

Shining a light on health systems



The biennial Global Symposium on Health Research was an opportunity to understand cultural and practical differences in the delivery of care

The Global Symposium on Health Research's theme this year was 'Health Systems for All in the SDG Era'. The October gathering encapsulated the spirit of the historic commitments of Alma Ata declaration and brought them forward into the current debate on the Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Health Coverage. The meeting recognised the challenges posed by social inequities and the imperative of understanding social differences, breaking down siloes, smart use of scarce resources, and innovation.

The UK city of Liverpool welcomed 2,368 delegates from 146 countries, including Health Policy and Systems Research (HPSR) scholars, practitioners, funders, policy actors, community activists and the media. They engaged in vibrant exchanges facilitated through 125 parallel sessions, including oral presentations, 451 posters, several launches, and Thematic Working Group special sessions. Over half of the attendees were from lower-middle-income country (LMIC) settings. On social media, #HSR2018 had over six million interactions during the conference days, indicating a healthy interest from many who could not attend.

Each of the symposium's four sub-themes – multi-sectoral action, community health systems, engaging the private sector, and leaving no one behind – helped advance conversations and commitments to stronger and more resilient health systems.

Community health systems

Engaging communities in policy, practice and research was stressed throughout the symposium sessions. Moving beyond the importance of community health worker programmes, it was acknowledged that the multiple ways in which households and multiple actors in communities contribute to health needed to be recognised to ensure truly people-centred health systems. Without this understanding, there is the constant danger of solutions being implemented that are not fit for purpose.

Engaging the private sector

Advances in commercial products, services, technologies, and business models have generated diverse forms of service provision, expanding the influence of the private sector. These advances have generated novel opportunities to expand the reach of the health system, as well as bringing challenges in balancing commercial interests with social needs. It was recognised that continued efforts are needed to move beyond polarising, ideological questions (about whether the private sector has a role), towards more granular considerations within specific government, societal and market contexts.

Leave no one behind

While some communities benefit from improvements in quality, affordable healthcare, healthy environments, and economic opportunities, others remain marginalised without adequate access or voice. Yet newly empowered civil society voices have demonstrated that those in positions of power can be held to account. The assessment of power, privilege and positionality remains central to assessing health system strengthening.

Cross-cutting reflections

The final report of the meeting, recognised several cross-cutting themes that emerged during the meeting. A greater understanding of these can help define the agenda moving forward.

There appear to be too many silos and parallel conversations – dividing the terrain into sectors, disciplinary perspectives, and groups – between North and South; practitioners and researchers; technical versus relational approaches. Consensus is needed on how to continue to pursue robust debate about conceptual starting points in the pursuit of greater mutual understanding.

Delegates learned more on knowledge translation and embedded research experiences. But there is still work to be done on understanding local learning systems that must include multiple stakeholders such as frontline workers, the media, civil society and the public at large. Following discussions at the fourth Global Symposium in Cape Town in 2016, the Liverpool symposium was used as a launch-pad for a new coalition supported by a diverse group of partners with a focus on advancing implementation research and delivery science. This coalition aims to address the challenges of equitable implementation, sustainable programmes and scale up through wider use of research embedded in real-time policy making, programme management, and health service practice.

Respect is central to HPSR. Delegates agreed that they had an activist agenda, and if their voice is to be heard, they need to ensure that ethical practices are routine in all research activities, and they need to strengthen research governance and support relevant training opportunities.

Delegates called for a broadening and expanding of foreign and domestic investment in HPSR, particularly for building capacity in LMICs and opportunities for embedded research. There was recognition that funding must align with national priorities, but provide opportunities for broadening how research agendas get set in ways that are open to innovation and inclusive of marginalised voices.