NITI Aayog, Health Policy Experts call for better leveraging of research & data to firm up policy priorities

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New Delhi: A panel discussion on 'Leveraging Big Data to Inform Research and Improve Public Health Policy' was organized by NCAER, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Global Health Strategies in New Delhi on 16th March. The discussion was held amid growing realization about the importance of using clinical, survey and administrative data for developing public health policies and shaping national health agendas.

The discussion, opened by Dr Suneeta Krishnan, Country Lead, Measurement, Learning and Evaluation, Gates Foundation, began with key note addresses by Dr. Maurício Barreto, Executive Director, CIDACS, The Center for Data Integration and Knowledge for Health, Brazil andDr. Anurag Agrawal, Director CSIR Institute of Genomics & Integrative Biology who dwelt on the experiences of Brazil and India in the field of big data and its contributions to health policy reform.

Subsequently, leaders in the fields of public health research and policy discussed opportunities for multi sectoral collaborations and the need for building capacities for leveraging big data analysis. Panelists deliberated on the drivers of evidence use in public policy formulation in India. They underscored the importance of using research and administrative data analysis to identify policy priorities and suggest targeted use of available resources for improving health outcomes.

Mr Alok Kumar, Adviser NITI Aayog, opined, "The need for cross-functional collaboration is now more than ever. As we grapple with new diseases and outbreaks globally, it is of utmost importance that science, policy, research, and data are all viewed from the singular lens of informing public policy. Only then can we attain a comprehensive developmental and growth agenda".

In this context, Ayushman Bharat -PMJAY was highlighted as a rich source of data, including for longitudinal analyses and identification of disease determinants and population impacts of policies.

"Traditionally data has been viewed from the colored vision of security breaches and impeachment of privacy. Before anything else we need to sensitise and reassure people about the prudent, careful and anonymised used of data generated from governmental initiatives and develop standardised procedures that ensure no misuse of such large amounts of information", remarked Dr. Indu Bhushan, CEO, Ayushman Bharat.

Dr Shekhar Shah, Director-General NCAER, stated, "The large volume of clinical data generated by the scheme, if suitably anonymized, can be used to develop targeted, cost-effective public health programmes. The data will also help researchers in analyzing disease outbreaks, causes and plausible measures for mitigation. We are sitting on a pile of gold, waiting to be used."

Dr Shinjini Bhatnagar, Dean (clinical research) THSTI, elucidated, "The strategy should be to encourage discovery/research that is inspired by societal need and innovation which is driven by new knowledge in order to create applications that can go back to the society".

C N Raghupathi, Head, India Business Infosys, explained, "Data, strategy, security and policy reform together form a tight rope that is difficult to walk on. Data- driven policies are an ideal and utopian vision, but in reality, the execution becomes muddy. However, that should not deter us from working continuously towards accomplishing the vision we have in mind".

Dr Henk Bekedam, WHO Representative to India, noted, "Digital health is a core element of WHO's new organizational structure and an important agent for advancing public health. WHO is committed to working with countries to accelerate the use of digital health interventions in advancing the efforts to strengthen primary healthcare, universal health coverage and health-related sustainable development goals."