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Centres for the systematic reviews of health policy and systems research: progress and challenges

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Abstract:

Research evidence can be one of many inputs into policy making. However, evidence from research may be difficult to access, or it may be perceived to be of limited quality or relevance to local context. Systematic reviews (SRs) of health policy and systems research (HPSR) have the potential to contribute to bridging the gap between what is known about policy options and what is currently done. Limited SR work has been conducted in the field of HPSR that could inform policymaking in LMICs. In early 2007 the Alliance HPSR (World Health Organization) awarded four three-year grants aimed at developing centres for systematic reviews of HPSR in low- and middle-income countries. Three of the centres are focusing on thematic areas: a team at Makerere University, Uganda, is focusing on human resources for health; a team at Shandong University, China on health financing; and a team at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) on the non-state sector. A fourth centre at Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile is tasked with further developing methodologies for systematic reviews of HPSR. A network of collaborating partners -- the Oslo Satellite of the Cochrane Effective Practice and Organization of Care Group, the EPPI Centre (Institute of Education, London), the Effective Health Care Research Programme Consortium (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Liverpool) and the Alliance HPSR -- have been providing ongoing technical support. To date, the Centres have published several systematic reviews of HPSR issues, and are working on a second round of SR protocols. The teams have shared their work locally (with policy makers and researchers) and internationally, for example, at the Cochrane Colloquium 2008. The methodological challenges that have been faced in developing these centres have been many. Specialized skills are required for carrying out the various steps of a SR -- writing and refining the protocol, conducting searches, screening literature, and extracting and analyzing the data. Overall progress of the project has been slower than expected. Lack of access to certain search engines and databases has complicated the work. Slow or irregular internet access had interfered with the work in some countries. In some cases, teams have conducted reviews of effect for the Cochrane Collaboration, the products have been "empty," which can be a frustration for investigators and policy makers alike. There has been much discussion and debate within this network as to how the SR process can be tailored to generate SRs that are more relevant to low- and middle-income countries. During a second round of reviews, new methodologies are being employed that are more amenable to answering HPSR questions.
