INVESTING IN KNOWLEDGE

for resilient health systems

World Health Organization

Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research

BACKGROUND

The Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research was established in 1999 and is housed as an international partnership within the World Health Organization (WHO). At that time, global health was dominated by debates between vertical and horizontal approaches and between selective and comprehensive care. The HIV epidemic was the looming public health threat and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were at the top of the development agenda. Health policy and systems research was a concept that was still in its infancy.

The mandate of the Alliance emerged from the recommendations of the 1996 WHO Ad Hoc Committee on Health Research, which recognized the role of health research in strengthening health policies and the overall development of health systems. Work towards the Alliance's mission – to promote the generation and use of health policy and systems research as a means to strengthen the health systems in low- and middle-income countries – historically focused on three areas of work: the generation of policy and systems knowledge, promotion of its use in decision-making to improve the performance of health systems, and strengthening of capacities of researchers and decision-makers to engage in these efforts.

Now, after 15 years of learning and accomplishments, a new strategic plan is launched, reflecting a changed context, new challenges and opportunities ahead.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE FIELD OF HEALTH POLICY AND SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Much has been accomplished since the Alliance began its work. Today, weak health systems are widely recognized, including by disease-specific initiatives, as a critical obstacle to improving health. Since 1999, the Alliance has emerged as a leader, playing an instrumental role in highlighting the importance of policy and systems research in the attainment of global health goals as well as building momentum for the field. It has been an advocate, within WHO and towards decision-making bodies, to catalyse action resulting in significant developments. Alliance milestones include the launch of WHO's first strategy on health policy and systems research, *Changing Mindsets*; leading a platform for implementation research within WHO; playing a key role in the establishment of a new society for health systems research, Health Systems Global (HSG); significant contributions to three global symposia on health systems research – the most recent of which drew more than 2000 participants; and the recognition of the value of health policy and systems research and health systems strengthening in the new report *Health in 2015: from MDGs to SDGs*.

Post MDGs, health is now positioned in the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The approach required to achieve the single health goal is integrative, linking with other development goals and consistent with a 'systems' perspective. The inclusion of universal health coverage as a specific target underscores the importance of a well-functioning health system that delivers a wide range of health services with assured access, affordability and quality. In recent years, health systems in many low- and middle-income countries have faced severe shocks, from Ebola epidemics to political and financial crises. Such weak and fragile systems are ever more vulnerable, as are the populations they serve. The Alliance recognizes the need to help these systems build resilience and responsiveness.

With this growth in the field also comes a need for greater dialogue and collaboration among global and country-level actors. Through its experience in mobilizing others committed to improving health systems, the Alliance has understood that working together is the best approach: uniting policy-makers, researchers, implementers, communicators, managers, community workers, practitioners and people in the search for knowledge and methods to improve the health of their populations. Health Systems Global, for example, as a strategic partner of the Alliance, will provide an important mechanism for reaching the community of health policy and systems researchers.

Functioning in this way is not new. What is new for the Alliance is the emphasis on building partnerships to bring about change. This focus represents a key shift in its way of working but not in basic principles.

THE CHALLENGES AND PROMISE

The inadequacy of knowing merely what can work, as opposed to understanding how and why things work, when and for whom, has been brought home by uneven progress towards the achievement of the MDGs and more recently, by the Ebola epidemic. The basic problem remains: weak health systems are a critical obstacle to improving health. Even when there is knowledge about effective policies and interventions, these often cannot be implemented at scale or in equitable ways because of inefficient or fragmented systems. Decision-makers often do not ask for research addressing real-world problems in health policy and systems, while leadership and the capacity to generate and use knowledge to address weak health systems is often lacking. Research that addresses the determinants of health outside the health sector, or looks at how health and other SDGs are related, are neglected areas. What sort of knowledge is needed, how can it be generated, and how can its use be promoted to help strengthen and improve the performance of weak health systems? This challenge is the crux of the Alliance's work.

Health policy and systems research is a complex field whose value is increasingly acknowledged by those responsible for health outcomes at national and international levels. Understanding the relationships between health policies and health systems, as well as the broader determinants of health, requires the best minds from economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, medicine and public health. Addressing current health challenges from a systems perspective requires the involvement of researchers, decision-makers, communities and practitioners at all levels. It also requires a new focus for the Alliance on working with institutions, whose structures, incentives and overall culture may not encourage such an approach. Yet if changes are to be sustainable, supporting the capacity of institutions, not only that of individuals, is essential.

OBJECTIVES 2016–2020

The strategic objectives presented here have been formulated in response to the changing context and the greater emphasis on building and facilitating partnerships as a pathway to change. They describe how the Alliance will achieve impact and emphasize its role as a coalition for action.

The four main objectives of the Alliance are to:

1. Provide a unique forum for the health policy and systems research community;

2. Support institutional capacity for the conduct and uptake of health policy and systems research;

3. Stimulate the generation of knowledge and innovations to nurture learning and resilience in health systems;

4. Increase the demand for and use of knowledge for strengthening health systems.

OBJECTIVE 1.

PROVIDE A UNIQUE FORUM FOR THE HEALTH POLICY AND SYSTEMS RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Building on its experience, the Alliance will strengthen its role in convening partners, especially policy-makers, to identify and prioritize areas and topics of research in order to ensure that these respond directly to their needs, which in turn can facilitate the integration of evidence into policy. The field is broad and actors from different types of institutions, some outside the health sector, need to be included, especially in view of the mandate of the SDGs. The Alliance will continue to monitor progress in the field, raising awareness of critical knowledge gaps, and will develop and apply tools to facilitate the prioritization of health systems needs to inform policy and programmes. Sharing of results, both in terms of success or failure, can stimulate the work of others, leading to measurable improvements in efficient health systems.

The Alliance will:

- Bring together key actors, especially national policy-makers, to establish research priorities for health policy and systems research particularly related to the SDGs and other health goals

- Facilitate greater sharing, coordination and alignment of approaches among global and country actors

- Convene meetings of interested partners to discuss challenges facing the field and the role of the Alliance in addressing these.

ALLIANCE ADDED VALUE

Under the aegis of WHO, the Alliance has the legitimacy to convene national policy-makers, development partners, research institutions, civil society organizations and other key actors to advance the field of health policy and systems research.

SUPPORT INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR THE CONDUCT AND UPTAKE OF HEALTH POLICY AND SYSTEMS RESEARCH

The sustained development of capacity for health policy and systems research and uptake of evidence remains a key priority for the Alliance. In the next phase of its operations, it will intensify its engagements with research institutions in low- and middle-income countries to strengthen capacity for undertaking research, particularly on the part of women, early-career researchers and policy-makers. At the same time, it will intensify efforts towards fostering and encouraging a culture of evidence-informed decision-making through strengthening the capacity of policy institutes and stimulating the interest of policy-makers.

The Alliance will:

- Work with selected research and policy institutions to develop and test effective models and mechanisms to support capacity development

- Increase the uptake of research practices and evidence by decision-makers through active engagement, leveraging existing and new health policy and systems research networks and partnerships

- Strengthen the capacity of women, early-career researchers, and policy-makers as future leaders in the generation and uptake of knowledge by prioritizing their inclusion in training opportunities and programmes.

ALLIANCE ADDED VALUE

As a recognized global leader and learning organization, the Alliance has an established reputation and history in developing the field. This, coupled with its wide network of stakeholders among research and policy communities, makes it a natural home for developing collaborative efforts for strengthening institutional capacity.

STIMULATE THE GENERATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATIONS

There remain serious gaps in policy and systems knowledge. The Alliance will sponsor research and synthesis that responds directly to the needs of decision-makers, in order to provide the necessary evidence to support policy at national and global levels. In addition, the Alliance will expand its work on developing and facilitating new models and approaches for the generation, synthesis and use of policy and systems research to strengthen health systems.

The Alliance will:

- Increase production and publication of high quality, relevant research and syntheses on health policy and systems research

- Develop new models, methods and approaches for the generation, synthesis and use of health policy and systems research

- Create an open repository of knowledge products aimed at health systems strengthening.

ALLIANCE ADDED VALUE

As an agile partnership, the Alliance can – in real time – align its catalytic research funding to the needs and priorities of country actors and assume considered risks in order to stimulate innovation.

INCREASE THE DEMAND FOR AND USE OF KNOWLEDGE

There is no doubt that new knowledge is needed to respond to evolving systems challenges, but even the knowledge that is available is not being sufficiently used to strengthen the performance of health systems. Evidence-informed policy-making presupposes the availability of high quality, relevant information and decision-makers may need support to assess what is already known or to articulate demands for specific new evidence. Their engagement in the research process should ensure that results answer their needs.

The Alliance will:

- Build and support a network of policy- and decision-makers to strengthen the demand for health policy and system research

- Engage decision-makers and researchers at local and regional levels and implement mechanisms to identify and use available knowledge to improve health systems performance

- Launch policy-information platforms in selected countries to provide a space for policy- and decision-makers to share and use local and global knowledge on priority topics.

ALLIANCE ADDED VALUE
Through its relationships with WHO, especially its regional and country offices, and with other leading agencies and partnerships, the Alliance is seen as a trusted partner that can serve decision-making bodies at national and global levels.

PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERLINE THE ALLIANCE'S WORK

Equity

The Alliance recognizes the central concern to address problems of inequity, poverty and disadvantage in health systems around the world. In addition to addressing gender inequality and empowering women in its research, the Alliance will promote women as leaders in health systems and health research, and include criteria for funding research based on the leadership role of women researchers.

Collaboration

The Alliance has both supported and depended on partnerships to achieve its objectives. The Alliance plans to strengthen its partnership base further to become the leading organization to convene and build consensus among organizations with a stake in health policy and systems research, on an inclusive and participatory basis.

Systems thinking

The Alliance will continue to be a global leader in promoting and applying systems thinking to better understand and influence health systems in comprehensive and coherent ways. This means examining how health systems building blocks, institutions and people are connected to each other in ways that affect how health systems perform and affect people's health.

Leadership

Influencing health systems coherently requires leadership, innovation and learning. The Alliance will invest resources to enhance the evidence base around effective leadership in health and support the next generation of health policy and systems leaders.

ENSURING QUALITY AND MEASURING SUCCESS

As a learning organization, the Alliance relies on regular monitoring and feedback on its activities so as to allow for adjustments as necessary. Its Board oversees progress towards strategic objectives and its donors are regularly informed. Success is not measured by inputs or outputs alone. Outcomes, in terms of more knowledge and capacity in health policy and systems research, and especially impact in terms of changes in policy and practice are true indicators, difficult though they often are to demonstrate and measure. In 2016, the Alliance is making its monitoring processes more robust in order to ensure greater transparency and better value for the investment in its work.

Through its website, newsletters and publications, the Alliance will continue to consolidate credible information on health policy and systems research news, events and trainings, and serve as an open source of health policy and systems research knowledge and resources. The Alliance will continue to review and assess its own work along with that of others so as to provide the best options to support and use policy-relevant knowledge, for example, or the best strategies to strengthen the capacities of researchers and users of research.

The Alliance will demonstrate efficient and transparent management practices in the running of its Secretariat, programmes and projects. It will maintain the highest quality financial controls, respecting the value of funds invested, and regularly monitor and report on progress in activities, sharing these results broadly. It will continue to measure and document its outputs (for example, in terms of publications and number of training sessions) but in the next five years it will specifically seek to understand the impact of its efforts in terms of:

- What types of innovations are being generated through its work, and how these innovations are benefiting others

- Whether the Alliance has been able to reach decision-makers and engage with them in a meaningful way as part of the Alliance's partnership, and how this has contributed to improvements

- Whether the Alliance has contributed to greater sharing and learning among global actors, and how this has improved alignment and cohesion/collaboration

- The extent to which the Alliance has contributed to changes that are sustainable and have ownership by local decision-makers, and how far they can be sustained without external funding support.

ALLIANCE ADDED VALUE
The ability of the Alliance to bring about change comes from the fact that it engages at all stages of decision-making: identifying priorities, building capacity, supporting research and synthesis and disseminating results. This holistic approach is what makes the Alliance unique and what enables it to achieve impact.

CONCLUSION

On its own, the availability of more and better knowledge about health systems does little to change how that information is used to strengthen the performance of health systems. By engaging national and local decision-makers, health policy and systems researchers, scientists from other disciplines, health workers and implementers, development partners, donors and civil society, the Alliance is seeking improved results that are more sustainable, translatable across contexts, and available for all communities. It builds partnerships with institutions that share its mission: to strengthen the health systems in low- and middle-income countries by promoting the generation and use of health policy and systems research.

This strategy outlines a challenging and exciting agenda to provide a unique forum for decision-makers in health policy and systems research, support institutional capacity for training and mentorship, stimulate knowledge generation and innovation, and encourage the demand for and use of research. In this way, the Alliance plays a unique role in serving local and global communities to strengthen health system development and contribute to the SDGs.

It is indeed **changing mindsets**.

The Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research was established in 1999 and is housed as an international partnership within the World Health Organization. It is governed by a Board made up of stakeholders in health policy and systems research, and assisted by a Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee. The Secretariat, headed by an Executive Director, manages day-to-day implementation of activities.

The Alliance works to:

1. **Provide a unique forum** for the health policy and systems research community
2. **Support institutional capacity** for the conduct and uptake of health policy and systems research
3. **Stimulate the generation of knowledge and innovations** to nurture learning and resilience in health systems
4. **Increase the demand for and use of knowledge** for strengthening health systems.

Its mission is to promote the generation and use of health policy and systems research as a means to strengthen the health systems in low- and middle-income countries.

Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research