

Twenty years of Research4Life: Learnings from the past and a look to the future for a more equitable research landscape

- *Domiziana Francescon*^{1*}

"The science is clear. The people are clear. This is no time to procrastinate. [...] The COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest challenge faced by us since the founding of the United Nations has brought us low. But we will not be beaten. We, too, must look beyond the current crisis and set our sights high, as we strike out for a world of dignity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet. Together, let us make this a decade of action; a decade of ambition; a decade of transformation; a decade of hope and peace."²

For many organizations, including Research4Life, these words from United Nations Secretary General António Guterres signified a mandate to accelerate efforts in support of the research behind the Sustainable Development Goals.

For the past twenty years Research4Life, a United Nations-publisher partnership, has played a critical role in facilitating free or low-cost access to vital subscription resources for researchers, librarians, doctors, policymakers and many others in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Together, the partners have worked to equip them with the access and tools they need to find evidence-based research and make robust policy decisions based on trusted, peer reviewed information.

Launched in 2002 with about 1500 journals from 6 major publishers³, Research4Life now counts up to 154,000 resources, including up to 30,000 journals and up to 131,000 books. Since 2019, 7 Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have been conducted, helping more than 6700 users get the most out of Research4Life. And while the recent covid-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role that science plays in society, it has also revealed just how rapidly the world in which we operate has changed in the two decades since Research4Life was founded.

This realization has helped the partnership to consider its own role as it shapes its new Strategic Plan – with the ambition to create a clear roadmap to 2030. The new Strategic Plan

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2 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-09-18/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-sustainable-development-goals-moment-delivered>

3 <https://www.research4life.org/blog/hinari-twenty-years/>

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will focus on inclusion and equity in the global research community, supporting the creation of an even richer body of research which will help to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and taking a more holistic approach that will support the community of users as both consumers and producers of research. As Chandra Bhushan Yadav, 2019-2021 Research4Life User Representative, noted: “In the sustainability era, I believe evidence-based information is of great importance to contribute to our great planet and the people that inhabit it.”⁴

Learnings from the Research4Life Strategic Reviews:

Two in-depth evaluations of Research4Life were undertaken during 2019-2021 to provide important evidence to support Research4Life’s strategic objectives: an Infrastructure Review⁵ and a User Review⁶, plus a Landscape Analysis⁷. The reviews are part of a five-year cycle of in-depth evaluations of the partnership to inform and to guide the next Strategic Plan.

The Landscape Analysis, looking at a comprehensive literature review, highlighted a few factors influencing how Research4Life operates:

1. **Growth in Global South research:** Growing demand for higher education has increased the talent pool for research and has seen the number of universities in LMICs soar. Increased R&D investment and need for research funding also means that there is a growing demand for more equitable research partnerships between high income countries and LMICs.
2. **The rise of Open Access (OA):** Beyond emergency measures, covid-19 is likely to lead to increased investment by governments in scientific research, information and advice and strengthened demands for open access to scientific publications and data. The growing amount of OA literature available, and the changing in publishing business models, means new challenges and opportunities – such as the need to build capacity and awareness with LMICs researchers.
3. **Workflows changes:** LMIC researchers risk being left behind as technological infrastructure increases in complexity and skills gaps widen – and initiatives for scholarly communication need to adapt for the changing technological environments.
 - The Infrastructure Review emphasized a number of key findings, based on interviews with 26 Research4Life partners and external experts to evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership: Research4Life has improved its offering, however usage has declined
 - Many partners are unaware of the decline in usage
 - Research4Life aligns with partners’ mission but lacks external visibility
 - There is limited awareness of the SDGs among partners
 - Publisher exclusions create large volumes of work

4 <https://www.research4life.org/blog/from-playing-cricket-to-supporting-health-researchers-research4lifes-user-representative-talks-about-his-work-as-a-librarian-in-nepal/>

5 <https://www.research4life.org/about/strategic-plan/>

6 <https://www.research4life.org/news/press-release-research4life-user-review-needs-challenges/>

7 <https://www.research4life.org/news/research-consulting-completes-landscape-analysis-for-research4life/>

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- Current training is deemed effective by partners who are aware of them
- Total costs have increased slightly - but cost per login has more than doubled
- Views on OA are mixed, and partners are frequently involved with other access initiatives
- The User Review consisted of both qualitative and quantitative studies with in-depth user interviews, an online survey and two in-depth case studies. It provided the following insights:
Relevance - Research4Life is a relevant resource for users who are aware of it, have had appropriate training and have access to supporting infrastructure. For these users, the absence of Research4Life would leave a significant gap: 97% of survey respondents view Research4Life as very valuable for their career⁸. However, overall usage remains limited. The most significant factor influencing usage is awareness, while the level of demand and the confidence to use the programs are also important factors.
- **Effectiveness** - Most users of Research4Life rate this resource as effective – delivering the objectives intended. The majority of participants expressed satisfaction with Research4Life on a range of issues, including platform, content and training – with 86% of respondents⁹ feeling highly satisfied with the Research4Life training MOOC¹⁰. However, challenges these areas are due to lack of awareness, reach and technical issues.
- **Impact** – Where Research4Life is used in institutions, it has made significant impact on its users: 86% of survey respondents say Research4Life improves their research skills, 78% that it improves their research quantity and 78% their research quality¹¹. As Dr. Pratyush Shrestha, Neurosurgeon at the Upendra Devkota Memorial National Institute of Neurological and Allied Sciences, said: “I can’t imagine being able to do that without Research4Life [...] it is really our only source of current information. It allows me to read what I need to be able to stay up to date.”¹²

Strategic priorities for the future of Research4Life :

By mapping the findings and context from the Reviews, along with in depth partner and user consultations, Research4Life has identified areas for prioritization in its response to the challenges and opportunities outlined above: 1. Product and service diversification; 2. User experience and marketing communications; 3. Funding and operational structure to support Research4Life.

Research4Life’s core activities play a vital infrastructural role into the development of evidence-based policies and investment priorities that will maximise the chances of the SDGs being achieved, specifically SDG17: Partnership for the Goals. It will be key to realize this vision through close collaboration with Research4Life’s two core constituencies:

- The Research4Life platform and community will enable **researchers** to contribute to the global knowledge environment by connecting key stakeholders and providing resources.

8 <https://www.research4life.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-R4L-user-review.pdf>

9 Ibid.

10 <https://www.research4life.org/training/mooc/>

11 <https://www.research4life.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-R4L-user-review.pdf>

12 <https://www.research4life.org/blog/research4life-helps-save-lives-neurosurgery-nepal/>

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- Stronger engagement and advocacy will help **partners and donors** to achieve their mission to contribute to the creation of a genuinely equitable open scholarship ecosystem.

To support the 2030 Strategy and respond to Research4Life's unmet resource need, in 2020 the partnership established Friends of Research4Life¹³, a US-based 501(c)(3) charitable organization with an independent governance structure and Board of Directors. Its establishment as fundraising vehicle¹⁴ will make it possible for funding agencies and individual donors to support Research4Life – helping to create more opportunities for Research4Life to expand content collection, extend training programs and to increase outreach.

The 2030 Strategic Plan aligns with the United Nations Decade of Action¹⁵, and builds on previous work to expand content, simplify criteria for eligibility and access, extend training and, vitally, increase visibility so that the benefits of Research4Life can reach a growing audience. Research4Life's future direction transforms from one-way donation to reciprocal engagement to enable diverse and rich scholarly exchange, significantly increase participation of researchers from LMICs in the global research community. Crucially, the user community will be an active participant in the delivery of this next phase of Research4Life: true equity will only be achieved if users sit at the heart of the Plan with an equal voice in its evolution.

Register for access to Research4Life :

Research4Life is a partnership between five UN Agencies (WHO, FAO, UNEP, WIPO, ILO), two major US Universities (Yale and Cornell), two global technology businesses, many individual experts and over 200 publisher partners – supported by the Publisher Coordinator sponsored by the International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers (STM).

Since 2002, Research4Life has provided researchers at more than 10,500 institutions in over 125 lower- and middle-income countries with free or low-cost online access to up to 154,000 leading journals and books in the fields of health, agriculture, environment, applied sciences and legal information.

Not-for-profit institutions from eligible countries, areas and territories¹⁶ can register for free or low-cost access to international scientific journals, publications and databases¹⁷. Research4Life additionally offers webinars, MOOCs and training materials for librarians, information specialists, scientists, researchers and students¹⁸.

13 <https://www.research4life.org/news/new-nonprofit-boosts-research4lifes-mission-to-build-research-capacity-in-lower-and-middle-income-countries/>

14 <https://friendsofresearch4life.org/>

15 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/>

16 <https://www.research4life.org/eligibility>

17 <https://www.research4life.org/access/>

18 <https://www.research4life.org/training/>