



RESEARCH TO POLICY MEETING



**NAVRONGO
DECEMBER 2014**

**Bridging the gap between
Research, Policy and Practice**

There has been a lot of enthusiasm in recent times from various stakeholders and interest groups on the need for more human and material resources to address the numerous health challenges in developing countries. On another hand, the pressure for governments to be more accountable to both their global partners and citizenry explains the urgent need for research-informed policy-decision to address the numerous health problems confronting our people.

Although the three main health research centres in Ghana, namely; Navrongo, Kintampo and Dodowa, which functionally are under the Research and Development Division (RDD) of the Ghana Health Service (GHS) have conducted many studies, only a small fraction of this research has been translated into policy and practice to save lives and reduce poverty.

In view of this, the INDEPTH Network, through



its Research to Policy Working Group has initiated strategies to promote the use of high quality health research in decision making and ultimately help bridge the gap between research, policy and practice in most developing countries.

This brief therefore relays the outcomes of a meeting held in Navrongo on December 12, 2014 between policy makers, researchers, the media and District Directors of Health Services in the operational areas of the Health Research Centres to dialogue and identify practical

strategies in bridging the gap between research, policy and practice in our health systems.

Highlights on experiences shared from the policy level, the challenges that researchers face in communicating research findings and engaging with stakeholders to make the needed impact and the role of the media to bridge the research to policy divide were the central themes at the meeting.

MEETING GOALS

- **A dialogue between policy makers, researchers, representatives in academia and the media on how to bridge the gap between research, policy and practice**
- **Identify ways by which research can be made more relevant to policy makers in making decisions to improve the health of people**

+ Hundreds of Research Results are in Shelves. Researchers should therefore use the many projects that have been done over the years to synthesize packages that can offer solutions to current problems.

+ Only a small fraction of research work has informed policy.

+ Long term relationship and engagement with the media is critical in getting research findings into policy.

POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY NAVRONGO, KINTAMPO AND DODOWA HEALTH RESEARCH CENTRES

Key research findings that have led to major policy decisions in the past include: the Ghana Vitamin A Supplementation Trial (VAST), the Bednet Study, the Community Health and Family Planning project which later informed the Community-based Health Planning and Services (CHPS) program and the Rectal Artesunate Study. Other policy relevant research are the Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Interventions, the Phase IV studies of available ACTs (INESS), RDT-based ACT Treatment and studies on the Quality of ACT Drugs. Additionally studies on the Deployment of Rectal Artesunate in the Dangme West district for Severe Malaria in Children Under-five, an Individually Randomized Trial of Rapid Diagnostic Tests in Rural Ghana, Home Management of Fevers in Children Under-five: a Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial in Southern Ghana, Examination of the TB Enablers Package in the Dodowa sub-district of the Dangme West District in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana have all informed policy at the local and national levels.



The various stages, including crucial roles played by major stakeholders at both national and local levels and the challenges encountered during the process formed a major part of the discussions.

Researchers ought to advocate and create interest in research activities among the community as well as engage the policy makers at the agenda setting stage !

UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Experiences shared by the Directors of Policy, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation



Units of the Ghana Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service revealed that the policy process is complex, interactive and muddy going through the various stages. These stages may include agenda setting/issue identification, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

Notwithstanding the desire by researchers to have their research findings become policy-relevant, a policy that is not implemented only remains an intension. Directors' in-charge of policy at the national level are therefore concerned that most policies are not evaluated to understand how the policy issues can better be addressed. Understanding the policy communication process is therefore imperative for research to contribute to policy. Writing policy briefs,



articles and publications in peer reviewed journals on research findings alone is not enough to influence policy. In addition to this, findings from research activities should be carried through to the implementation stage.

A document can become a policy even at the local level unless it contravenes a higher policy document such as the constitution or act of parliament

THE NEED FOR NATIONALLY-RELEVANT AND POLICY- FOCUSED RESEARCH

Research topics for investigation must be relevant to the national discourse affecting the needs of the people and not just for academic purposes or for researchers' interest in a particular area. Research into health issues that affect the lives of the majority of the people should be prioritised within the national context to address the needs of the people and not just conducted because funders are paying for it. For research outcomes to be translated into policy the research must be carried out by a credible institution or researchers; the design must be appropriate; the results accepted, ethical issues addressed and ethical clearance obtained from the appropriate bodies.

THE NEED TO ENGAGE WITH POLICY MAKERS

The periodic review meetings at the national level provide good opportunities for researchers to make inputs into policy related programmes. Research findings can be further discussed and debated directly with policy makers at such forums.



It is imperative that researchers continually involve stakeholders in the research policy process-agenda setting through policy formulation to the policy evaluation stage.

Key to achieving this includes:

- The production of high quality, timely and credible research outputs for identified priority agenda, including realistic recommendations that reflect understanding of the policy context and constraints
- Synthesize research into evidence that can support decision-making.
- Engage key stakeholders, especially policy

makers and policy analysts, in the conception and conduct of research

- Advocate and create interests in research among policy makers, managers & the public
- Go beyond research dissemination to advocacy for evidence-based policy making – policy memos/briefs/papers, etc.

SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION THROUGH THE MEDIA

The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and getting the public to take keen interest in research findings. Collaboratively, media practitioners can be assisted to communicate more effectively research findings that are targeted at specific audiences including policy makers to fast track the decision-making process.

Engaging the media in a more proactive way to communicate most of the work done at our health research centres to the general public therefore fuels the debate on most research findings that are largely neglected.

Failure to engage the media may result in publications with half-baked truths that may hurt the intensions of research findings.

In order to effectively engage the media, researchers must:

- Understand how the media works and have a strategy to work with them
- Learn to use media advocacy techniques
- Provide information that is concise and more relevant to current debates on health
- Budget for training of critical mass of journalists in science reporting
- Budget for media advocacy
- Be proactive – Use social media
- Engage in more media briefings and organize site visits for the media

A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH

Every opportunity must be taken to communicate evidence in ways appropriate to audience needs, hence the need to develop appropriate strategies including advocacy strategies, mobilizing the influence of networks and the use of key stakeholders to convey critical evidence to decision-makers.



LEARNING FROM IFAKARA HEALTH INSTITUTE

Using different tools and approaches to communicate research findings helps narrow the gap between research and policy. It will be worthwhile for research centres to emulate the practice at the Ifakara Health Institute (IHI) in Tanzania where the Communications Unit works to narrow the research-policy divide by organising research dissemination workshops that actively involve policymakers from the Ministry of Health and multilateral organisations. The Unit also relays important findings to the communities involved in the research, thereby creating further interaction and allowing research findings to seep into the lower fabric of the society.



TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING

Committing resources to build the capacity of all those involved in the research to policy chain deepens the linkages and facilitates the process through to the implementation stage. Significantly, developing the capacity of researchers to be able to synthesize research findings and prepare policy and media briefs for audiences of varying backgrounds will help increase the chances of research findings informing policy.

Correspondingly, research education will improve the capacity of decision-makers to recognize the benefits, and identify and use research information to strengthen health policies and practices.



CONTACTS

**INDEPTH Network Secretariat,
East Legon,
Accra, Ghana
Postal Address:**

P.O Box KD 213, Kanda
Accra, Ghana

Tel:

+233-302-519394/521671

Fax:

+233-302-519395

E-mail:

info@indepth-network.org

Website:

www.indepth-network.org