Health Policy and Systems Research: 20 Years On

Twenty years ago a gathering of thinkers from around the world strongly endorsed investment in the field of health policy and systems research and sowed the seeds for what would become the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research. In April 2017 a group of some 50 concerned and knowledgeable individuals from around the world met again in Stockholm, hosted by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, reflected on the development of the field, reviewed the contributions of the Alliance thus far and explored current opportunities and challenges to strengthen the position and role of the Alliance in the context of Agenda 2030.

Twenty years have changed the world in many ways but have not obviated the need for decisions and policies informed by the best possible evidence – especially in health where people’s quality of life and even lives themselves are at stake. It is now recognized that, without a strong system in place, interventions focused on one health improvement can even harm other areas – for example, by taking away human or financial resources; without a strong system in place, it is immensely difficult and costly to cope with outbreaks such as Ebola.

Twenty years of work have resulted in more visibility for the field, more scientific publications, more funding and more funders. There are regular symposia (the fifth will be held in Liverpool in 2018), there is the membership society Health Systems Global (established in 2012), the WHO Strategy on Health Policy and Systems Research: Changing Mindsets (2012) and, just launched, the first World Report on Health Policy and Systems Research.

The meeting welcomed this important publication and reaffirmed its support for the Alliance. Recognizing diversity and valuing inclusivity were principles seen as essential: diversity and inclusivity among all stakeholders – funders, researchers from multiple disciplines, decision-makers at all levels and citizens of all countries and regions. In the new context of the Sustainable Development Goals, the approach and terminology of health policy and systems research must change to reflect the expectations of decision-makers and to stimulate investment.

The meeting acknowledged the continued role of the Alliance, with appropriate partners, in contributing to the challenges of the SDGs and universal health coverage, setting directions and facilitating learning across boundaries; and emphasized the need to remain true to the principles of equity, collaboration, systems thinking and leadership.

Statement read at the close of the meeting
Stockholm, 26 April 2017