WHY IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH AND DELIVERY SCIENCE?

While remarkable advances have been made in medicine and public health, significant bottlenecks remain in delivering proven interventions to populations in need, particularly in low and middle income countries. These bottlenecks result from the significant gap between developing evidence-based solutions, strategies, and interventions and effectively implementing those solutions through health policies, programs, and practice—resulting in missed opportunities and interventions failing to reach their full potential. While this gap occurs across the globe, populations with the greatest healthcare needs and inequalities are disproportionately affected by the delay in delivering evidence-based knowledge to practice, known as the “know-do-gap”.

WHAT IS IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH AND DELIVERY SCIENCE?

Implementation research and delivery science (IRDS) is a process to both understand “what” works and “how” to get what works to the populations that need it to improve health outcomes. The process has been called by many names (e.g., implementation research, implementation science), is closely related to other approaches (e.g., operations research), and is an integral component of health systems research. The term IRDS has recently been coined to capture both the research and delivery aspects of the process, highlighting the challenges of actually implementing and scaling up evidence-based approaches to improve health care.

Global implementers, researchers, policy-makers and funders have recognized the increased importance of IRDS. Despite advances in some global health indicators, much work needs to be done to improve maternal, newborn and childhood health (MNCH) and to make progress toward achieving the newly established Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). USAID sees IRDS as a key paradigm for development—representing the interface of knowledge generation, management and knowledge use.

While the need for IRDS is often recognized, there has been reluctance to invest in IRDS and work toward a common commitment to build the capacity and the systems needed for success. The USAID-funded TRAction Project is defined by its investments in addressing MNCH through IRDS. Through its rich portfolio of IRDS studies TRAction promotes the area by building capacity and by demonstrating methods and results that have the potential to improve health outcomes.

CLOSING THE “KNOW-DO-GAP”

In order to achieve global health goals and improve the health of women, children, newborns and communities, the “know-do-gap” must be addressed and more effective approaches to implementation and scale-up must be identified or developed. TRAction promotes research and innovation through local ownership and partnerships in order to scale up equitable and sustainable efforts to “do what works.” Partnerships, meetings, workshops and dissemination events are spreading the news about the value and impact of IRDS.
IMPROVING MATERNAL, NEONATAL, AND CHILD HEALTH (MNCH) WITH IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH AND DELIVERY SCIENCE

TRAction applies IRDS to the real world to better understand MNCH challenges and explore how best to deliver solutions to women, newborns, children, and communities. TRAction efforts support capacity building across the IRDS spectrum – addressing skills related to research design, analysis, communication, and policy development. TRAction activities bring together stakeholders to strengthen partnerships and close the gap between researchers, implementers and the women and children whom the interventions are aimed at benefiting. TRAction also provides external expertise by utilizing advisory groups and making adaptations to experimental design as challenges and learning opportunities arise. TRAction broadly shares research findings with the academic community, policy-makers, and advocates and fosters dialog to advance the field and enhance the relevance of research for decision making. Through TRAction's work, the value of IRDS has been demonstrated and greater evidence-based solutions have been generated to improve maternal, newborn and child health.

ADVANCING IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH AND DELIVERY SCIENCE

The Collaborative of IRDS was formed in 2010 in response to the growing interest in IRDS and the need for an engaged global discussion on the topic. The IRDS Collaborative is comprised of the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (WHO), the World Bank and USAID. TRAction and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health serve as secretariat of the Collaborative.

Responding to interests and concerns about IRDS, the Collaborative brought together international and local stakeholders to explore ways to build a common understanding on IRDS, to broaden understanding of the potential of IRDS and to identify ways to expand investments in IRDS as a way to tackle challenging health issues. These consultative meetings resulted in the development of the Statement on Advancing Implementation Research and Delivery Science. The statement serves as a call to action for researchers, policymakers, implementers, funders, academics, editors and civil society at large. It was promoted at the Third Global Symposium on Health Systems Research held in Cape Town from September 30, 2014-October 3, 2014.

The Collaborative continues to meet regularly to promote and advance the objectives of the IRDS Statement. Through its members, supported by TRAction and JHU, it is carrying out several activities to expand the understanding and use of IRDS.