

# WHAT FACILITATES RESEARCH UPTAKE?

## LESSONS FROM THE RESYST RESEARCH CONSORTIUM



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Health Policy and Systems Research has always taken seriously the importance of research being used beyond academia to serve a practical benefit, and for many research projects and programmes, efforts to achieve research uptake are placed as central to their wider research mission.

Research uptake was a key component of RESYST research consortium when it was established in 2011, with an overarching goal of enhancing the resilience and responsiveness of health systems through policy and management changes. Over the years, our experience has shown that the ways in which research contributes to changes are nuanced and varied; however, there are some factors that are essential in ensuring the uptake of research across settings.

This brief provides examples of RESYST research contributions to policy and management changes, and highlights the key factors that facilitated uptake. It provides valuable lessons for research programmes that strive for policy impact.

### RESYST CONTRIBUTIONS TO POLICY AND MANAGEMENT CHANGES

Over the lifetime of RESYST, researchers conducted more than 20 individual research projects, of varying size and scope, in seven countries. By the time it ended in 2018, the Consortium was able to report on research contributing directly to changes in managerial practices and health policies in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, and to multiple policy discourses at sub-national, national and global levels. This is a considerable achievement given the relatively short time period between research and impact.

The boxes provide some examples where research contributed to changes in policy and practice. More detailed [impact case studies](#) are available on the RESYST website.

#### Kenya: Contributing to legislation on funding for health facilities in Kilifi County

In 2013, several concurrent policy changes resulted in health facilities and hospitals losing critical sources of funding in Kilifi County, Kenya. Health facilities faced a cash crisis: in one facility visited by researchers, casual workers and utility bills went unpaid and outreach services could no longer be conducted.

Researchers played a vital role in communicating the concerns of health managers to policymakers in the county, and participated in meetings that eventually led to the creation of the [Kilifi County Health Facilities Improvement Fund Bill](#). The Bill establishes a Fund for health facilities to spend on medical supplies and equipment and also gives decision-making autonomy to hospitals to plan and manage the resources within their control.

#### Nigeria: development of new federal government guidelines for implementation of the Basic Health Care Provision Fund



The National Health Act in Nigeria aims to substantially increase revenue and improve Primary Health Care services through the Basic Health Care Provision Fund (BHCPF). In order for this additional revenue to reach services effectively, it is necessary that strategies are in place to ensure accountability between the different stakeholders responsible for implementing the Fund.

RESYST researchers developed an accountability framework for implementing the BHCPF, encompassing mechanisms for strategic planning, strong and transparent monitoring and supervision systems and systematic reporting. A senior RESYST researcher was appointed as a member of a Technical Working Group, convened by the Federal Ministry of Health and responsible for developing implementation guidelines. He used this channel to share the accountability framework and influence the content of the guidelines. The [guidelines](#) were published by the Ministry of Health in December 2016, acknowledging the Working Group in their development.

### South Africa: Developing new approaches to health leadership development in Cape Town

Mitchell's Plain, a sub-district in Cape Town, was the location of a partnership between two academic institutions and two government health departments, who worked together to explore, support and review a range of actions to strengthen governance in primary health care since 2010. The project led to new insights with regards to the complexity and challenges of managing the sub-district health system, as well as the importance of effective leadership in supporting staff to deliver health services under challenging conditions. These insights fed into wider discussions with staff at the provincial health department and influenced the framing and orientation of the Western Cape Strategic Plan ([Healthcare 2030](#)) and the Leadership Development Strategy.

### Influencing global discourses: Providing a conceptual contribution to health financing discussions

RESYST has carried out research on strategic purchasing in all seven partner countries. This cross-country work helped researchers to identify broad issues relevant to both national and global health financing debates. Researchers participated in several global discussions on strategic purchasing and through these helped to shape the purchasing agendas of the World Health Organization and the Gates Foundation. Specifically, they contributed to the increased prominence in health financing discourse of strategic purchasing as an instrument for improving health system outcomes. This in turn has had national level influences, including the inclusion of strategic purchasing in national health plans and policies in both South Africa (National Health Insurance White Paper) and Nigeria.

## FACILITATORS TO RESEARCH UPTAKE

Many factors facilitate the uptake of research: high-quality research, credible researchers, accessible outputs, innovative communications approaches. However, from RESYST researchers' experiences, several factors emerged as particularly important across settings.

### 1. Research is policy driven

Research that is conceived in response to explicit demands from policymakers is more likely to be operationally relevant and timely, and thus contribute to change compared to theoretical research. Since the inception of the RESYST Consortium, projects strove to address policy problems that were identified through formal and informal discussions with a range of stakeholders, some of whom were actively included in the research and in formulating relevant recommendations from the findings. Researchers also held regular policy scans to ensure that the research questions, outputs, communication and engagements were timely.

### 2. Continuous engagement with policymakers and other stakeholders

Meaningful engagement with stakeholders throughout all stages of the research is a key route to uptake. Active collaboration and participation ensures that policymakers are familiar with the research and have a vested interest in the outcomes. There are many ways of involving stakeholders throughout the research process, for instance by consulting them in the design of research questions during the inception phase, providing regular updates through feedback meetings, and involving them in producing outputs.

More generally, researchers often engage with stakeholders outside the work of specific research project activities; they may meet informally or hold discussions on related policy issues, or be approached to provide ad hoc advice. Teaching has also provided an important opportunity for engagement with policymakers. Many of the teaching programmes

delivered by RESYST researchers (ranging from short courses through to PhDs) include, or are aimed specifically at, current and future policymakers, and this engagement forms the foundation of networks and enduring linkages between researchers and policymakers.

'Engaged researchers' are prepared to frame their research to address policy issues, discuss and co-create the implications of research findings with stakeholders - and if necessary, advocate for change. Successful engagements rely on researchers having a good understanding of the context, politics and policy processes, and being willing and able to respond to opportunities to provide consultation and advice. In settings with constantly changing policy environments, there is a need for responsive but sustained engagement so that researchers can continue to put forward relevant evidence and take advantage of windows of opportunity to inform policy, as and when they arise.

### 3. Researchers participate in policy processes

Working formally or informally as technical advisors or participating in policy committees, provides a direct opportunity for researchers to influence discussions and to inform policy-makers understanding of the topic. On these occasions, researchers often draw on a wider body of knowledge, including but going beyond the evidence generated through a particular research project. Presenting research in advisory meetings allows researchers to emphasise the practical uses of research, to answer questions directly, and to highlight implications for policy.

Use of research in policy discourse and discussion can also lead to future policy impacts. The RESYST experience of providing resources, conceptual understanding and language to debates about '[everyday resilience](#)' and '[strategic purchasing](#)' have arguably led to a wider uptake of these concepts at both national and global levels, and the establishment of RESYST researchers as perceived experts in these fields.

#### 4. Embedded research collaborations with health system actors

Research partnerships that involve multiple countries and institutions can benefit from working with researchers who are embedded in local contexts and have strong relationships with research users. A particular strength of all RESYST partners is that they are embedded researchers, either through their position as research organisations closely linked to government and to policy processes, or through continuously engaging in multiple ways with health policymakers and managers.

In South Africa and Kenya, researchers made deliberate and purposeful efforts to engage closely with mid-level and front-line health managers and to draw them into the research through a process of action learning and co-production. This research approach, which we termed 'learning sites', supported managers to identify and take action to strengthen their decision-making, and allowed researchers to work with them in implementing these actions.

Through work conducted in learning sites and continuous engagements, researchers developed a wider set of relationships with health system actors including policymakers. In Kilifi County, Kenya, evidence generated at the facility and district levels fed up to higher levels of the system to inform policy.

#### 5. Multiple types of output adapted for key audiences

As well as journal publications, RESYST produced a wide range of outputs suited to different audiences including policy briefs, blogs, infographics and videos. The policy briefs, which presented the key findings and policy implications of the research in a clear and concise manner, were particularly useful for researchers to share with policymakers during meetings, ensuring messages were remembered and passed on to their wider networks.

Knowledge generated from the research has also been used in teaching materials, as case studies for example, reaching a wider student audience, who often go on to become health managers and policymakers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To researchers

- Researchers can increase the chances of research being used by actively including policymakers in research, asking policy-relevant questions and in developing policy-focused outputs.
- Develop researchers' skills in, and exposure to, policy engagement and ensure there is adequate funding and time to plan for or respond to opportunities for stakeholder engagements.
- Recognise the value of investing time and effort in building and sustaining long-term relationships with policy actors.
- Develop researchers' skills to support the production of different types of output and ensure research uptake specialists work closely with researchers, to understand the substantive research focus, and so support its effective translation into different types of output.

### For assessing the contribution of research

- More emphasis should be placed on assessing a range of research impacts rather than primarily focussing on the instrumental impact of change in policy documents or guidelines. The experience from RESYST is that impacts are often conceptual, i.e. changing people's views and attitudes towards a topic.
- It is important to keep tracking impacts after specific policy changes to see how they unfold into implementation and change in practice and experience on the ground.
- In identifying the pathways of influence, it is helpful to collect data as the research takes place - for example, logging engagements with policymakers and important events.

## ABOUT THE BRIEF

This brief was written by Rebecca Wolfe, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

### Further reading

- Rebecca Wolfe and Felix Obi (2018) [Assessing the contribution of RESYST research on changes in health systems policy: case study on policy guidelines for implementing the Basic Health Care Provision Fund in Nigeria](#). RESYST Impact case study.
- More information about RESYST's approach to research uptake is available on the website along with training tools developed by the LSHTM Research Uptake team. Subjects of the tools include: research uptake strategies, writing policy briefs, data-visualisation, social media and writing blogs. <https://resyst.lshtm.ac.uk/research-uptake>

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