



Book Review AMJ 2013, 6, 10

Health policy and systems research

Reviewed by: Ravi Shankar

Email: ravi.dr.shankar@gmail.com

Health has been widely recognised as a basic human right but unfortunately many developing countries are unable to offer good quality health care to their residents. In many resource-constrained settings healthcare delivery suffers from many problems. Health systems are crucial for developing countries both to ensure basic health care to the population and for implementing programs for the control of major public health problems. Health system strengthening is crucial to achieve the millennium development goals.

There is, however, a significant lack of knowledge about health system functioning in many developing low-income countries. Health policy and systems research (HPSR) thus needs strengthening. To accomplish this task an Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research has been formed and the first global symposium on health systems research was held in Montreux, Switzerland in 2010. The third symposium will be held in South Africa in 2014. Recently the alliance has published a methodology reader for health policy and systems research.

The reader is divided into five parts. Part 1 provides an overview of the field of health systems research in developing countries and key challenges in the field. Part 2 deals with key steps to be followed while conducting HPSR research and part 3 describes a selection of papers which provide a conceptual framework of the field. Part 4 provides a selection of papers on HPSR research drawn from developing countries. Part 5 presents references for papers that reflect on specific concepts or methods relevant to HPSR as well as some of the particular challenges of working in this field.

Section three presents an interesting selection of papers dealing with HPSR in low income nations and is the major section of the book. Part 1 offers cross-sectional perspectives and among the issues addressed are policy interventions that attract nurses to rural areas, political analysis of health reform in the Dominican Republic, pathways to malaria resistance in remote central Vietnam, network-based social capacity building programs from Ethiopia, and strategies for coping with the costs of inpatient care. Part 2 examines the case

study approach and among the papers presented are those dealing with assessment of decentralised health care, health management information systems and decision making in Zambia, the potential of using a 'retired' workforce to deal with the crisis in human resources for health, the emergence of political priority for safe motherhood in Honduras among others. Ethnographic research has been popularised by anthropologists and modified approaches can play an important role in health systems research. Among the papers selected are those dealing with evidence-based policy-making in maternal health, and the organisation of primary health clinics in Cape Town, South Africa. Advances in impact evaluation, investigating policy and system change over time, cross national analysis and action research are the other parts in this section.

The boxes, figures and tables simplify the understanding of the material presented in the text. The book will be of use to all those conducting HPSR and also to those interested in the topic.

About the book: Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, World Health Organisation: Health policy and systems research A methodology reader. Geneva: 2012. ISBN 978 92 4 150313 6. Available free from: <http://www.who.int/alliance-hpsr/resources/reader/en>.