

Strategic Research Planning Guidelines

Departmental SWOT & TOWS Analysis Worksheet

SWOT Analysis – Guiding Questions

Reflect on your department's internal and external environment in relation to research capacity and potential.

Strengths (Internal, Positive)

- What unique research capabilities, expertise, or resources does our department currently have?
- What successful projects, publications, or collaborations have we completed?
- What clinical or community access advantages do we have that can support research?
- What internal systems or support structures work well for initiating or sustaining research?
- What areas of research are we already known or respected for?

Write your Strengths:

- Across provinces (except KPK) community outreach with strong presence in underserved areas.
- Established trust with local populations and cultural understanding.
- Experienced in delivering primary care and public health programs.
- Access to diverse populations and real health data.

Weaknesses (Internal, Negative)

- What are our current gaps in research capacity, infrastructure, or funding?
- Are there skills, training, or personnel we are lacking to do effective research?
- What barriers prevent us from publishing or submitting research proposals?
- How effective is our department's research coordination or leadership?
- Are there organizational or time constraints affecting research productivity?

Write your Weaknesses:

- Limited research training among community health staff.
- Inconsistent documentation and paper-based data systems due to EMR/HMIS Issues.
- Overburdened staff with limited time for research tasks.
- Weak institutional linkages with academic research entities.
- Lack of standardized research protocols across sites.

Opportunities (External, Positive)

- What external funding sources or partnerships can we explore?
- Are there national or global research trends we can tap into (e.g., TB, air quality, AI in health)?
- What institutional initiatives (e.g., IHHN Research Strategic Plan) can we align with?
- Are there gaps in public health or clinical needs that our research can address?
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with other departments or academic institutions(interdepartmental/national/international)?

Write your Opportunities:

- Donor interest in community-based operational and implementation research.
- Growing digital health and tech-based data collection tools.
- Increasing collaboration opportunities with local and international research institutions.
- Emerging interest in climate-health, mental health, and NCDs at the community level.

Threats (External, Negative)

- What external challenges may limit our ability to conduct research (e.g., regulatory hurdles, donor competition)?
- Are there risks of talent loss, data limitations, or publication barriers?
- What broader environmental or economic factors could disrupt our research plans?
- Are other institutions or disciplines outpacing us in our focus areas?
- Are there changes in policies or funding priorities that may impact our work?

Write your Threats:

- Insecure and hard-to-reach areas disrupt fieldwork and follow-up.
- Cultural resistance or mistrust around sensitive health topics.
- Staff attrition and limited retention of trained personnel.
- Donor shifts from research to emergency relief or service delivery.
- Ethical or regulatory delays in approval for multi-site research.

TOWS Analysis – Strategy Formulation

Use your SWOT inputs to develop actionable strategies. Reflect on the guiding questions for each quadrant:

SO Strategies (Use Strengths to pursue Opportunities)

- How can we leverage our internal strengths to maximize external opportunities?
 - Which existing capabilities can be applied to emerging research themes or collaborations?

Write your SO Strategies:

- Leverage our nationwide outreach to lead implementation research on national health priorities like MNCH, NCDs, and nutrition.
- Use our community trust and grassroots insights to form partnerships with academic and global health institutions.
- Apply our field data systems to pilot digital health tools and strengthen research in mHealth and telemedicine.
- Document and publish community-based care models to influence policy and attract research funding.

WO Strategies (Use Opportunities to overcome Weaknesses)

- Which external opportunities can help us overcome our internal gaps or limitations?
 - Are there collaborations, trainings, or funding sources that address our weaknesses?

Write your WO Strategies:

- Partner with academic institutions and research organizations to build research capacity among community health staff through targeted training and mentorship.
- Seek donor-funded grants focused on operational research to strengthen underdeveloped data systems and improve research infrastructure at community sites.
- Collaborate with digital health innovators to introduce user-friendly tools that address documentation gaps and standardize data collection across regions.
- Engage in national and regional research consortia to improve visibility, share best practices, and reduce isolation from academic research networks.

ST Strategies (Use Strengths to mitigate Threats)

- How can we use our strengths to protect ourselves against external challenges?

- What proactive measures can we take to prevent threats using what we already do well?

Write your ST Strategies:

- Use our strong community presence and trust to reduce resistance to research participation and overcome cultural barriers in sensitive topics.
- Leverage our field staff's local knowledge and presence in remote areas to maintain data continuity despite access or security challenges.
- Utilize our broad service coverage and outreach programs to ensure consistent data collection and follow-up, minimizing participant dropout in research.
- Apply our operational experience to standardize data tools and protocols across sites, reducing variability and strengthening research quality.

WT Strategies (Minimize Weaknesses and avoid Threats)

- What steps can we take to reduce both internal weaknesses and external threats?
 - Should we avoid high-risk areas until our capabilities improve?

Write your WT Strategies:

- Prioritize capacity-building for field teams before initiating research in high-risk or underserved areas to ensure data quality and staff safety.
- Phase research activities strategically, starting in more stable regions while strengthening infrastructure and systems for later expansion into difficult areas.
- Avoid overcommitting to complex research studies until standardized data tools, training, and supervisory mechanisms are fully in place.
- Develop clear ethical guidelines and community engagement plans to prevent mistrust and ensure responsible research in sensitive settings.

Reminder: Your SWOT and TOWS analysis will directly inform the development of your departmental research goals, OKRs, and KPIs.

Use this worksheet as a foundation for focused strategic decision-making!