Digital empowerment at the frontlines: SORT IT for advancing Universal Health Coverage through implementation research in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (2026)

This SORT IT initiative will fast-track training and research to strengthen health systems. Frontline health workers and senior medical students will gain vital skills to harness data and digital tools - driving solutions, saving lives, and enhancing public health.

Application deadline: 15th December 2025

TDR, the *Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases* hosted at the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with Yerevan State Medical University after Mkhitar Heratsi and partners, invites applications from **Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan** for the first Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative (SORT IT) on advancing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) through digital implementation research.

This SORT IT initiative aims to strengthen national research capacity, promote evidence-based decision-making, and support digital health integration within routine health systems. Although participating countries have advanced in digital health, data from these systems are often underused for policy and planning. SORT IT will provide practical, scalable training to frontline workers and young professionals to conduct operational research and harness digital tools, including AI.

Aligned with the WHO European Region's Digital Health Action Plan (2023–2030), the programme fosters regional collaboration among participating countries to become data rich, information rich, and action rich.

The duration of the SORT IT cycle is 10–12 months covering three modules with clear milestones and measurable targets. Failure to fulfil the expected outputs linked to each module implies the candidate cannot proceed to the next module. Participants should be drawn from institutions actively engaged in implementing health programmes. They could include doctors, nurses, veterinarians, laboratorians, pharmacists, monitoring and evaluation officers and other public health professionals. Trainees will go through the whole research process and complete the intensive training cycle with defined products including a peer-reviewed manuscript to be submitted for publication in scientific journals and which should go on to inform policy and/or practice.

I. PURPOSE

To develop the practical skills to conduct operational/implementation research with health systems using digital health tools, publish and effectively disseminate the findings and foster evidence-informed decision making for policy and practice.

II. SCIENTIFIC SCOPE OF RESEARCH AND GUIDANCE

The intent is to cover a spectrum of OR studies focused on infectious diseases, outbreaks, and other topics of practical relevance to health system strengthening using digital health tools. Research priorities will be tailored to local needs, and oriented as much as possible with the four major global health challenges affecting infectious diseases of poverty (https://tdrstrategy.org/tdr-strategy-2024-2029/). Applicants should propose a research question addressing a problem in their programme or health system. Projects must be completed within 6–8 months, so studies using existing secondary data from digital health tools are preferred. Research requiring patient interventions or primary data collection is unlikely to fit the course timeline.

III. COURSE CURRICULUM

The course comprises four modules as follows:

Module 1: Research Questions and Protocol Development- Feb 23-28, 2026

This six-day module introduces participants to operational research and guides them to produce a draft research protocol by the end. The virtual, facilitator-led training includes lectures, discussions, exercises, and case studies from published OR. Participants will also present and discuss their protocols with facilitators and peers.

Brief content overview

- Introduction to operational research
- Research terminology
- Asking the right research questions
- Aims and objectives
- Ethics
- Developing a plan of analysis
- Drafting research protocols

(Key Deliverable Output: A draft scientific protocol to be submitted by March 30, 2026)

Module 2: Data Management using mobile-based data capture – March 2 - 3, 2026

This two-day module introduces participants to data management and analysis, including quality-assured data entry. Learning will be applied to specific projects through plenary sessions and feedback.

Brief content overview

- Designing an efficient data entry instrument
- Making an efficient mobile-based data entry questionnaire
- Data Entry and validation using mobile phone

(Key Deliverable Output: Electronic data entry form and dummy tables/figures to be submitted by March 30, 2026)

Module 3 (Hybrid): Scientific paper writing – Oct 22-29, 2026

This six-day hybrid module guides participants in writing scientific papers, submitting them online, and responding to journal editors' and reviewers' comments.

Brief content overview

- Learn the principles of writing a scientific paper
- Learn how to deal with peer review

(Key Deliverable Output: draft paper to be submitted to a scientific journal)

Module 4: Research communication and uptake – merged with module 3 dates

This three-day module equips participants with skills to effectively communicate research findings and their implications to decision-makers

Brief content overview

- Plain language summary**:** Prepare a two-page summary of your paper in plain language for non-experts, including key findings, implications, and recommended actions.
- Presentation practice: Rehearse PowerPoint presentations with mentors, colleagues, and via video to improve timing, confidence, and delivery.
- Elevator pitch**:** Draft a 1–2 minute oral summary and practice it with mentors, colleagues, and video for effective delivery.

(Key Deliverable Output: tools for effective communication of research findings)

IV. FACULTY OF THE COURSE

The course will be led by experienced faculty from the TDR-coordinated global SORT IT partnership, including staff from disease control programmes, NGOs, and academic institutions. SORT IT alumni from Armenia and the EECA region who have become faculty will also participate, ensuring an international mix of facilitators.

V. EXPECTED OUTPUTS AND BENEFITS FOR TRAINEES AND INSTITUTIONS

- *Hands-on training through real-world research***.** Health worker teams will engage in practical, project-based training using real-world implementation research. This approach ensures skills are immediately applicable and relevant to local health system needs.
- *Fostering collaborative learning and integration***.** Each research team will include a frontline health worker, a medical student, faculty members, and SORT IT alumni. This cross-sectoral collaboration bridges gaps between public health programs, academia, and medical training—strengthening connections and fostering peer learning and mentorship across disciplines.
- *Developing a skilled critical mass of researchers***.** Building on previous initiatives in Armenia and EECA countries SORT IT will leverage its alumni network to expand national capacity and cultivate a critical mass of skilled researchers equipped to lead evidence-based improvements in health care. Trainees are encouraged to train and mentor others, following the philosophy: "see one, do one, teach one—and teach many more."

- *Embedding capacity for long-term sustainability*. By integrating implementation research into national institutions and the medical school curriculum at Yerevan State University after Mkhitar Heratsi, SORT IT will promote local ownership and ensure long-term sustainability of research and decision-making capacity.

VI. COURSE FOLLOW UP

- Between Modules 1 and 2, participants will resume their regular work and obtain local ethics approval for their studies.
- Between Modules 2 and 3, participants will collect data for their research projects.
- After the course, participants will be periodically contacted to assess achievements and the policy or practice impact of their studies. They will also join an operational research alumni network via a web-based forum for continued interaction and sharing.
- Course facilitators will remain available for advice on request.

VII. CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

Participant selection is guided by strict eligibility criteria. The applicant must:

Be actively involved in implementing digital health tools at the national or health facility level in a Government or NGO setting.

1. Submit a one-page proposal including:
    - **Title** (max 20 words)
    - **Problem description**: outline a relevant health system strengthening issue identified in your programme (max 500 words)
    - **Draft research question**: to be developed into an operational research project (max 100 words). Preference will be given to studies using existing routine programme data (secondary data) or data that can be collected during the course; primary data collection is discouraged due to course timelines.
    - **Brief methodology** (max 200 words): indicate whether data is primary or secondary. If secondary, specify data source, format (paper/electronic), and access permission. Qualitative or prospective studies that may exceed course timelines should be avoided.
2. Preferably hold a Master's degree with at least three years' experience in public health, animal/environmental health, clinical care, or laboratory settings. Lack of a Master's degree will not automatically exclude applicants if strongly recommended.
3. Be computer literate and able to bring a laptop to the course.
4. **Applicant statement**: provide written commitment to attend all four training modules, return to their programme after the course, and apply course knowledge for at least 18 months. Use the attached template.
5. **Supervisor statement**: provide written confirmation from a direct supervisor, programme manager, or relevant authority endorsing the research question, granting permission to use programme data, and supporting the applicant in meeting course milestones, including publication as first author. Use the attached template.
6. As part of pre-selection, an experienced senior SORT IT mentor will review the proposed project, assess the dataset (existing or planned), and assist in refining the research question.

VII. SPONSORSHIP

The course organisers (TDR) AND Yerevan State Medical University will provide logistics support for attending the modules to successful applicants and also cover the publication costs.

VIII. APPLICATION DEADLINE: **December 15, 2025! Successful applicants will be informed of the results of selection by the end of December, 2025**

Applications, along with supportive documents, have to be submitted online using the link-
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DSPRSS2

Supporting documents that have to be submitted online while filling the application are:

- *Brief CV of applicant*
- *Statement from applicant*
- *Statement from supervisor / programme manager*

Templates are given here- https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/kl1buxb7bwo29tkio0vwn/AGUUBXhOloA2r-QfNy22ykU?rlkey=y6ofk7cpi9al9jba3szbf7ftr&dl=0

For any further clarifications on the applications, please contact

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Note:

1. Failure to provide all the above requested information will result in the rejection of your application. Incomplete applications will not be considered.
2. The decision of the selections committee will be final in matters related to the selection to the course.
3. All supportive documents must be in Word or PDF format.