

**Launch of the Platform on Human Health
September 15, 2010**

Summary of the Debate

Approximately 80 participants were gathered at the launch of the Platform on Human Health including researchers from all universities in Denmark, NGO representatives, Danida representatives and individual resource persons. The meeting was facilitated by Carl Erik Schou Larsen, Senior Consultant at the Faculty of Life Sciences, who guided the discussion and provided perspectives from other capacity development initiatives outside of health.

The first presentation at the meeting was an introduction to the Building Stronger Universities initiative by Universities' Denmark's Project Manager Christian Pilegaard Hansen (CPH) including information on the background, the other platforms, the overall organization, financial issues and the foreseen process until March 2011, when work plans and core funding for 2011-2012 are expected to be in place.

This was followed by a presentation of the Platform on Human Health, by Chairman Flemming Konradsen (FK), including a definition of the topics to be covered by the platform, and an introduction to the criteria for selection of partner countries and research themes, the organization, the funding frame, and the time frame.

General Debate

The first question from the floor related to the future of the research networks and the Danida funded centres. CPH stressed the importance of bridging between existing knowledge within the field of research capacity building, which has been generated within networks such as Enreca Health and Danish Development Research Network and centres such as DBL. He further stressed that an active dialogue between the platform coordinators and the steering groups of the networks as well as centre directors will provide important input in the defining of the future.

Another question regarded the nature of the collaborating partners of the platforms, taking into consideration that the strongest partners may not always be universities but rather sector based research institutions or other institutions. CPH underlined that the selection of partner institutions should be guided by their excellence and that the choice should always include but not be

restricted to universities as core partners. Another selection criteria will be that more than one platform collaborates with the given partner institution.

An underlying assumption of the BSU initiative is that the initial core funding will serve as a strong platform for joint applications to external donors. FK noted that these applications must be based on a solid record of high-quality research and high-quality capacity building experience, e.g. in the field of joint courses where Danish researchers can demonstrate excellence.

It is envisaged that South partners as an entry point can be expected to primarily contribute to the joint activities with time, staff salaries, venues, and housing rather than direct financial support.

Selection of countries and areas of priorities

Initially, a number of countries have been listed as potential collaborators for the Platform on Human Health and these were limited to Sub-Saharan Africa countries. Of this list, in particular Ghana and Tanzania meet the criteria concerning a record of robust and relevant institutional relationships, as well as potentials for co-financing.

The question was raised from the floor why countries outside of Africa apparently had been excluded by the Platform as it had been stated by Danida representatives that the call for focused activities should not be used by the Platforms to exclude other regions. FK answered that the need for a focused efforts had been given priority, thus the decision to start in Sub-Saharan Africa (where Danida directs most of its assistance), but Vietnam and until recently also Bolivia have been considered strong candidates for inclusion in the BSU activities over time.

Since the first application was submitted to and approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat has been positively approached by a significant number of people proposing support to countries outside the present list. The recently formed Steering Committee will take these suggestions into due consideration when looking at the longer term planning *vis a vis* the opportunities to attract funding in support of the involvement in a wider number of countries.

The need to focus does not relate to choice of countries alone but also in terms of defining the thematic areas the Platform should support. The criteria for assessment of relevant themes in a given country will depend on the match between the identified needs and the comparative advantage among Danish partners to meet these.

The importance of focusing on few areas and few partners was highlighted by several participants. As funds are limited, activities should not be spread too thin. This will only cause disappointments among the partners.

Concerns about the time frame

There was an expressed concern by the participants that time would not allow for in-depth involvement of South based partners in priority setting to meet the deadline for submission of work plans to Universities Denmark by February 2011. All experiences show that building ownership among partners requires close dialogue and collaboration over time. The experiences from the development of collaboration with the consortium of partners in Zanzibar, which has been going on since March, has demonstrated the need for a planning process that allows for small scale pilot activities and gradual consolidation and expansion of the partnership. Investments in joint fact finding and capacity and needs assessments is required to establish a genuine joint platform.

Thus there was an agreement to advise Universities Denmark to develop a format (e.g. Concept Note) that can be developed and adjusted phase by phase, as the partnerships evolve.

It was also noted that it seems that the objectives of BSU has changed and there is less focus on building institutional capacity, which is a very important part of the process of building stronger universities. CPH and FK agreed that the focus has moved more towards building research capacity in the initial phase, partly due to the funding source and the limited budget.

Collaboration and coordination with the other platforms

There is an expressed intention among the four platforms to avoid unnecessary competition, and rather focus on means and ways to reach optimal synergy. As a part of the work plan to be submitted to Universities' Denmark in February, each platform will be required to elaborate on ways to collaborate and coordinate their activities with the other platforms.

Balancing research and capacity development efforts

There was strong call for not letting research become completely absorbed by capacity development activities. Researchers are motivated by their interest in conducting research with a high impact, guided by the highest international standards, rather than following priorities set by development agencies which historically have been show to change over time in a political driven way, rather than driven by data and new insights. It was strongly recommended that the platform should build on experiences gained through the Enreca projects and team up with population based demographic surveillance sites in order to build on long term data.

It was suggested by the facilitator that there is a mismatch between researchers' and donors' motivation to get involved in the BSU initiative in the sense that researchers essentially are driven by a motivation to engage in research followed by education and to some extent capacity development, whereas donors are motivated by a wish to obtain results within capacity building. However, this assumption was opposed by the Danida representative who claimed that Danida took a keen interest in research, specifically by supporting this initiative.