

Preface

One of the greatest challenges facing the World Health Organization, member states and the global health community is how to ensure access to safe and effective health services for those most in need. Increasingly, we all recognize that strengthening health systems is a core part of this challenge. Without stronger health systems, new technological developments and innovations, as well as many of those we already have, are likely to remain inaccessible to poorer people.

However, more evidence is needed about what works in terms of health system strengthening, and under what conditions. Sadly, health policy and systems research (HPSR) has been relatively neglected for many years, and while there are some areas, such as health financing, that are now much better understood than they were 20 years ago, other issues, such as how to retain and motivate the health workforce or what service delivery models work best in resource-constrained environments, are still poorly understood.

Unlike some types of health research, health policy and systems research needs to be rooted in and responsive to national needs. Health systems and social, economic and political contexts vary so widely that there is no 'one size fits all' solution for health system strengthening. Instead, each and every country needs capacity to analyse its own health system and, drawing on international literature, develop and evaluate its own health system-strengthening strategies.

Developing national capacity for health policy and systems research is thus critical – but may in and of itself be of little value. We also need to enhance capacity to ensure that research is responsive to national needs, that it gets synthesized, summarized and packaged in ways that policy-makers and civil society representatives can use, and that policy-makers have sufficient capacity to access and apply research findings. As societies become increasingly democratic, it is even more important that research evidence is widely accessible and can be used by multiple stakeholders, both government and non-government, to inform their policy positions.

This report by the Alliance for HPSR covers new ground in terms of looking at capacity both to generate and apply research evidence. The report not only describes the capacity development challenges for health systems research but also outlines concrete actions that should be pursued to enhance capacity. Action is needed at multiple levels (global, national and sub-national) and by multiple stakeholders (national health leaders, researchers, international funding and development agencies, as well as civil society stakeholders) to achieve the goal of enhanced capacity for HPSR. While achievement of this goal requires considered and coordinated action, the stakes are high: enhanced access, particularly for the poor, to safe and effective health services, depends on it.



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