Where is the policy in health policy and systems research agenda?

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In the last 15 years there has been considerable growth in the amount of – and funding for – health policy and systems research. However, research addressing health policy decision-making, across all stages of the policy process, has been relatively neglected. Here we argue for an increased emphasis on policy in health systems research. We focus specifically on low- and middle-income country contexts where such research has an important role to play in improving health systems and health care delivery.

Health policy and systems research aims to produce new knowledge to improve how societies organize themselves to achieve health goals. Its objectives are to promote the coverage, quality, efficiency and/or equity of the health system, with the goal of achieving improved health and health equity.

While much health policy and systems research is characterized by its pursuit of better health policies, only a part of it concerns research on policy, i.e. how policies emerge, are formed and are implemented (health policy analysis). The policy component of health systems research directs attention not only to the formal content and instruments of health policy (the outputs of decision-making) but also to the forces influencing the decision-making: actors, power and politics; institutions, interests and ideas. The research focus on actors and processes draws from the broad and well-established fields of political science, public administration and organizational science.

Health policies are courses of action and inaction that affect the sets of institutions, organizations, services and funding arrangements of the health system. Health policy analysis embraces ethnographic and sociologically-informed studies and considers global influences on health system development. The analysis supports understanding of the influences on policy agendas and priorities and how power influences health policy implementation. It also directs attention to the ways in which health system hardware – the functional and quantifiable pieces – and software – the ideas, values, norms and power that dictate relationships – combine to shape health system functioning. Health policy analysis also illuminates how past policies, including those directly addressing specific services, programmes or interventions, have unintended consequences on other health system elements or on other health policies. Hence such analyses are part of the complex context of health system development.

From its name, it may appear that the field of health policy and systems research contains two domains: health policy analysis and health systems research. However, the term health policy and systems research indicates that these two areas of work are integrally connected. Health systems respond and adapt to health policies and health policies shape and are shaped by health systems.

To explore the current emphasis being given to health policy analysis within health policy and systems research, we extend an earlier review that examined the research on health policy in low- and middle-income countries. The review showed that there were only 391 relevant publications between 1994 and 2007. During this same period there were 35 564 publications for low- and middle-income countries. The review resulted in 26 (10.9%) concerned health policy analysis.

As Fig. 1 shows, only 12.5% (9216/73 712 in the period 1996 to 2014) of all health policy and systems research publications contained references to health policy. However, even this is likely to be a gross overestimation of the true number of publications that specifically investigate policy processes. While these publications may include policy conclusions (resulting from research for policy), only a small proportion is likely to examine the forces shaping policy (representing research on policy).

Finally, we tried to determine whether some parts of the health system may be particularly neglected with respect to research containing references to health policy. We assessed the percentage of publications that were indexed with the MeSH term “health policy” or mentioned...
As with health systems research, there are concerns about the quality of health policy research.\(^2\)\(^3\) Appropriate theories and analytical methods are often not used, studies frequently lack analytical depth and an explanatory focus and are commonly limited to describing policy problems without developing solutions.\(^2\)\(^2\)\(^5\) In short, health policy analysis in low- and middle-income countries is still in an early developing phase.

While health systems research has been recognized as an important element for strengthening health systems, there is a relative lack of research on policy, policy processes and their implementation. Given the importance of policy change to health system development, this is a critical gap in the health policy and systems research field. The relative absence of policy analysis funded and published does not align with the objectives of entities in health policy and systems research, major funders of health research and actors in global health in general.

There is also a lack of focus on health policy analysis by key stakeholders, but particularly in a lack of capacity...
for this type of research in low- and middle-income countries. Therefore, we believe that the global health community needs to enhance its investments in improving capacities in health policy analysis.

The third objective of the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research is to facilitate the development of capacity for the generation, dissemination and use of health policy and systems research\(^4\) and the World Health Organization sees helping research to improve policy-making as one of its core responsibilities.\(^24\) Therefore, the alliance is launching a new programme of work to strengthen capacities for health policy analysis, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

**Competing interests:** None declared.