

# Maximising impact through collaborative research practice



Lucy Gilson<sup>1,2</sup> Sassy Molyneux<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Wolfe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Health Economics Unit, University of Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK

<sup>3</sup> KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kenya



wellcome trust

## Background

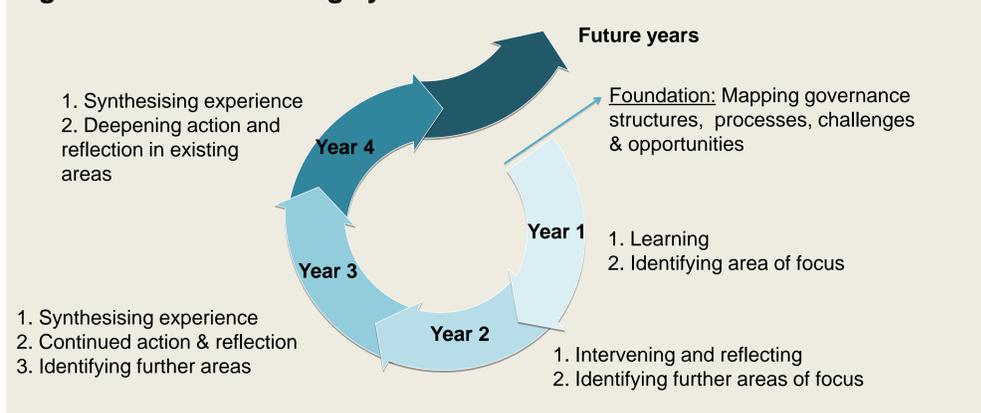
Front-line health managers play a critical role in health systems governance, policy implementation and in accountability processes. However, their decision-making practices are dynamic and complex, and it is difficult to observe and to disentangle the effects of governance issues from other health system dimensions.

As a consequence, conducting research on governance faces significant challenges. One way of overcoming these challenges is for researchers to work directly with health managers to define research questions, identify appropriate methodologies and generate shared knowledge.

This is known as an action learning approach: research is a collective process of enquiry between researchers and managers, with cycles of action, reflection and learning which support continuing processes of decision making (see figure 1).

Learning sites in Kenya and South Africa form the settings for this research approach. Established over a long timeframe, they allow for the investigation of critical governance issues in real time, and of policy implementation as it occurs.

Figure 1: Action learning cycle



## Case studies



RESYST learning site in Kilifi County, Kenya

<http://resyst.lshtm.ac.uk>

In Kenya, learning sites have been established among District Health Management Teams in rural Malindi and Kilifi districts in Kilifi County.

Kenya is currently experiencing significant governance and community accountability changes, brought about by the devolution of government functions to 'semi autonomous' counties. The changes have enormous implications for health system performance at county and health facility level, including through impacting on decisions regarding priority setting, resource allocation and human resource management.

RESYST researchers have begun to establish the relationships and understanding that will support investigation of local level decision-making power, and how to strengthen it within these learning sites.

Researchers are also in the process of establishing a RESYST learning site in Sedibeng, Gauteng province in South Africa.

## DIALHS Project - District Innovation and action learning for health system development

In South Africa, a learning site has been set up in Mitchells Plain, near Cape Town, through which researchers and health managers are considering how to strengthen leadership and governance to support improvements in primary health care (PHC).

Researchers and managers are working to support:

- Understanding of local community health needs and possible local level responses
- Environmental health practitioners
- PHC facility managers
- Clarification in roles and responsibilities, and relationships among, staff supporting PHC facilities
- Sub-district managers

Now in its fourth year, the DIAHLS project has demonstrated the value of the learning site approach in building trusting relationships between researchers and health system staff, and in opening opportunities for understanding the decision-making practices that are the essence of governance, their influence over health system functioning and new ways of supporting their development.



## Potential for impact

- Action research and learning has supported engagement between health system staff and community members: learning sites provide an opportunity for researchers to support the health system in developing its responsiveness to communities' needs and concerns e.g. through identifying local health priorities.
- Working within a learning site allows close and immediate engagement with managers at different levels, and researchers may impact on their practices by encouraging reflection and providing support in their work or capacity strengthening activities.
- In addition, researchers working within learning sites are also engaged in other activities (e.g. training, formal involvement in policy committees, informal interactions with policy makers), through which they can share the site's experiences, spread learning and stimulate wider action (figure 2).

Figure 2: Changing mindsets as a long-term and engaged research practice

