Executive summary

Introduction

This Review addresses a mismatch between what is known about how to respond to particular health problems in poor economies and what is actually done about them. It focuses on one cause of the problems that ensue from the mismatch – capacity constraints. Weak capacity at a number of levels in the institutions and interfaces between knowledge generation and use in policy-making has been identified by the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (HPSR) as a key strategic issue in addressing health care in low-income countries.

Capacity is a widely but often superficially used term. This Review explores capacity issues underlying different aspects of the relationship between two key groups – policy-makers and researchers – using a new conceptual framework (see Figure 1). Accordingly, the analysis focuses on capacity constraints in research priority-setting; generation and dissemination of knowledge; filtering and amplification of evidence; and policy processes. The framework could be applied to analyse critical areas for capacity development in-country.

Figure 1  Framework for evidence-informed policy-making
Current capacity needs

The ability of policy-makers to draw on appropriate evidence is often restricted by its availability. Priority-setting processes for research are largely internationally driven, with limited responsiveness to national research agendas. International processes must become more locally responsive and help to build capacity for priority-setting at the national level.

Generating appropriate, trustworthy evidence depends on the existence of good research organizations. At present, the capacity of such organizations in low- and middle-income countries is variable. Funders’ attention has historically focused on developing the skills of individual researchers. Capacity-strengthening strategies, in contrast, need to focus on the comprehensive needs of institutions, including overall skills and career development, development of leadership, governance and administrative systems, and strengthening networks among the research community, both nationally and internationally. There is also a need to develop stronger methodologies for conducting HPSR.

The third function relating to the often complex processes that mediate between knowledge generation and policy-making is the least understood. Filtering and amplification refers to selecting particular pieces of evidence for transmission to policy-makers and packaging that information. This function is carried out by a spectrum of organizations from knowledge brokers through to advocacy organizations. Each is likely to have different capacity needs; none appear to have been systematically addressed by capacity development initiatives.

The policy-making function is the crucial end-point. For policy-makers, evidence generated from research findings is one consideration among others. Policy-makers need help overcoming the disincentives to rely on evidence in their deliberations. Capacity-development needs may include skills in commissioning and interpreting evidence, stronger relationships with researchers, and tools to assess the legitimacy of the filtering and amplification function of diverse organizations.

Policy-makers have a responsibility as health system stewards. They need to be able to assess the capacity of each function and support initiatives either related to individual elements or the interface between them. Such a comprehensive view of all the elements of an evidence-informed health policy-making process is rare, yet it is critical.

Capacity strategies

We suggest four strategies aimed at national health, research and international agency leaders to respond to these needs.
Enhancing evidence on capacity development in the HPSR field

Evidence is needed in two related areas. First, there is a need for more and better evaluations of international capacity development initiatives in order to enhance future investments in capacity strengthening. Second, nationally-owned initiatives to map capacity needs related to the interface between HPSR and policy processes are needed. Such initiatives will require the development of specific assessment tools and financial support for their implementation and the subsequent development of capacity-enhancing strategies.

Strengthening architecture for health systems research funding

International and national bodies need to develop mechanisms for funding HPSR that reduce existing fragmented approaches and enhance national ownership of priorities. International agencies should devolve some decision-making powers to the national level; national stakeholders must ensure appropriate priority-setting bodies. International funders need to examine current funding processes to make certain there is adequate, appropriate low- and middle-income representation on the bodies that set priorities and that their decisions support rather than constrain the capacity of HPSR institutions.

Responding to the needs of HPSR

HPSR institutions need support in assessing their needs and developing capacity-building strategies. This may include for example, help in developing leadership programmes or assistance in creating partnerships among institutions and developing networks. In some small and particularly poorly resourced health systems, where no HPSR capacity exists at all, a strategy may be needed both to build capacity and to find interim arrangements, perhaps with neighbouring countries, for support. Investment is also needed to strengthen HPSR methods.

Enhancing investment in evidence synthesis and knowledge translation and use

Investment in better understanding the needs of policy-makers and developing more appropriate responses is needed. The form such investment takes will vary between countries, with different sets of civil society organizations, knowledge brokers, research institutions and government bodies having a potential role. Each will have differing capacity needs, and an assessment on a country-by-country basis may be appropriate. At the international level, support is needed in developing methods for synthesizing evidence to provide easily accessible and digestible information to policy-makers.