

# THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCH IN ROMANIA – RAPID ASSESSMENT UNDER THE STEPS PROJECT

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**Rezumat:** Proiectul STEPS (Strengthening Engagement in Public Health Research) este un model de colaborare între vechii și noii membri ai Uniunii Europene, în cadrul celui de-al Șaptelea Program de Cooperare (FP7), având ca scop promovarea implicării organizațiilor societății civile în cercetarea din domeniul sănătății publice, prin cooperare, dialog și susținere reciprocă. Acest proiect a favorizat organizarea în toate statele nou-membre ale UE de dezbateri naționale privind cercetarea de sănătate publică și rolul organizațiilor neguvernamentale în acest domeniu. Atelierul pe această temă, organizat în România, a reunit reprezentanți ai universității, ai unor instituții guvernamentale, ai unor organizații neguvernamentale și chiar ai unor organizații internaționale care susțin cercetarea în sănătate publică. Concluzia lucrărilor a fost aceea că cercetarea în domeniul sănătății publice trebuie să aibă un rol mai important în identificarea priorităților și în definirea politicilor publice în general, fiind necesară o colaborare mai strânsă între sectorul guvernamental și cel neguvernamental.

**Keywords:** research, public health, civil society organizations

**Abstract:** The STEPS Project (Strengthening Engagement in Public Health Research) is a model of collaboration among the old and new member states under the Seventh Framework Programme, having as goal to promote the involvement of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in public health research through dialogue, mutual understanding and support of common interests. This project supported the organization of a public debate at country level related to the importance of public health research and the CSOs role in it. The workshop held in Romania was attended by representatives of CSOs, university, national and international organizations supporting public health research. They concluded that public health research should play a more important role in setting priorities and defining the public policies in Romania and a closer interaction between all the involved stakeholders – both from governmental and non-governmental sectors – needs to be developed.

## SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE PREDOMINANTLY THEORETICALLY

The evolution of the modern society brings the public health problems as top priorities on the public agenda. In this context the public health research has an increasing role in documenting and supporting the public health interventions. The STEPS Project (Strengthening Engagement in Public Health Research) is a model of collaboration among the old and new member states under the Seventh Framework Programme, having as goal to promote the involvement of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in public health research through dialogue, mutual understanding and support of common interests. The project partners are the University College of London, the European Public Health Association, the Association Skalbes from Latvia and different CSOs from the twelve new EU members. The main activities at country level consisted in identifying national or local CSOs interested to have a role or a voice in public health research and in organizing national workshops on this theme. Such a workshop was held in Romania, at the end of March by the Center for Health Policies and Services together with the Department of Public Health – University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Carol Davila” and the Romanian Public Health and Health Management Association. Representatives of CSOs, international organizations, universities and governmental institutions did a rapid assessment

the national context of public health research with its strengths and weaknesses.

### The research frame in Romania

Research and development are specifically defined in a binding normative act - Government Ordinance no. 57/2002 on scientific research and technology development, with subsequent amendments and additions - which covers the definitions of terms, the institutions involved and their responsibilities, the national research-development system and the types of related organizations, the accreditation criteria and the accrediting bodies. There is a national research-development system in place, that can include public and private institutions having R&D as mission, like universities, national research-development institutes, research centers of the Romanian Academy, related academies, national societies, national companies and national state-owned corporations (units of national interests) or other public or private organizations (including CSOs). Pursuant to the above-mentioned normative act, the Romanian Government passes a national research-development strategy on a regular basis (Government Decision no. 217/2007, for 2007 - 2013) and a National Research-Development and Innovation Plan (GD no. 457/2007). The national strategy priorities also include health, where, for the 2007 - 2013 period, research will focus on developing the knowledge of human integrative biological systems, human

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body mechanisms for adjusting to the dynamics of biological and psycho-social environment factors, investigation and interventional methods based on molecular and cellular medicine, genomics and proteomics, modern therapies focused on chemical, genetic and cellular support, as well as their benchmarking in line with the bioethical norms, developing the brain-machine interface for investigation and recovery in neurological disorders, implementing new prevention and intervention methods nationwide, specific to the European operation area.

Despite the political commitment to support research, expressed by the above-mentioned documents, this area doesn't seem to be a priority on the political agenda. Thus, research funding at national level varied between 0.4 and 0.6% of the GDP, reaching one of the lowest levels per inhabitant in EU (fig 1).

### The Public health frame in Romania

Public health, on another hand, is defined by a national law as "the population's health status in relation to health's determinants: socio-economic, biological, environmental factors, lifestyle, healthcare provision, healthcare quality and access". According to this law, public health care represents the society's organized effort to protect and foster the population's health and is implemented through a set of political and legislative measures, programs and strategies intended for the determinants of health status, as well as through the organization of institutions to provide all necessary services.

The Ministry of Health is the central authority in charge with public health, acting mainly as a regulatory, organization and funding entity for certain services or interventions in public health and, to some extent, as a controller for how the legislation is being implemented. The Ministry of Health also finances the prophylactic component of national healthcare programs focusing on the most important public health issues in Romania (the therapy component being funded from the Social Security Fund).

The Ministry of Health has under its subordination the National Public Health Institute, recently reorganized by bringing together the six public health institutes and centers with tradition capabilities for public health research. However, this future role in research of this institute is unclearly defined.

The Ministry of Health usually does not finance the research activities in the legal meaning. However, this entity needs research – in its scientific meaning – in order to prioritize public health issues, as well as to plan, implement and evaluate the interventions and programs in the field.

The relation between the national research-development and the healthcare system is tempted to be illustrated in fig 2.

In scientific terms, research means conducting studies based on a certain methodology to prove various assumptions or answer specific questions, using also an experimental process. The activity must be systematic and follow a series of steps and a rigorous standardized protocol, taking into consideration the literature review of previous surveys in the field and setting the questions to be answered. The answer requires a certain interpretation or opinion of a researcher.

### DISCUSSIONS

The participants agreed there are strengths and weaknesses for research in public health in Romania. The major strength is that public health research has had a long tradition, as the first social medicine University chair in Romania was established in Bucharest, in 1942. Furthermore, the social variables as health status determinants were taken into account 70-80 years before social medicine turned into an academic

scientific subject in all traditional university centers. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the establishment of public health institutes, which started to collaborate with universities and successfully host their teaching and research activity. After 1990, numerous collaboration relationships with schools from Western European countries, Canada and USA were established, and many professionals, starting with the youngest ones, participated in specialization internships and advanced courses in Europe and North America between 1992 and 2002. Another strength is the existence of few medical specialties in preventive medicine, that have a research based approach. They provide young and well trained medical specialists that are able to work in public health research. Last, but not least, there are in Romania very active CSOs in the field. They can organize, support and facilitate the public health research.

As weaknesses, few items were considered:

- from legal point of view, the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports does finance all the research activities, but there is a weak interaction between the organizations from the healthcare system and those from the research system. Following this, very few research studies from the public health field are financed by the specific ministry. Also the research outcomes (even fundamental or applicative research) are partially transferred and used in the overall health system.
- Usually, the Ministry of Health does not finance research activities for health or public health. For the time being, this is not recognized as a formal activity and it is not systematically financed from public sources, although it is a prerequisite for the adequacy, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of public health interventions.
- The mechanisms of establishing the priorities in the public health field are not very documented and there is a medium capability to plan and especially to implement and assess the public health interventions. Ensuring the sustainability of the interventions, programs and projects remains a continuous challenge.
- There are some CSOs interested in public health research. These organizations usually have prior experience in research, in international projects and they are often part of the national and international networks. But they never come to receive public financing from the state for public health research, because the process of accrediting a NGO for research at national level is very complicated and usually they are not able to follow it.

A huge opportunity for developing PH research in Romania is the EU accession, but the national capacity to write good project proposals is still weak and needs to be developed. The economic crisis is a major threat both for research and for public health in general, these budgets being among the most vulnerable ones.

### CONCLUSIONS

Public health research should play a more important role in setting priorities and defining the public policies in Romania. A closer interaction between the two ministries involved but also between the organizations from the healthcare system and those from the research system is needed and the use of existing capacity should be improved.

More stakeholders should be involved in the public health priority setting process, including universities - that have knowledge and capacity - and CSOs - that have also experience, capacity and willingness. A formal framework for consulting the CSOs in relation to the public health priorities needs to be built and real partnerships to be developed.

