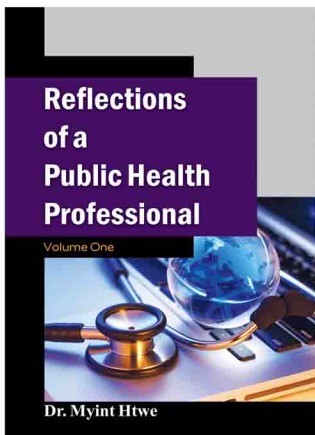


Promoting Health Policy Research



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9. Promoting health policy research

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Health policy research can be defined in many ways but all definitions support the same objective: i.e., *to improve the policy of the institution or country*. The formulation of National Health Research Policy is closely linked to National Health Policy. There is reciprocity between the two policies. Analysis of National Health Research Policy is incomplete without referring to the National Health Policy. The term health policy research is *sometimes* interchangeably used as health policy analysis.

Health policy research is a process of scientific investigation where different methodologies and principles from health and social sciences are applied in order to either formulate or evaluate the policies. Such research finally leads to setting objectives and formulating strategies, including activities and plans for health development. Health policy research can also be viewed as a subset of health systems research. The principles, methods and approaches used in health systems research are also applicable to health policy research. Health policy research promotes a way of looking into the policy process. For example: has the policy achieved its desired effect? If not, what aspects of it should be modified or amended. If its impact is not appreciable, health policy researchers must ask the following questions in order to arrive at the correct diagnosis:

- (i) Are managerial/administrative aspects of the health system at fault?

- (ii) Are health-related policies and strategies not supportive of the health policy? Are they antagonistic?
- (iii) Is the health care system (including technical aspects) not dynamic or not responsive to changing epidemiological conditions?
- (iv) Are programme strategies not relevant or supportive to health policy itself?
- (v) Are activities identified under the strategies less cohesive and not integrated?
- (vi) Is the policy itself not explicit?
- (vii) Is the policy irrelevant or not in consonance with the existing health infrastructure and epidemiological conditions?
- (viii) Do policy makers and senior administrators ignore the research findings that challenge current policies?

These are just a few exploratory questions which may help in the analysis of health policy. Each of the above question is a researchable issue in itself, and health policy research is the key to unlocking it.

In its simplest form, health policy research is research done on health policy. Health policy research can be viewed from different perspectives. It can be viewed either as a policy process or reviewing the policy contents. It can be analysed or researched by applying theories and methods from different disciplines of science. From a broader perspective, health policy research can be done on the whole gamut of *policy formulation, policy advocacy, policy implementation, and policy evaluation*. Health policy research can be carried out on exogenous factors that affect health policy. They are *situational* factors (which are more or less transient, impermanent or idiosyncratic conditions that have an impact on policy); *structural* factors (which are relatively unchanging elements of the society); and *cultural* factors (which are value commitments of groups within communities or the society as a whole).¹⁴

Reflections of a Public Health Professional

Frenk (1992) has regarded health policy research as the study of the *determinants, design, implementation and consequences* of health policy. In this context, it can be seen as a component of health systems research.¹⁷ Health policy research can also be regarded as (i) purely a research process; (ii) research into the managerial process of health planning; (iii) a complementary process into the development of health policy; or (iv) a tool to monitor and evaluate the intended and unintended effects of the health policy. It is usually more practical to initiate health policy research within the framework of health systems research. The approach should be *pragmatic and focused* rather than tackling issues on a broad front⁷. In other words, initial emphasis should be given to conducting research relevant to specific issues in the health policy rather than on the comprehensive National Health Policy.

WHO position on health policy research

The Global Advisory Committee on Health Research, in its 32nd session in 1994, noted that *health policy research deserved a very high priority. More case studies should be done to generate new hypotheses*. It was agreed that research is needed to convince decision-makers of the usefulness of health policy research. The recommendations made by WHO South-East Asia Advisory Committee on Health Research in 1994 are still valid today. These are:

- (i) Health policy research should be considered a priority area for promotion and support by WHO;*
- (ii) WHO Regional Office should support national efforts in using health policy research to monitor and evaluate existing health policies with respect to their relevance and impact on health and health infrastructure in order to achieve more effective and efficient public health actions;*
- (iii) WHO Regional Office should assist ministries of health in developing dynamic relationships with researchers, politicians and planners in non-*

- health sectors where health policy research may contribute to formulation of healthy public policies conducive to health promotion and protection;*
- (iv) *WHO Regional Office should assist Member States in developing expertise in health policy research for use at national and sub-national levels and create a critical mass of policy analysts, and foster linkages among countries for regional collaboration.*

The forty-eight session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia in 1995 adopted a resolution urging Member States “*to undertake a comprehensive review of their health policies, covering all aspects of social and economic development, and placing appropriate emphasis upon health promotion and primary prevention*”. In the era of reforms in health care concepts, orientation towards the market economy, dwindling resources and the competitive nature of resource allocation for different ministries, health policy must be *flexible and adaptable* to the contemporary situation.

Why is health policy research necessary?

Health policy research is necessary because:

- (i) *Health policy is a basic determinant in ensuring that health systems perform more efficiently and effectively;*
- (ii) *Health strategies, based on National Health Policy, are formulated based on prevailing and changing epidemiological conditions. The health policy, therefore, must be equally dynamic and responsive to the situation;*
- (iii) *Health policy cuts across all programmes at all levels of the health care delivery system;*
- (iv) *Health policy research is an area where there is great potential for further development; and*
- (v) *Countries are in epidemiological and socioeconomic transition. Thus, existing health policy needs to be reviewed as to its appropriateness*

Reflections of a Public Health Professional

and applicability in the context of new or unexpected situations, e.g., changing lifestyles and resultant diseases/conditions, environmental and industrial pollution.

What does health policy consist of?

The *degree of emphasis* given to each component depends on the type and the level of policy to be applied. The policy is not simply about prescription or description of the topic in question. It is the outcome of complex social, political and economic interactions.

The components of health policy depend on the level of health policy to be promulgated. Generally, it consists of: (i) conditions pertaining to financing and mode of health services delivery and health promotion; (ii) technical standards for health care provided by both the public and private sector; (iii) emphasis on certain fields or disciplines e.g., traditional medicine, health systems research, etc.; and (iv) regulatory aspects within the health system.

What does health policy research process basically involve?

During the process of conducting health policy research, different options may evolve to operationalize the health policy. The process involves inputs from disciplines such as social science and management science.

- (i) A review of existing health policy, including the content, feasibility, as well as intended or unintended effects on the beneficiaries.*
- (ii) A review of the controllable and seemingly uncontrollable factors influencing the policy itself. Depending on the nature and intent, either prospective or retrospective analytical studies can be done.*
- (iii) A process of looking into the health policy for its flexibility and sensitivity to the changing environment.*

General Issues to be noted in health policy research or analysis

At the initial stage of undertaking health policy research, *complex questions* that are likely to lead to ambiguous and unsatisfactory answers should be avoided. It is important to decide which questions are important, keeping the list as short as possible. If the research is to be performed successfully, key issues must be clarified and prioritized as far as possible. It is to be noted that *complex interdisciplinary* work is required to carry out health policy research. Areas for health policy research are unlimited. However, it is time dependent.

Before health policy research is conducted, members of the research team must be apprised of the current situation in the context of *health effects of sectoral policies*. From the point of view of the policy process, it is essential to do situational analysis on the overall status of health policy. *Policy environment or contextual analysis* is a pre-requisite in initiating a sequence of activities. It should be done within the context of socioeconomic, political, and technological settings. The ways in which *policy, decisions and plans* are arrived at, implemented, monitored and evaluated should be reviewed, i.e., *process analysis*. The medium where the policy is translated into action must be analyzed, i.e., *infrastructural analysis*. The impact of the policy is relatively difficult to measure given the fact that it is the result of the interaction of multiple factors, some of which are totally unrelated to health policy.

Policy assessment indicators

- (i) *These should be developed in order to provide information for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating the direction, pace and degree of success of the policy being implemented.*
- (ii) *Indicators are necessary for different phases of the policy process, i.e., pre-formulation phase, formulation phase and various implementation phases until termination.*

Reflections of a Public Health Professional

- (iii) The more sensitive the indicator the better is the responsiveness of the evaluation process. Indicators are actually the guiding lights for the decision makers, health professionals, planners and legislators.*

Steps in health policy research (analysis) and policy formulation⁹

The following are basic steps in health policy research (analysis). It does not necessarily follow the sequence mentioned below:

Justification of the need for health policy research (analysis)

- (i) Justification based on past experience.*
- (ii) Economic pressure on the system.*
- (iii) Political pressure on the system.*
- (iv) Cost implications of a strategy, programme or project.*

Availability of technical and administrative know-how, including infrastructure, to conduct health policy research must be reviewed. Involvement of professionals from other institutions who have experience is essential.

Preparatory activities

Areas to be covered should not be confined to the existing health policy but should extend beyond the domain of the current health policy.

- (i) Formation of health policy research (analysis) steering committee and core group*
- (ii) Review and analysis of available literature - (past case studies, epidemics of conditions/diseases, case reports, evaluation reports, etc.)*
- (iii) Review and analysis of the modus operandi of the health care system, health infrastructure, including human resources for health, at different levels*

Review of policy environment

Inter-relationship with policies of health-related ministries, including identification of hindering and facilitating factors must be explored. It is important to have a dialogue with focal points or key informants from health and health-related ministries. Based on the aforementioned activities, we need to: (i) identify and pinpoint issues to be tackled and hindering and facilitating factors; (ii) identify new channels or strategies to alleviate problems as well as collaborating and supporting mechanisms; and (iii) develop flow diagrams for implementation of different policies at different levels using the strategies envisaged under each policy statement.

Health policy formulation (based on the above)

- (i) Identify a broad range of goals and objectives in line with the existing or modified health policies.*
- (ii) Identify policy options and submitting them to the Steering Committee, together with expected implications of each option.*
- (iii) Get approval from the Steering Committee of the draft version of the policy statement.*

Implementation mechanisms of health policy

- (i) It could be framed for different hierarchical levels of the health system together with identification of supporting and collaborating mechanisms.*
- (ii) Depending on the nature and objectives of the mission, the extent of built-in review, research and analysis should be incorporated in the implementation plan.*

Strategies for promoting health policy research

The following strategies are envisaged. It is not exhaustive but includes the essential ones. Health policy related definitions are also mentioned as an annex.

(A) Awareness and demand for health policy research (initial strategy)

- (i) *Create awareness among decision makers by explicitly explaining the importance and usefulness of health policy research for planning and other purposes, e.g., citing results of case studies.*
- (ii) *Creation of awareness must also be directed towards strategic officials who have the authority and power to initiate the process.*
- (iii) *Explanatory mechanism or method of communication should be simple and straightforward.*
- (iv) *Controversial issues must not be highlighted at this juncture.*
- (v) *Epidemiologic triad (person, time and place) play a critical role in the success of this activity. To whom we should address and at what opportune time and where. The third variable “where” will vary from country to country and also on the level i.e., country, provincial, regional, township, etc.*

(B) Research capability strengthening

(basic strategy for embarking on health policy research).

- (i) *It needs some advance planning to streamline it. It should be well orchestrated with other health-related strategies.*
- (ii) *Availability of appropriate human and financial resources is an essential prerequisite.*
- (iii) *Collaboration among institutes of different disciplines is the sine qua non because health policy research requirements are many and varied. Unlike other types of research, it goes beyond the boundaries of health research.*

(iv) *The most effective and least costly activity is conducting research with built-in training programmes.*

(C) *Regional and inter-country networking*

(for sharing of experience and information)

(i) *Establish focal points in the Ministry of Health for networking.*

(ii) *Supporting and collaborating activities must be clearly identified and visualized.*

(iii) *To obtain more information in support of this strategy, linkages can be made with international organizations.*

(D) *Giving research grants to research scientists*

(a direct strategy for promoting health policy research)

(i) *Commissioned research studies are preferable.*

(ii) *Areas/topics to be studied must be identified by means of a consultative process through involvement of professionals from various disciplines.*

(E) *Dissemination of information*

(i) *This activity may be taken by WHO-SEARO in collaboration with various focal points in respective countries, WHO Collaborating Centres, and Centres of Excellence involved in doing health policy research studies.*

(ii) *Bibliography on health policy research should be prepared, frequently updated and disseminated to focal points.*

Conclusion

The aim of doing health policy research can be summarized as (i) to facilitate in formulation of sound, practical and applicable health policies; (ii) to facilitate in formulation of appropriate strategies and operational activities; (iii) to detect flaws and weaknesses in the existing policy in light of the system environment in which the policy is being implemented; (iv) to develop policy

Reflections of a Public Health Professional

implementation/assessment indicators, which may be required to change the course of action whenever and wherever necessary; and (v) to finally make a policy change or reform the health care system. The ultimate outcome, therefore, of health policy research is to achieve the most practical, implementable, and dynamic health policy and synergy between health policy and affiliated/related policies. It will finally lead to a health care system becoming more effective, efficient, adaptable and responsive to the needs of the country.

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Reflections of a Public Health Professional

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