Why systems research is more relevant than ever

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Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (AHPSR) established in 1999 – with the goal: to promote the generation, dissemination and use of knowledge for enhancing health systems performance through catalytic action

• **Strategic Objectives:**
  – Provide a forum for learning and exchange for HPSR community
  – Support institutional capacity for conduct and uptake of health policy and systems research.
  – Stimulate the generation of knowledge and innovations to nurture learning and resilience in health systems.
  – Increase the demand for use of knowledge for strengthening health systems
Contributions of the Alliance HPSR

Since 2000 the Alliance has supported over 350 projects in more than 70 countries.

Bridging the worlds of research and policy
Contributions of the Alliance HPSR

• Stimulating greater interest, appreciation, and recognition for HPSR and its role in health systems strengthening:
  – Organization of global symposia (Montreux 2010, Beijing 2012, Cape Town 2014 and Vancouver 2016)
  – Contributions to the World Health Report 2013 and acknowledgement of HPSR in achieving goal of Universal Health Coverage
  – Supported the establishment of *Health Systems Global*, a professional society of HPS researchers
Contributions of the Alliance HPSR

• Helped to build the HPSR through innovations in thinking:
  – Sounds Choices (2007)
  – Systems Thinking (2009)
  – HPSR Methodology Reader (2012)
  – Participatory Action Research Methodology Reader (2014)
  – HPSR Synthesis Methodology Reader (2017)
Contributions of the Alliance HPSR

• Pioneering new thinking and forging partnerships to help shape and inform current approaches to the conduct and use of HPSR

  – Establishment of Implementation Research Platform within WHO
  – Collaboration with UNICEF, GAVI and WHO Regional Office to support embedded research led by decision-makers
  – Engagement with Wellcome Trust & DFID on the development of theoretical framework for the development of capacity to use evidence
  – Facilitating learning and exchange among global actors (including the Sax Institute) to establish a LEAP Forum
Reflections & Learnings
Our challenge

• We know what works but we have not been successful at ensuring that those interventions are effectively integrated into systems and scaled up

• **This is not new**

• What is different now is the global context –
  – Shift from MDGs to SDGs
  – Learnings from Ebola and other 'trans-boundary' threats to health resulting in emphasis on resilience of health systems
  – Growing recognition and evolution of complexity and systems
Change is needed

“I want you to find a bold and innovative way to do everything exactly the same way it’s been done for 25 years.”

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Assumption that outcomes and impact can be predicted based on inputs and outputs
What happens in reality

- Inputs
  - Research Funding
  - Priority Setting
  - Capacity Development

- Outputs
  - Publications

- Outcomes

- Impact

- Evidence & other Knowledge
- Context
- Competing Interests
- System readiness
- Opportunity for change
- Political will/motivation

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Learnings and Reflections

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Science → Evidence → Care → Patient Experience

- Insights poorly managed
- Evidence poorly used
- Experience poorly captured

Communities, Clinicians, Patients

Missed Opportunities, Waste, and Harm
Learning Health Systems

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CHANGING MINDSETS

STRATEGY ON HEALTH POLICY AND SYSTEMS RESEARCH

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Shifting our thinking

• Separation of 'knowing' and 'doing' a false dichotomy
Shifting our thinking

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• Evidence-based to evidence-informed
Shifting our thinking

• Separation of 'knowing' and 'doing' a false dichotomy

• Evidence-based to evidence-informed

• Recommendations to options
  “Policies for health are social choices, and the ways in which they are formulated and implemented matter very much in determining ... either a virtuous or a vicious cycle between [a society’s] level of development and the workings of its health system.”
Shifting our thinking

- Separation of 'knowing' and 'doing' a false dichotomy
- Evidence-based to evidence-informed
- Recommendations to options
- *Translational* research to *transformative* research
Shifting our thinking

• Separation of 'knowing' and 'doing' a false dichotomy
• Evidence-based to evidence-informed
• Recommendations to options
• Translational research to transformative research

• Towards a learning health system that continually responds to changing contexts
Way Forward
Three fundamental shifts

• Systems Thinking

• Embedded Research

• Local investment and ownership of HPSR by policy and other decision-makers
Systems Thinking

- Emphasis on inter-linkages and relationship between internal and external factors (including structures, processes, and people) in a system.

"I’m sure glad the hole isn’t in our end..."
Systems Thinking

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Systems Thinking
Health systems strengthening is a process of change, not a one time event

- Evidence and knowledge is needed throughout the entire process not at an end point as is assumed in some models
Embedded Research

**Exploration**
- Research questions related to the feasibility, appropriateness, acceptability of interventions in relation to the context and health system in which the intervention is being implemented.

**Installation**
- Research questions related to the adoption, costs as well as how interventions can be integrated into existing system.

**Initial implementation**
- Research related to the fidelity, penetration as well as understanding impact of the intervention on health system.

**Full implementation/Scale-up**
- Research questions related to the sustainability of the intervention.

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Embedded Research

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Embedded Research

• National Level:
  – Exploring the use and impact of parastatal or otherwise linked research institutions within government bodies
  – Exploring the role of dedicated platforms for research priority setting and as a mechanism for funding HPSR

• Programme Level:
  – Decision-maker led research to improve programme implementation

• District level:
  – Strengthening the use of routine data in planning and monitoring of activities and to identify research needs
Local investment and ownership by policy and implementing agencies

• Increasing domestic funding for research
  – Utility of research findings not dependent upon the size of research grants – Alliance experience with grants ranging from 15K – 500K has shown that even small investments can contribute to significant improvements

• Integrating funding for research into programme activities
  – Research and Programme funding often separated so left hand doesn't always know what the right hand is doing.
  – Needs for evidence and knowledge are real time and systems need to be responsive

• Outcomes of research is to inform policy and other decision-making
  – participatory leadership for HPSR - ownership/responsibility for HPSR should be shared by researchers and policy makers
    – "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit"
Thank you!

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