Considering Context in Health Systems Research

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HSR: key questions

• What interventions can strengthen health systems & promote health?
• How can successful interventions be scaled up - made more widely available?
‘...the context specificity of [this] research constitutes a major challenge....

it is extremely difficult to draw generalizable conclusions...’

AHPSR, 2007
1. What features of context need to be considered by HSR?
2. How can these contextual features be considered?
3. How can policy lessons be drawn from HSR?
Recognising health system complexity
Health systems are dynamic & interconnected systems at whose heart are people

‘It is the multiple relationships and interactions among the building blocks ... that convert these blocks into a system’

De Savigny & Adams, 2009
COLLECTIVE MEDIATOR

HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

ORGANISATION

OTHER SECTORS

POPULATION

RESOURCE GENERATORS

Degree of control

Degree of control

Degree of control

Community participation

Formal health services

Services with health effects

Taxes, Demands for services

Basis for eligibility

Competition for responsibilities and resources

Schemes for interpreting human experience

Human resources, Payment mechanisms, Scientific information, Technology

Subsidies, Information, Ideologies

Potential personnel, money, data

Frenk, 1994
Recognising complexity

Health system interventions involve long chains of implementation

The Ugandan immunization programme: Rwashana et al. 2009
Health system interventions have unpredictable paths of implementation.
Human Resources for Health

Research

Health sector reforms and human resources for health in Uganda and Bangladesh: mechanisms of effect
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Recognising complexity

The Dynamic Responses Model

Health worker
dynamic responses

De-jure system

De-facto system

Health system as experienced by patients

Formal health system
Health system complexity

Rooted in the people & relationships that are at heart of every health system and intervention within it
Features of context relevant to HSR
Three sets of baseline context features mediate between health system interventions & outcomes:

a) population & health features
b) other programmes/interventions with similar goals
c) characteristics of the health system

Victora et al. 2005
Policy interventions that attract nurses to rural areas: a multicountry discrete choice experiment

D Blaauw, E Erasmus, N Pagaiya, V Tangcharoensathien, K Mullee, S Mudhune, C Goodman, M Burrell, M Lagarde

Objective To evaluate the relative effectiveness of different policies in attracting nurses to rural areas in Kenya, South Africa and Thailand using data from a discrete choice experiment (DCE).

Methods A labeled DCE was designed to model the relative effectiveness of both financial and non-financial strategies to attract nurses to rural areas. Data were collected from over 300 graduating nursing students in each country. Mixed logit models were used for analysis and to predict the uptake of rural posts under different incentive combinations.

Findings Nurses’ preferences for different human resource policy interventions varied significantly between the three countries. In Kenya and South Africa, better educational opportunities or rural allowances would be most effective in increasing the uptake of rural posts, while in Thailand better health insurance coverage would have the greatest impact.

Conclusion DCEs can be designed to help policy-makers choose more effective interventions to address staff shortages. Intervention packages tailored to local conditions are more likely to be effective than standardized global approaches.
Influences over health worker performance

Franco et al. 2002
The critical realist view of context

Pawson, 2006
1) Work in public health
2) Live in South Africa: high HIV burden, large treatment programme
Interpretive acts underpin intervention implementation

2003 South African CHW policy

Lehmann & Matwa, 2008

- seen primarily as the ‘stipend policy’
- not fully implemented
- access undermined
Interpretive acts reflect context

- Infrastructure
- Institutions
- Interpersonal relations
- Individual capacities
- Intervention
- Working environments
- Accepted ways of doing things
- Communication processes
- Views of others
- Personal experience

Pawson, 2006
HSR strategies for considering context
Overall approach

Inductive & multi-method research programmes comprising quantitative and qualitative analysis

Atun and Menabde, 2008
New approaches to evaluation

What is an intervention?

A standardised set of steps in a change process

A critical event in the history of a system

Hawe et al. 2004a; 2009
The PRISM study

- Primary & community based care to promote maternal health after childbirth

- Evaluation:
  - Consider *system context*
  - Prospective & retrospective data collection
    - impact logs to develop timeline
    - inter-organisational network surveys
    - field worker diaries
    - key informant interviews

_Hawe et al. 2004b_
Using case studies

‘a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence’

Robert Yin
A cross-country case study:
What factors influence the development of strong family planning programmes?

- 4 pairs of countries: each matched on socio-economic characteristics but of different programme strength
- Comparative analysis within & across pairs
- Three factors enable development of effective FP programmes:
  a) coalitions among policy elites
  b) spreading policy risk
  c) organisational & financial stability of programme
Generalising from case studies

Analytic generalisation:

• Develop ‘theoretical insights’ by comparative analysis across multiple cases
• These insights are universal enough to have relevance in other settings
Drawing policy lessons
What is learning?

Learning as an act of engineering: *transfer*

Learning as *part of* the process of policy development & implementation

Freeman, 2006
What is a policy lesson?

• Not a photocopy of an intervention elsewhere

• An adaptation of interventions observed in other contexts

• Developed by ‘re-contextualising’ theoretical insights from elsewhere within a new context

Rose, 2005
Research to support learning

Critical reflection

Learning through doing

Action Research
The job of the health system researcher

‘...is to illuminate the processes of change and experience that they observe...
to make a contribution ... to the social process of understanding or promoting change.’

Barnes et al., 2005