible, a meeting using alternative virtual methods of all members will be organized.

When possible, all meetings of ESSENCE members will utilize alternative virtual methods to allow participation of more ESSENCE members who are not able to attend in person.

SC functions include:

All SC functions support those of ESSENCE membership and are implemented in support of the overall goals/outcomes set by the wider membership.

1. Providing strategic advice on the overall planning, budgeting, implementation and evaluation of the ESSENCE portfolio.
2. Overseeing, at a strategic level, the ESSENCE portfolio and supporting activities, and overseeing priority-setting of the initiative with regard to activities, products and strategic implementation.
3. Identifying opportunities for collaboration, harmonization and alignment based on each institution's strategy, including the involvement of low- and middle-income country scientists and institutions.
4. Developing models for various aspects of research capacity building and monitoring and evaluation, including indicators of input, process, impact and performance that can be used by different member organization/programmes.
5. Proposing joint capacity, research and development programmes, based on areas of interest, geographical focus or methodologies.
6. Discussing the relevance of initiatives proposed by ESSENCE with key stakeholders in low- and middle-income countries.
7. Identifying scientists and institutions to carry out training, research and development projects or other activities within the ESSENCE portfolio through open or invited calls for applications.
8. Facilitating *a posteriori* and value-for-money evaluations of products developed under the auspices of ESSENCE.
9. Preparing biennial workplans and progress reports of ESSENCE to be disseminated to ESSENCE members and beyond through broad communication means.
10. Holding meetings/teleconferences with a defined agenda once a month. The SC may invite *ad hoc* participants in order to discuss specific topics.

Responsibilities

The responsibilities of the Chairperson of the SC are:

- To chair the monthly meetings;
- To represent and speak on behalf of ESSENCE where required in meetings and events;
- To prepare, chair and moderate ESSENCE annual meetings; and
- To oversee the activities of the ESSENCE Secretariat.

The Chairperson can delegate any of these duties to other members of the SC.

The responsibilities of the **ESSENCE on Health Research initiative** Secretariat - existing TDR staff based in Geneva are:

- To assist the Chairperson and the SC in their duties;
- To propose initiatives and opportunities for ESSENCE leadership in line with the overall goal
- To develop and monitor implementation of the biennial workplan of ESSENCE
- To organize face-to-face and telephone ESSENCE meetings;
- To maintain communication and information flow among ESSENCE members;
- To prepare the agenda for annual meetings (following consultation with the Chairperson) and share the agenda with members for input before the meetings;
- To produce and circulate minutes of the annual meetings and teleconference calls, including action points, once agreed by the Chairperson;
- To circulate key points/issues that have been decided by the Chairperson and the SC for discussion among ESSENCE members;
- To compile ESSENCE members' responses and comments on issues, papers, etc. and circulate them to ESSENCE members; and
- To obtain annual timetables for health research-related meetings in order for the ESSENCE group to take advantage of these meetings.

IX. Financing of ESSENCE

ESSENCE will be funded by participant organizations through different mechanisms on a voluntary basis. The basic core funding is currently provided by Sida as a specific part of its support to TDR. TDR hosts the Secretariat with a dedicated staff member who serves as the ESSENCE Coordinator for part of their time. In addition, the TDR Secretariat may include other short-term consultants, depending on the needs. In addition:

- members self-fund to attend meetings and when possible support costs for relevant low- and middle-income country participants as needed;
- individual ESSENCE projects can be sponsored by interested members;
- joint funding for projects and activities is sought on a case-by-case basis; and
- the Chairperson and members of the SC are financed by their own organization.

A budget that may include travel, printing, electronic platform or any other costs will be calculated on an annual basis to correspond to the biennial workplan.

X. Participation/members

Criteria for membership

Members are organizations that fund health research and/or research capacity strengthening for health. Members should recognize the importance of working together to coordinate the efforts of funders in addressing the needs in these areas. Organizations that fund research and/or research capacity strengthening for health can request an observer status which allows them to attend and actively participate in all ESSENCE events/activities.

Members can also be organizations which are not funders but that demonstrably support health research and/or research capacity strengthening for health. These members can request an observer status which allows them to attend and actively participate in all ESSENCE events/activities. The organizations that currently meet the observer member status criteria are NEPAD, EviR, Institut Pasteur, ACU, GACD and UKCDR.

Criteria for participation

ESSENCE members may invite guests to attend the annual meetings or any of its working groups. Such guests may include representatives from governmental or nongovernmental organizations, initiatives (e.g. HIROs), global or regional multilateral organizations or programmes (e.g. WHO), national research councils, research institutions or universities.