Achieving impact through teaching and learning: researchers convene new course for health systems managers

RESYST researchers in Kilifi County, Kenya, have been participating in a longstanding project with health managers to better understand the challenges and complexities they face in delivering services. Through this partnership, researchers identified the need to support county health managers to steer and manage health services in the context of substantial political change and have established a new training course, the first of which was held in July 2016.

Over the past 4 years, RESYST researchers from KEMRI-WT have been carrying out research to better understand the 'health system from within'. They have done this by forming partnerships with county health managers, becoming embedded in the routine practices of the health system and creating safe spaces for conversation and problem solving to improve the delivery of services. The approach has been termed a **learning site** and is also being used in two districts in South Africa.

From this work, researchers gained new insights into **priority setting** practices within Kenya's county hospitals, and the early **experience of devolution** in the health sector at all levels of the county health system. They also learned about the ways in which **primary health care managers** carry out responsibilities whilst also dealing with regular strains and shocks, many of which have been exacerbated by devolution.

A course to support health managers

Researchers identified the need to support county health managers to undertake their new roles of steering and managing health services within the highly dynamic, devolved political system.

In July 2016, Benjamin Tsofa and Edwine Barasa convened a short course entitled 'Understanding Complex Health Systems', organised in collaboration with Pwani University and the Department of Public Health in Kenya, and supported by the Initiative to Develop African Research Leaders (IDeAL).

The course content drew on **CHEPSAA** (Collaboration for Health Policy and Systems Analysis in Africa) - an open access, online resource that has been used in more than 50 countries. However, it was adapted to local circumstances, drawing on the knowledge generated through the Kenyan learning site and addressing health systems problems that were identified by the participants.

Influencing systems thinking and future practice

Managers reported that the course was especially useful in highlighting the centrality of people in health systems, and in helping them to understand that health systems do not only comprise hardware components (e.g. infrastructure and finances), but also have software components including power dynamics, trust, and motivation. Linked to this was the managers' increased appreciation of systems thinking - conceptualising the health system as a whole involving relationships, processes and networks, and the need to work with all relevant stakeholders and take into consideration their influences and interests.

The managers also revealed that the course equipped them with skills to help them to carry out their day-to-day roles. This was especially important given that the devolution process in Kenya had been rapid, giving little time for capacity building and ensuring that the newly formed counties had the structures, capacity and resources to carry out their functions. For instance the concept of 'Start small and win big' led managers to perceive their work challenges differently. Managers began to appreciate their agency in influencing change by understanding that there are no quick fixes but having the assertion that small changes within their departments will eventually cause an overall big change.

Looking forward

The course has shown to be an important way of sharing new insights from the research with managers, and of further strengthening relations. Given the success of the workshop, plans are being made to extend the teaching to more health systems managers, particularly senior managers at the county-level.