



Networking and Coalition Building: Lessons from a Latin American Network

Introduction

Health Systems and Services Research (HSSR) is advocated as an important instrument in the political process of bringing change to health systems and their services. During 1999 and 2000, the Executive Secretariat of the **Network for Health Systems and Services Research in the Southern Cone of Latin America** launched an assessment of HSSR in the region. The project aimed not only to provide valuable information on HSSR activities in the Network's member countries (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay), but also to assess the extent to which HSSR has contributed to health sector reforms, improved communication between stakeholders in research, and contributed to capacity building in these, and other countries in the region. Funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC/Canada), the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO/Washington) and the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED/Geneva), the outcome of the project would serve to reorient the HSSR Network's activities in the future.

This Learning Brief focuses on lessons for the HSSR Network, and for networking activities in general.

The HSSR Network

Founded in 1994, the Network for Health Systems and Services Research in the Southern Cone of Latin America advocates the development of HSSR as an instrument for evaluating Latin American countries' health sector reform processes, with the goal of attaining better health and equity in the sub-region. The Network also aims to explore alternatives/new models for the organisation of health systems and services. Specific objectives of the Network include: promoting capacity building in the HSSR field and providing information support for sectoral policy-making which is based on empirical evidence.

In relation to promoting research utilisation, the Network encourages linkages between academic research centres and users of research - NGOs, health services, government programmes etc. By organising regular national and regional seminars, the Network stimulates and promotes the exchange of experiences between researchers and policy-makers both within, and outside the region.

The activities undertaken as part of the Network's HSSR assessment were:

1. A preliminary survey of HSSR and inter-institutional technical co-operation projects carried out over a three-year period (1996-1998) in the Network's four member-countries
2. A preliminary survey of HSSR relating to health sector reform, carried out over a five-year period (1995-1999) in a selected group of research centres and institutions in the Network's four member-countries
3. Two further surveys: (i) of researchers who are funded by the Network, and (ii) of participants at the Network's regional seminar
4. Four national seminars in the Network's member-countries, and a regional seminar.

The Role of a Network

Two questionnaires with targeted "samples" were designed to gather qualitative information on the experiences of the various stakeholders, either in undertaking HSSR, or in using research results in policy formulation and implementation. The first survey included researchers funded by the HSSR Network's Small Grants Program (1995-1998); and the second survey interviewed professionals active in the health systems and services area (either as researchers, policy makers or health service workers), who participated in the Network's Regional Seminar held in Rio de Janeiro, in April 2000. Some lessons for the Network are presented below.

Survey results which specifically related to the Network included respondents' views on the definition of a network, and on the role of the HSSR Network.

There were several variations on the definition of a network. Generally speaking however, respondents raised the notions of interlinkage and exchange, and that a network should be a strategic and democratic mechanism for discussing important matters, objects and interests in common. Further, a network should generate greater capacity for intervention and political strength. Meanwhile, interlinkages should be voluntary, horizontal and flexible.

One respondent said that "a network cannot be conceived as a mesh that limits and prevents movement; on the contrary, its survival depends on the capacity to interlink while maintaining the greatest possible flexibility".

To the question "what is the role of a HSSR Network?", all Network activities and programmes are widely

welcomed among individual and institutional members. On the other hand, respondents offered suggestions relating to decentralised activities, specific strategic research projects, the importance of improving electronic dissemination of research results and, particularly, on the political role of the network. The notion of marrying the fields of research, capacity-building and information distribution was reinforced.

Respondents agreed that an important mission of the HSSR Network is to develop mechanisms for utilising the knowledge produced, especially directed to HSS managers and policy makers. In addition, the Network should facilitate and foster exercises in developing agendas and priority-setting, and it should oversee external negotiations for getting these decisions put into practice.

The general consensus was that the HSSR field must be strengthened in the region, that the Network has a fundamental role in promoting and funding research in this area, and that developing research has been one of its central activities since the early stages of development.

At the national-level workshops on the HSSR Network's role, development of an action plan was proposed that would include researcher capacity building (supported by, and mobilising, existing resources in the region), communication of HSSR results, creation of incentives to encourage quality in research proposals, specifically for those with less capacity, and elaboration of new mechanisms to facilitate better links between research and policy. This idea was carried further at the regional-level workshop, where participants included a range of stakeholders from both the HSSR and service fields, as well as policy makers at both the national level (from Network member countries and other countries in the region), and at the international level, from organisations and agencies active in the HSSR field. Participants at this meeting also discussed the Network's past experiences, successes and failures.

One of the main accomplishments of the Network's activities has been to establish a democratic, participatory forum where diverse actors discuss the agreement to formulate a common agenda for research and for developing health policies.

National and regional seminars are forums for exchange, and unquestionably are moments for intense reflection and exchange of ideas. The difficulty, however, lies in defining and implementing strategies to ensure that this effervescence persists and generates movement in each country to multiply and leverage the changes intended in the Network's objectives.

Lessons Learned

In general the Network's performance is viewed favourably, and participants at the various workshops

stressed the need to negotiate continuance of certain programs, such as the small research grants, methodological HSSR training, communication and publication of research results.

Networks can play a lead role in facilitating public discussion on an issue. The HSSR Network should therefore be strengthened by expanding its membership and increasing the number of working partners, bearing in mind the possibility of diversifying sources of funding and the actors and stakeholders that participate in them. Building a network is a never-ending task and goes on hand-in-hand with the implementation of activities, evaluation and fresh starts.

It is also important to consider that institutions are more firmly anchored at the national level, and no feasible action program can be independent of the national and supra-national dynamics. These two levels have to be coordinated strategically by:

1. Dialoguing and converging with agencies, sources of demand and international organisations, discussing shared agendas of work.
2. Developing mechanisms for concerted action and for interconnected actions between networks and other organisations acting in the HSSR field, by associating with ongoing processes, seeking complementarity and generating agendas for cooperation.
3. Mapping of strategic, selective, long-term funding directed to locally-defined priorities.
4. Organising a data base with a permanent record of studies, events, debates and discussions in the HSSR field, as well as of national and international meetings on the subject.

References/Further Reading

Almeida C, Romero CNP, Ramos CL and Genoese MIV (2000) "Health Systems and Services Research in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay: Present situation and capacity-building needs Preliminary survey". Report from the Network for Health Systems and Services Research in the Southern Cone of Latin America: Brazil.

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