



## INFLUENCING HEALTH SYSTEMS POLICY AND PRACTICE

### Experiences from the Consortium for Research on Equitable Health Systems

There is a growing interest in the role of research in policymaking processes. This has been driven by an evidence-based policy movement which advocates the use of evidence to strengthen policy and practice. At the same time leading research funders, in particular those working in international health and development, are increasingly concerned about the practical implications of research and how these can be used to save lives and reduce poverty.

However, the ways in which policies are formulated, adapted and implemented are complex as policymakers' decisions are subject to many influences, with research being only one factor. The production of high quality research is not sufficient to ensure it is used. In order to strengthen the impact of research on policy and practice it is important that researchers take into account the contexts in which they work, including the multitude of factors that affect how policies are developed and implemented, and use this knowledge to communicate research findings, policy implications and recommendations effectively.

This briefing paper relays some experiences from the Consortium for Research on Equitable Health Systems (CREHS) of getting research into policy and practice. CREHS research focuses on how to strengthen health systems policies and interventions in ways that benefit poor people with projects in Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa, Thailand and India.

Country level experiences highlight the different political contexts and challenges that researchers have faced in communicating research and engaging with stakeholders, and some of the approaches that they have used to overcome these.

### Key points

- CREHS researchers have carried out a range of approaches to communicate research and influence policy, including direct interaction with policymakers, working with the media to influence debates and holding dissemination meetings with communities.
- At national levels, research is more likely to be used when it addresses country priorities and when recommendations take into account the reality of different contexts including practicality, budget and service delivery issues.
- Policy influence requires dedicated efforts towards building relationships with key stakeholders, strengthening researchers' ability to communicate findings to different groups of people, and increasing policymakers' capacity to understand and use evidence when making decisions.

## OVERCOMING THE RESEARCH-POLICY DIVIDE IN TANZANIA

For many policymakers in Tanzania, severe time constraints, heavy workloads and poorly coordinated internal research linkages leave them with little time to access, absorb and use research when making decisions. This situation is reflective of an ongoing tension between researchers and policymakers: whilst national policymakers are interested in policy-relevant research with practical implications, researchers have more incentive to produce outputs relevant to international audiences and for academic journals that are often too long or technical for policymakers to use.

To overcome this problem, CREHS members have focused on producing research that is relevant to national level health priorities and developed research questions and approaches in consultation with key stakeholders. At the Ifakara Health Institute (IHI), policy-relevant research includes an evaluation of the National Insecticide Treated Net (ITN) Voucher Scheme. This research highlighted the persistent socioeconomic and urban-rural differentials in net ownership and, in doing so, has helped influence the geographic targeting of the national under-five catch up campaign. Free distribution of nets to all children under five will now start in the poorest and most isolated parts of the country.

The Communications Unit at the IHI also works to narrow the research-policy divide. The unit organises research dissemination workshops that actively involve policymakers from the Ministry of Health and multilateral organisations. It also relays important findings to the communities involved in the research. This helps to break the practice of researchers informing international

audiences before local level stakeholders and can also influence policy by providing communities with knowledge to approach and campaign to politicians. The idea here is that community mobilisation allows research findings to filter up from local government to higher tiers of policy.

A variety of creative communications approaches have been used including local musicians who spread messages through songs including, recently, to promote intermittent preventive treatment of malaria for infants during routine health facility visits.

“The glaring gap between researchers and policy makers needs to be narrowed through a serious, ethical and honest rethink of the research prioritisation process at both national and international levels.

At the national level, broader stakeholder consultation and participation are needed in prioritisation and resource allocation for an appropriate and sustainable research agenda.

At the international level, what is urgently required is for researchers to get closer to governments, to listen and advise and not to direct or impose and use financial incentives as carrots to agree to researchers’ areas of interest.

Quote from former health policymaker in Tanzania

## INVOLVING POLICYMAKERS THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, there is a disjuncture between health policies as laid down on paper by the government and how these are implemented in practice by local authorities, which is exacerbated by a lack of structures to hold local actors to account. This policy context adds to the challenges faced by researchers based in the Health Policy Research Group (HPRG), University of Nigeria: in addition to influencing policy at the state level, they also attempt to influence how these are implemented on the ground.

CREHS research includes an analysis of the development and implementation of two health policies in Enugu State: Community Based Health Insurance and the District Health System, through which researchers have identified the challenges to effective implementation and provided practical recommendations to overcome these.

In order to increase the impact of research, researchers actively engage with policymakers throughout the research process: at the beginning, researchers use policy

makers’ input to generate the initial research question, and during the research policy makers are sometimes involved as members of the research team. This has the benefit of ensuring that research is policy relevant. It also incentivises policymakers to use the evidence that is generated. To achieve this type of partnership, HPRG researchers maintain regular contact with policymakers and have developed strong informal linkages, for instance through membership of medical networks or professional associations.

In addition to outputs aimed at academic audiences, HPRG research findings are communicated at workshops for policymakers. Similar to IHI in Tanzania, there is also a focus on communicating findings at the local level through meetings with local opinion leaders, religious leaders and women’s groups. Successful communication with these groups has required researchers to have good knowledge of cultural customs as well as an ability to communicate messages in local languages.

## WORKING IN THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH IN THAILAND: A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD?

Amongst CREHS partners, researchers based at the International Health Policy Program (IHPP) in Thailand are in a unique situation as they are able to interact directly with policymakers and influence policy. This is because the Program is located in the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) and more than half of the researchers are MOPH officials on secondment at IHPP.

In this situation the pathways through which research influences policy are clearly set out - policymakers, including the Minister of Public Health and the Permanent Secretary for Public Health, request IHPP researchers to provide technical support or evidence concerning a specific health issue, and researchers then have a set time frame within which to provide feedback and recommendations for policy. This organisational arrangement has enabled researchers to develop relationships with policymakers, who value the evidence that they provide.

There are several examples where research has directly influenced policy decisions. For example, policy briefings that show the pro-poor benefits of the Universal Health Care Coverage Scheme (a national health insurance policy that entitles all Thai citizens to a comprehensive set of health services), were instrumental in persuading

the government to safeguard funding for the scheme, despite pressure arising from the global economic crisis. Researchers also convinced policymakers to expand the services offered under the scheme to include antiretroviral (ARV) treatment and renal replacement therapy with evidence that the costs of these treatments can be catastrophic and impoverishing for poor households.

Having a large part of a research programme that is organisationally and administratively located within government allows researchers to address, interact with policymakers regularly and identify and policy relevant research questions. However, this close relationship with the Ministry of Health raises concerns about whether researchers can maintain scientific independence and be politically impartial. To overcome this, IHPP researchers receive research funding from several domestic and international sources which means that their agenda is not only set by the government. They also seek to communicate findings to other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations, civil society groups or the media, with the intention of influencing policy indirectly and to shape public opinions.

## SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION BEFORE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Centre for Health Policy (CHP) at the University of Witwatersrand and the Health Economics Unit (HEU) at the University of Cape Town have jointly undertaken research projects in South Africa for almost 20 years. They share the current African National Congress (ANC) vision of addressing health inequities and implementing National Health Insurance (NHI), a reform that gained policy momentum when the ANC came into power in 1994 and according to the 2009 Election Manifesto, will be rolled out over the next five years.

Researchers have, over the years, played a key role in providing evidence for health care financing policy debates. Current research includes modelling the costs of alternative NHI schemes within the context of a heavily burdened public health system.

Researchers have been able to influence policy in part because of their efforts engage and stimulate dialogue with policy-makers. Their links from the past, in terms of involvement in anti-apartheid activism, remain an important source of shared experiences and converging interests. Furthermore, researchers have nurtured a national reputation for credible research through which they have earned the trust of policy-makers.

The media has also played an important role in shaping the NHI debate in South Africa. The issue has been particularly divisive with some media outlets supporting the policy, others opposing it and others voicing concerns about its implementation. For example, newspaper articles and radio programmes identified several factors that could limit the feasibility of implementing universal health coverage including the lack of health workers and inadequate hospital facilities. Recognising the power of the media to shape public opinion and its importance as a source of information, CHP and HEU have devoted substantial efforts to better inform the media of the issues, correct misperceptions and encourage more open public debate.

The strategy adopted by researchers has been to publish opinion newspaper articles which explained the importance of NHI, and the need to implement it carefully to ensure it is a viable policy initiative. Researchers have also appeared on radio and primetime news television programmes to engage with other stakeholders, thereby presenting a more balanced view of the ideas around NHI. They were also quoted in newspaper reports. This multi-pronged approach of producing material for publication as well as being readily available to participate in media reports has helped to open up public debate through the media.

### The need for nationally-relevant and policy-focused research

There is a tension when working as part of an international research partnership between balancing research on international issues with national level priorities. It is important that research agendas and questions address the needs of countries and that recommendations take into account the reality of different contexts including practicality, budget and service delivery issues. Consulting and working with policymakers and other key stakeholders will help ensure that research agendas are aligned to national problems and priorities.

### A strategic communications approach

It is important to develop an understanding of what channels of communication are effective to reach different groups by monitoring and evaluating communications activities and consulting with key stakeholders to find out, for example, to what extent the internet is used to search for information, what length of written outputs are preferred by policymakers and what type of are trusted. With this knowledge, it is possible to develop and implement a more effective strategy for communicating research and ensure that activities are appropriate to reach key stakeholders.

### Tailoring messages to different audiences

There is also a need to shape key messages so that they are compelling to different groups of people who have diverse levels of technical expertise and interests. Policymakers in particular require a serious technical argument which includes the key facts and reasonable recommendations that take into consideration issues of affordability and feasibility. Reaching communities on the other hand, requires a different set of messages that explain the outcomes of the research in clear terms and the relevance of this for communities.

### The importance of timely dissemination

As well as being policy relevant, research findings are more likely to have an influence when they are timely and results are communicated when policy decision-making

and debates occur, for instance before strategic planning sessions and health sector review meetings. This raises another tension between the long time that it takes to develop, carry out and analyse research and the short timeframes during which decisions are made. Researchers can reduce this problem by framing completed research findings in current policy debates and planning outputs to coincide with important events.

### Shaping public opinion through the media

There are multiple ways in which research can have an impact including by influencing public opinion and shaping long-term views. When it is independent, the media can play an important role in shaping debates, increasing coverage of neglected issues and gradually changing opinion, and can be an invaluable mechanism for researchers to communicate important findings to the general public.

### Engaging directly with policymakers

Personal interactions with senior or mid-level health policymakers and managers is a particularly effective way of communicating research findings. This is enhanced when researchers have reputations for producing credible evidence and have established strong and trusting relations with policymakers. Research dissemination meetings and workshops provide good opportunities to discuss and debate evidence directly with policymakers. However, it is also important to maintain communication with policymakers throughout the research process to provide updates and develop trusting relationships.

### Committing resources, building capacity

As has been shown, effective communication for policy change requires time to build relations, skills to reach different audience and resources to organise meetings and produce outputs. Developing the capacity of researchers to communicate, for instance, to write short briefs for policymakers, and working closely with policymakers so that they can better understand and use research findings, will help to increase the chances that research will impact health systems policy and practice.

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This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.