# "Evidence for Health Action"
# The Research - Policy Divide

## Workshop organized by the Ethiopian Universities Research Centers Network



Yemane Berhane (Prof)
Addis Continental Institute of Public Health
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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# Sources of evidence to inform policy

Sources of evidence include:

- Published research- peer reviewed journals

- Routine program statistics

- National surveys, census…

- Program and policy evaluations

- Economic and statistical modelling

- Stakeholder consultations including community needs assessment

- …

**Research is only one form evidence to inform policy development!**

# Factors Influencing Research Uptake

**External influences**-international factors, economic and cultural influences; donor policies, ...

**The Political Context**-political structure/processes, institutional pressures, prevailing concepts, policy streams and windows...

**Links** between policy makers and other stakeholders, relationships, voice thrust, networks, the media & other intermediaries,...

**The Evidence**-credibility, methods, relevance, use, how the message is packaged and communicated, ...

# The Research-policy framework

- Traditionally, the link between research and policy has been viewed as a linear process

- However, the assumptions underpinning this traditional view are now being questioned. The three key assumptions were:

  - research influences policy in a one-way process (the linear model);

  - there is a clear divide between researchers and policy-makers (the two communities model); and

  - the production of knowledge is confined to a set of specific findings (the positivistic model).

# The Policy-Research Divide

| Problems relating to research | Problems relating to the policy-making process | Problems with the interactions between researchers and policy makers |
|---|---|---|
| •Insufficient/weak evidence (fragmented, doubtful methodological quality)<br><br>•Research not driven by policy interest – not relevant<br><br>•Research mostly answers what works, but not how and why it works | • Lack of organization to make the best possible use of scientific evidences<br><br>• Conviction-driven or ideological politics dominating decision-making<br><br>• Lack of access and trust in research | • Differences in priorities<br><br>• Differences in languages<br><br>• Differences in operating timescales<br><br>• Differences in understanding external factors |

# Problems relating to research

- Insufficient/weak evidence (fragmented, doubtful methodological quality)

- Research not driven by policy interest – not relevant

- Research mostly answers what works, but not how and why it works

- Lengthy and complex research reports

- Limited access, clarity, relevance and credibility of research

- Cost of research – high quality and relevant researches are  expensive

- Lack of collaboration among researchers

- Lack of infrastructure and research management for high quality research

# Problems relating to the policy-making process

- Lack of organizational competence to make the best possible use of scientific evidences

- Conviction-driven or ideological politics dominating decision-making

- Lack of access and trust in research – some sources are more trusted than others

- Research utilization perceived as time-consuming (searching, accessing and reviewing)

- Reliance on other sources – political wills/interests, public/patient demand, expert opinion, donor pressure

- Senior staff turnover- difficult to establish sustained relationship

# Problems with the interactions between researchers and policy makers

- Differences in priorities

- Differences in  languages (literal as well as technical)

- Differences in operating timescales/schedules

- Differences in understanding external factors

- Lack of personal communication and mistrust between researchers and policy makers – credibility and specialty of researcher is important

- Power and budget struggles

- Confusion about accountability/role – whose job is it to compile the evidence?

# Bridging the research-policy gap



Neither definitive evidence nor rational decision making
are absolute requirements for bridging the gap!

# Ways to improve the research process

- Identifying and prioritizing key gaps in research knowledge; improve funding to thematic research

- Improving the quality of research – improve methods and interpretation; give more emphasis to research focused on assessment of what works?

- Using systematic review to synthesize accumulated knowledge

- Improving knowledge translation –presenting key messages to different target audiences in understandable fashion and language. E.g. Policy brief

- Acknowledging limitations- research rarely provide definitive answers about what works in tackling complex social problems

# Ways to improve the policy-making process

- Organizing agencies/units with competent human resource and technology to promote the best possible use of scientific evidence

- Promote the use of evidence by requiring relevant agencies to publish (open access) the evidence base for policy decisions, may lead to scrutiny by informed citizens and pressure groups.

- Facilitating better evidence use by encouraging sustained collaboration with researchers, second university staff into policy making agencies, and training staff in evidence use

# Ways to improve interactions between researchers and policy makers

- Using advocacy groups- especially those having long-term interests and knowledge in shaping policy

- Working with intermediary bodies/knowledge brokers/advocacy groups
  - Such as the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, associations,…
  - These group can help digest, synthesize and package evidences to eliminate barriers such as language issues, access, and contextualizing to settings and needs

- Improving communications– promote 'sustained interactivity' between researchers and research users throughout the research process- for example establishing TAG

- Organizing conferences, workshops… to discuss research ideas and/or disseminate results

- Use multiple adaptable partnership strategies encourage more effective interactions than few rigid rules – relationships need to remain loose, shifting and contingent

# Reducing the policy-research divide requires improving at both ends

Availability of definitive research evidence

Understanding that the policy making process is inherently political in nature need to be understood as well.

The practice of rational decision making

What counts should be what works!

# Thank you!