

Using Research to Inform Policy and Practice: A story from India

Influencing food and nutrition policy

Anaemia, caused by a lack of iron in the diet, is estimated to affect over half the women in India. Iron supplements to prevent or treat anaemia have traditionally been taken in the form of pills, but these can cause gastritis, a serious stomach inflammation that deters people from taking them. With an India Alliance Margdarshi Fellowship, Professor Anura Kurpad, a senior researcher at St. John's Medical College Bangalore, has used stable isotope tracing methods to investigate how effectively iron is taken up and used in the human body. His research has been used to inform policy and practice in several ways.

Professor Kurpad's research into the absorption of iron has informed decisions about how much iron should feature in the Recommended Dietary Allowance guidelines developed by the Indian Council of Medical Research. In 2018, he was invited to participate in a high-level inter-ministerial committee to provide inputs to the National Iron Plus Initiative (NIPI), a government programme tasked with developing policies for improving the iron status and haemoglobin levels of poor women and children. The committee initially considered promoting enteric-coated iron tablets as a solution. These are specially coated tablets that prevent gastritis by delaying the release of iron until the tablet has moved into the intestine. But Professor Kurpad's research

findings demonstrated that there is very little absorption of iron from coated tablets. Iron is absorbed in the upper part of the intestines, whereas the coated tablets release the iron in the lower reaches of the small intestine, from where it passes unabsorbed out of the body. As a result of this research, policy-makers decided not to use enteric-coated iron tablets in the NIPI programme.

Professor Kurpad also chaired a committee at India's Food Safety and Standards Authority, aimed at setting standards for the fortification of staple foods, like rice or salt, with iron. This practice was being widely adopted in the food industry without regulation to manage the potential over-fortification of the food chain. Professor Kurpad's work helped to demonstrate that fortifying staple foods with iron would be more effective than supplements at combating anaemia, but also that it should be done with restraint. His research has also informed guidelines on the levels of iron in the fortified foods that are distributed through national programmes, such as the mid-day meal scheme for school children.

The flexibility granted by the India Alliance fellowship allowed Professor Kurpad to respond rapidly to the NIPI committee's need for new evidence about iron absorption, while his positions on relevant committees gave him rapid access to key policy officials.

“Being located within committees that advise the government as well as in a well-furnished laboratory, I can be sure that my research is needed and relevant, and I can take my research findings directly to the ministry where stakeholders will listen.”

– Professor Anura Kurpad



Dr Pratibha Dwarkanath running an education program

Photo credit: P Dwarkanath

India Alliance's Approach

The India Alliance has built up a reputation for funding high-quality research, conferring a great deal of credibility on its fellows and helping them be recognised as experts in their field and able to engage with policymakers at all levels. The fact that these fellowships are not tightly prescribed has helped India Alliance fellows pursue the types and avenues of engagement they feel most fitting at any particular time. The Indian system of multi-level government (national, state and local) poses several challenges for researchers seeking to engage with policymakers. As one of the fellows noted: *"The level of complexity is dizzying: you really need a flexible approach"*.

India Alliance fellowships, being a long-term programme, provide enough scope to sustain the funded research projects to their conclusion. This helps them develop a deep understanding of the local context and the nature of policy shifts as they happen. In turn this understanding helps them engage more effectively with policymakers and other stakeholders, engaging in ongoing debates and responding to their needs for evidence and advice.

There is a need to build strong relationships with a range of stakeholders; not just civil servants but frontline staff, who have different perspectives on the need for policy reforms and how they can be implemented. For India Alliance fellows to be effective policy influencers, they and their research teams need two sets of skills: producing high-quality research evidence and being able to translate it for these different audiences.

Background to the India Alliance

The Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance (India Alliance) is a joint venture between the Wellcome Trust, UK and the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India. Established in 2008, India Alliance enables high-quality researchers to build excellence in biomedical research in India. Since its inception, it has awarded 5-year fellowships to basic, veterinary, clinical and public health researchers to work on health-related topics of their choice. A number of fellows have used their research output to engage with policymakers and practitioners on key issues, developing relationships that help them use their research evidence to inform policy and practice.