Background

Our underlying principle in developing a Network wide data access and sharing policy is that data are a public good and sharing data is both *ethical* and *beneficial*. Our ultimate goal is to promote the wide use of our data by the scientific community and eventually make more meaningful contribution towards promoting societal wellbeing. However, we remain mindful of the challenges and complexities of data sharing and will continue to make efforts to create a well-functioning research and innovation infrastructure, supported by institutions that are committed to protecting the interests of key stakeholders that are integral to a sustainable data sharing environment.

INDEPTH Network[1] is a southern-based research network comprising currently of 36 independent member centres running 43 health and demographic surveillance systems (HDSSs) which conduct longitudinal health and demographic evaluation of populations in 20 low-and middle-income countries. The centres that constitute the INDEPTH Network cover over 3 million individuals across Africa, Asia and Oceania. This represents one of the largest sources of longitudinal data and scientific evidence on the health and living conditions of the global south in the world today.

The data collected by these centres are unique in several respects and serve a number of functions:

- They provide longitudinal data on the changing dynamics of population and health that more accurately reflects the prevailing conditions in resource poor and geographically defined areas for which such information is hard to obtain;
- They can serve as platforms for conducting policy relevant research and for monitoring and tracking new health threats, such as emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases and drug resistance health conditions so as to alert relevant stakeholders to prepare for appropriate interventions;
- They assist in developing standard data collection methods and in testing and evaluating cost-effective health interventions.

To more fully realise the benefits of sharing such rich datasets, while minimizing the concerns and challenges associated with data sharing, it is imperative that the process be guided by a set of principles and a comprehensive policy. INDEPTH's data access and sharing policy document seeks to ensure that the Network conforms to international best practices of data sharing and also upholds the Network's own position expressed at its July 2011 Nairobi meeting[2]. The Policy reflects the Network's and its individual member's commitment to responsibly, efficiently and widely share public health research data within and beyond the Network in a sustainable manner. The policy is also expected to strengthen the Network's capacity to effectively manage, curate, analyse and publish research outputs and to foster balanced collaborations and partnerships with the scientific community.

This policy was drafted by the INDEPTH Data Access and Sharing Committee (iDASC) operating under the auspices of the INDEPTH Board and will be maintained by the INDEPTH Board. The INDEPTH data access and sharing policy builds on existing Network and centre specific data access and sharing policy documents and identifies various categories of data and access levels associated with each. It also stipulates the terms, conditions, scope and time frame for accessing and sharing the different data categories equitably, ethically and efficiently. The scope of this Network policy is restricted to the sharing of those data (falling under different data types mentioned in this policy document) that are submitted by member centres to the Network.

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[1] http://www.indepth-network.org
[2] Sustainable data sharing in public health research: an INDEPTH-COHRED Position, http://www.indepth-network.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1262&Itemid=595