



# STRATEGIC DOING REPORT

November 2021

The 4 A's

Awareness, Alumni, Administrative Support, Access Funding



## Executive Summary

MicroResearch (MR) is an innovative, community-focused, and locally empowering research training program conceived in 2008 in Mbarara, Uganda, by Noni MacDonald and Bob Bortolussi of IWK Health and Dalhousie University from Canada, in collaboration with Jerome Kabakyenga of Mbarara University of Science and Technology. The vision of MR is to train and coach local multidisciplinary teams to solve local health problems through research within the local context, using local resources. As of 2022 over 1,100 participants have been trained through 43 Workshops, 126 projects launched, and 50 projects completed.

MR has engaged in strategic planning in the past, which has paved the way for an expansion in both Africa and in Canada. The program has grown and evolved over time and is now at a pivotal point where its sustainability and educational focus require strategic direction for the next phase of growth. A Strategic Doing exercise, completed in November, 2021, involved about 100 active participation from stakeholders in numerous countries, with approximately 2/3 from Africa. This process resulted in a dozen potential action items related to sustainability and education. These actions were streamlined into four priority areas – *the four A's*.

<b><i>Awareness</i></b>	Web development, enhanced KT, regional forums, leveraging stakeholders as promoters, participating in existing conferences and events
<b><i>Alumni</i></b>	Establish a network of advocates; share best practices, share stories
<b><i>Administrative</i></b>	Operational support offices to support region, share resources, promotion
<b><i>Access Funding</i></b>	Engage broader stakeholder groups and incorporate MR into big projects; grow local site/country funding for MR

The next step is for the MR leadership together with the Strategic Doing participants to decide on priority action areas to be undertaken and when. These decisions will be dependent on the scale of the tasks and the number of participants with skillset and enthusiasm to become involved in the project teams. The recommended process is to define an initial “pathfinder project” that move toward the ultimate outcome

## Introduction

MicroResearch (MR) is an innovative, community-focused, and locally empowering research training program conceived in 2008 in Mbarara, Uganda, by Noni MacDonald and Bob Bortolussi of IWK Health and Dalhousie University from Canada, in collaboration with Jerome Kabakyenga of Mbarara University of Science and Technology. The vision of MR is to train and coach local multidisciplinary teams to solve local health problems through research within the local context, using local resources.

MR seeks to decolonize research in low-income countries. Rather than parachuting in research teams, research questions and research models from high-income countries, MR puts the local research team firmly in the driver's seat from question selection and proposal development, to ethics submission, project implementation and completion, to knowledge translation. As of 2022 over 1,100 professionals from healthcare and beyond have been trained through 43 Workshops. Through this, 126 projects have been launched, and 50 projects completed, generating nearly 50 peer-reviewed publications. For over a decade, MR has been decolonizing and democratizing research, terms that have only recently been popularized in global health circles. MR has shown that high-quality research in developing countries can be done locally when supported by training, coaching, and access to small grants.

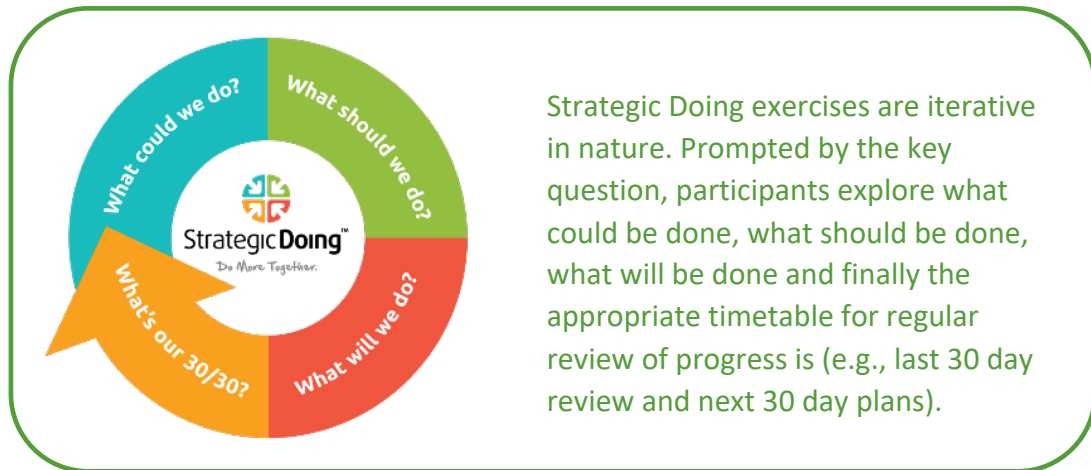
MR has engaged in strategic planning in the past, which has paved the way for an expansion in both Africa and in Canada. The program has evolved to a point where attention to sustainability and the program's educational components and goals are needed. The goal for the planning process to address those two aspects involved engaging a broad group of stakeholders, using their time efficiently and leveraging technology, as the COVID-19 pandemic prevented a face-to-face planning exercise.

We also wanted a simple plan of action that would be “owned” by those who can make it happen. We needed to avoid a top-down, complex plan that would be difficult to implement in the multinational and multisite MR settings. Rather, in these evolving circumstances, we wanted a plan that could allow us to learn and adapt as progress is made. Thus, the approach chosen for development of the plan was “Strategic Doing” – a method developed at Purdue University that accelerates implementation by designing collaborative projects that are driven by cognitive diversity (for more information, see <https://strategicdoing.net/>).

Strategic doing involves bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders and challenging them with appreciative, generative questions. These are questions that prompt thinking about a desired future state – not the traditional strategic planning approach that often starts by looking back and describing strengths and weaknesses. Rather, we wanted to describe the desired future picture of what MR could be in the minds of enthusiasts committed to its success.

The focus for the Strategic Doing meeting was clarified through discussions with the co-directors of MR. The two areas of concentration were:

1. Imagine that MR concepts were fully integrated into undergraduate and post-graduate education programs in Africa and elsewhere. What might that look like? How might we make that happen?
2. Imagine that MR and infrastructure were fully sustainable within your country. What might that look like? How might we make that happen?



The two basic questions were addressed in several rounds of group discussions. The first round involved key stakeholders invited from Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, and Tanzania to help identify issues and challenges. The next round involved additional participants from Africa and Canada.

Following these two discussions, a survey was sent to a broad group of stakeholders to gain feedback and help prioritize the suggested actions.

The final round involved previous and new participants to streamline priorities and begin to identify tactics and metrics/indicators. We used this approach in three rounds of discussion to ensure that there were multiple opportunities for people to participate and for all voices to be heard as we progressively narrowed the prioritized actions.

## Results

The first round of discussions were held using Zoom with participants from Africa on November 9 and 10, 2021, with the first day devoted to Education and the second to Sustainability. Round two, held on November 22 and 23, 2021, involved larger group discussions on the same two topics, with the addition of positioning videos prepared by experts in Canada and Africa, designed to provide insights and initiate thinking on the issues (either education or sustainability). A final round of discussion was held on November 29, 2021, when more specific action items and metrics were identified.

Round One: (November 9 and 10, 2021) The focus was on “what could we do?” to achieve the aspirational situations prompted by the core questions. Each day produced a list of ideas - a summary follows:

### Summary of Suggestions: Integration of MR in Education

- Participate in regular (annual) university, ministry and institutional research conferences, workshops, and seminars
- Coach and train students and faculty to publish in local and international research journals
- Gain support from senior leaders to integrate MR across faculties (not just health)
- Begin process to integrate MR in graduate curriculum, then undergrad
- Share resources regionally to build capacity for coaching and mentoring across institutions

### Summary of Suggestions: Sustainability of MR

- Establish fully operational MR Hub office to support the region and facilitate resource sharing
- Encourage local needs assessments to support value/relevance of MR solutions
- Create new grant channels for researchers
- Leverage local, regional, and national stakeholders to support research
- Establish a broad base of mentors for researchers
- Support MR alumni to become advocates/promoters of research across region
- Embrace opportunities for research beyond the MR program
  - Support participants, and coaches to seek local support.
  - Support participants, and coaches to collaborate in grant writing for local/regional funding
  - Broaden research groups to be able to access funding for larger grant applications
- Develop a research culture

In advance of the next round of discussion, two experts, one from Canada and one from Africa, prepared short positioning videos on "Research Education: the Culture of Enquiry", and two other experts did the same for "Sustainability". Participants for the second round of discussion were asked to view the videos before the sessions.

Round Two (November 22 and 23, 2021): This round of two sessions was attended by additional international participants and included small breakout sessions to address the topic for the day. First, institutional/organizational leaders were grouped together to discuss what they would have needed to have done, to achieve the aspirational state. Others continued to discuss what “could” be done to achieve that state. The summaries of suggestions from the first round, noted above, were shared with them to prompt their discussion.

Survey (November 25, 2021): A QuestionPro survey sent to a large group of MR stakeholders and resulted in 68 responses of which 34% were from Uganda, 30% from Canada, and the rest from other countries in Africa. This helped to prioritize the suggested actions.

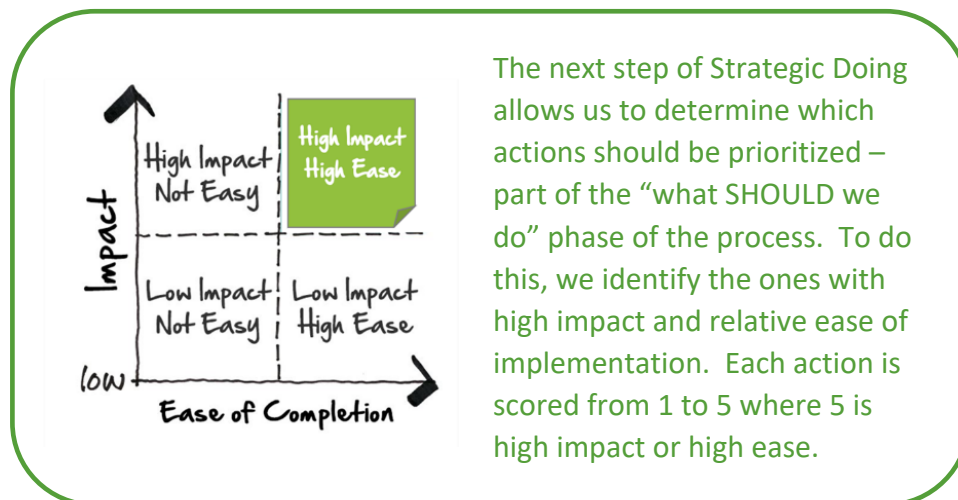
Round Three (November 29): In advance of the final session, ideas proposed in the previous discussions were streamlined and consolidated by the strategic doing team and 12 suggested actions were identified – 6 related to education/culture of enquiry, and 6 related to sustainability, although there is overlap among them.

#### Education/Culture of Enquiry:

1. Engage with and gain support from senior leaders for MR integration across faculties, not just healthcare
2. Develop and support an alumni network of advocates
3. Form a network of MR education leaders at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels to encourage cascade training
4. Build awareness of MR through the sharing of stories, community outreach, enhanced KT, and regional forums
5. Participate in existing university/Ministry/institutional research conferences, workshops and seminar events
6. Begin the process to integrate MR in graduate curriculum first, then undergraduate

#### Sustainability

7. Establish a fully operational main MR Hub Office to support the region and facilitate resource sharing, project results, funding strategies, local research themes/regional needs and local publications
8. Link research evidence to policy making and emphasize local relevance and impact to build understanding among decision makers
9. Establish MR Hub Offices in each country and seek external funding for this through partnerships
10. Engage broader stakeholder groups (e.g. institutions, universities, global organizations, Ministries, KT groups) to access funding for large scale grant applications that incorporate MR projects
11. Create an alumni network to share lessons learned to help garner support for MR locally, regionally, and nationally
12. Leverage community and institutional stakeholders, researchers, and research supporters to promote MR



During this round, surveys were posted for participants to rank actions according to their impact and ease of implementation. Some technical issues were experienced with the Zoom application and so not all ranking was completed during the session – however, results from 3 of 4 poll segments were obtained to further prioritize the potential actions. The core team later provided their ranking for the missed poll items.

Six breakout groups were each asked to further explore one education-oriented action and one sustainability-oriented action and to identify tactics to help achieve each one, as well as associated metrics.



*Strategic Doing participants, November 29, 2021*

## Summary of Priorities

Group decision making in Strategic Doing is done with a simple matrix method that is often used in agile leadership. Two criteria (relative impact and ease of implementation) are scored to help prioritize the most important and do-able options. Participants scored the priorities with 5 being high impact and easy to implement – the average score for each criterion, and the totals, are provided here, with the highest total score being shown in bold.

	Impact	Ease	Total
<b>Education/Culture of Enquiry (limited response)</b>			
Engage with and gain support from senior leaders for MR integration across faculties, not just healthcare	3.33	3.44	6.77
<b>Develop and support an alumni network of advocates</b>	4.0	4.28	<b>8.28</b>
Form a network of MR education leaders at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels to encourage cascade training	3.67	3.76	7.43
<b>Build awareness of MR through the sharing of stories, community outreach, enhanced KT, and regional forums</b>	4.67	4.44	<b>9.11</b>
<b>Participate in existing university/Ministry/institutional research conferences, workshops and seminar events</b>	3.67	4.12	<b>7.79</b>
Begin the process to integrate MR in graduate curriculum first, then undergraduate	4.0	3.32	7.32
<b>Sustainability</b>			
<b>Establish a fully operational main MR Hub Office to support the region and facilitate resource sharing, project results, funding strategies, local research themes/regional needs and local publications</b>	4.62	3.61	<b>8.23</b>
Link research evidence to policy making and emphasize local relevance and impact to build understanding among decision makers	4.28	3.50	7.78
Establish MR Hub Offices in each country and seek external funding for this through partnerships	4.48	3.38	7.86
<b>Engage broader stakeholder groups (e.g. institutions, universities, global organizations, Ministries, KT groups) to access funding for large scale grant applications that incorporate MR projects</b>	4.59	3.65	<b>8.24</b>



<b>Create an alumni network to share lessons learned to help garner support for MR locally, regionally, and nationally</b>	4.28	4.38	<b>8.66</b>
<b>Leverage community and institutional stakeholders, researchers, and research supporters to promote MR</b>	4.28	4.00	<b>8.28</b>

Further comments on the top priorities identified by the group follow. These include comments on the results of a survey sent to participants to indicate importance of a list of choices.

### Actions to support development of a culture of enquiry

**1. Build awareness of MR through the sharing of stories, community outreach, enhanced KT, and regional forums** *(This was seen to have the highest impact and be easiest to implement – although it was ranked second lowest on the survey in terms of “Importance”. Nonetheless, it is considered here as a top priority)*

- Advocacy is key and this also opens opportunities for mentorship and for demystifying research; stories from MR graduates will help others see opportunities
- Could use MR as background course for post-graduate work in universities before proposals are developed
- Conferences are helpful for building momentum, gaining interest, attracting funding
- MR has helped researchers to gain insight into awards of bigger grants

**2. Develop and support an alumni network of advocates** *(This action scored second highest for impact and ease of implementation – but was ranked lowest for importance from the survey. It overlaps with a similar action, that scored highest, to support sustainability (see next section) – and is considered here as a high priority)*

- Generate database of alumni at country-level; engage them to confirm goals of advocacy program and benefits to them
- Stratify alumni for effective operations and provide tools for advocacy; senior alumni can be mentors, spokespeople
- Collaboration across other alumni networks is important to broaden base
- Metrics include contact details of all alumni included in database and supplied to national /regional hub office, # of meetings hosted and attendance log
- Advocates Enrollment log, Outreach log with feedback from target audience and Benefits log by advocates would also be helpful

**3. Participate in existing university/Ministry/institutional research conferences, workshops and seminar events** *(This action scored the next highest total for impact and ease of implementation and was ranked second on the survey)*

- This will raise the profile of MR, increasing awareness locally/regionally – but also for funders/sponsors – and if working with international institutions, it raises

profile of both MR, and the institution where MR is happening, which encourages people to work there

- MR should feature prominently in these events OR be recognized as a key partner (speakers and/or presenters will highlight their MR connection)
- Success metrics include tracking the number of these events with MR as partner, the frequency of MR related research presented at conferences
- MR should be embedded in community-lead activities (e.g., see UNICEF, MSF) – with more people engaged in MR, the output with other collaborators will demonstrate MR’s success (e.g., WHO partnered event).
- Metric: Rate of MR related research published, including co-authorship and when referenced in academic publications; and successful and impactful knowledge translation into practice – impacts at community level and potentially, more broadly.

### Actions to support sustainability

- 1. Create an alumni network to share lessons learned to help garner support for MR locally, regionally, and nationally** *(This was seen to be the easiest action to implement, and it has high impact. Alumni understand MR and are well positioned to serve as advocates, mentors and knowledge transfer enthusiasts)*
  - Coordination by the Hub with orientation and network opportunities will be important
  - Virtual or physical exchange programs would help to share best practices
  - Metrics include number of participants, their research output, mentorship offered, grants awarded – and replication of the MR model elsewhere
- 2. Establish a fully operational main MR Hub Office to support the region and facilitate resource sharing, project results, funding strategies, local research themes/regional needs and local publications** *(This was seen to have the highest impact and good ease of implementation by session participants and was the highest ranked action, in terms of importance, by survey respondents)*
  - Funding is needed for an East African Hub that will coordinate mentors, coaches, reviewers, communication, proposal writing, IT support and more; a Hub will be more cost effective than having resources distributed which may free up project funds
  - Hub will help to create networks and link teams working on similar projects to support KT and sharing of best practices; it may offer expert consulting to groups
  - Metrics include the number of groups and collaborations supported, reach and awareness of the Hub
- 3. Leverage community and institutional stakeholders, researchers, and research supporters to promote MR** *(This was seen to be one of the easiest actions to implement, and it has strong impact)*

- Bring together passionate local champions (alumni, coaches and others) to tell their stories – videos may help
  - Research and institutional planning should include consideration of MR, and can allow funds to be leveraged – in-kind support (e.g., waive ethics fees, include research time in job)
- 4. Engage broader stakeholder groups (e.g., institutions, universities, global organizations, Ministries, KT groups) to access funding for large scale grant applications that incorporate MR projects** *(This action has strong impact and good ease of implementation and was rated as having second highest importance by survey respondents)*
- Action is important as funding is a significant barrier, especially for novice researchers who have particular challenges accessing national funding; MR gives faculty and students experience with good research and publishing
  - MR enables novice researchers to develop confidence, build their network and access larger funding opportunities – this action will enhance this

## Summary of Priority Actions – The Four A’s

There is overlap between actions to support development of a culture of enquiry and ensuring sustainability of MR. Several actions also can easily merge. The top four actions – the 4 A’s - are:

<b><i>Awareness</i></b>	Web development, enhanced KT, regional forums, leveraging stakeholders as promoters, participating in existing conferences and events
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### Next Steps:

The next step is for the MR leadership together with the Strategic Doing participants to decide on priority action areas to be undertaken and when. These decisions will be dependent on the scale of the tasks and the number of participants with skillset and enthusiasm to become involved in the project teams. The recommended process is to define an initial “pathfinder project” that move toward the ultimate outcome.

## Conclusion:

The success of MR since 2008 has largely been achieved through the collective efforts of volunteers in Canada, Eastern Africa, and elsewhere. They have worked interdependently and distributed work across geographic and disciplinary boundaries. They have answered questions that no individual could recognize and tackle on their own. Against all odds, the grassroots MR approach to problem solving and discovery has been a success. But can it be sustained?

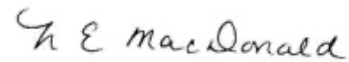
MR is at an important crossroads in its development. The next 12 months will likely determine if it will succeed as it tries to transition to a new phase of growth to establish financial stability and a culture of enquiry among local and national organizations. The torch is ready to be handed to a new generation of leaders.

We wish to thank Louisa Horne for her leadership through the strategic thinking phase of our planning. We are also indebted to approximately 100 people who participated in the strategic doing exercises through the rounds of discussion. We look forward to seeing the birth of a new phase for MR as the outcome of the strategic process emerges.

Respectfully submitted,



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MicroResearch Co-Director



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