

Bridging gaps between research and policy

Inequities and social exclusion weigh heavily on Latin American and the Caribbean societies at the start of the 21st century. This time-honoured situation has been aggravated in recent decades by sweeping processes of economic and institutional reform, including health sector reforms. Although the political and technical rationales for the reforms claim that they will eliminate inequalities and achieve equity, this is belied by the figures. This situation is not exclusive to the region and has prompted considerable thinking on alternative means for overcoming such a vast social drama.

The same period, has also witnessed a global debate on the need for greater investment in scientific and technological development (particularly in areas such as health policies and systems), with emphasis on innovation and knowledge translation. It is believed that essential research pursued in each national context can enable relevant empirical evidence to be constructed to help formulate and implement policies able to solve the social problems. Various dynamics overlap in this process where major variables include the roles played by research funding agencies, and by national States in interrelationship with society.

This Supplement aims to contribute to that discussion. It assumes that extending social protection in health is an absolute priority and that to achieve that goal means inducing knowledge production from an actively committed standpoint i.e. with a view to solving our populations' crucial health problems. It argues for strategies that interrelate knowledge production processes with those of technical and political decision-making and strengthen the links between these two fields.

The first article offers a critical review of the theoretical, analytical and explanatory frameworks for this complex interweave. It stresses the importance of considering relations between "experts" and the State in historical terms, in particular contexts and political conjunctures. To encourage debate, the authors dialogue with nine discussants. The second article discusses the lack of conceptual coherence in the terms "governability" and "governance", arguing that precise theory is useful both analytically and instrumentally when analysing policy-making and implementation processes. Five case studies then examine the relationship between researchers and policy-makers who worked together, in association with a specific funding mechanism, to pursue research projects. The final article, builds on the theoretical review mentioned above, to offer a critical discussion of the lessons learned by funding agencies and the various groups of actors involved in the process.

One of the main conclusions is that innovative funding strategies can alter knowledge production and decision-making process, as well as encouraging positive relations of mutual respect and learning between actors working in these very different fields. Not only is it stressed that knowledge is a source of power that actually alters the terms of debate, but there is also a clear recognition that different kinds of evidence are at play and interact, and that their value is determined by historical and contextual factors. It may be a more important and realistic to build such interaction expectation than the original goal of "transferring" research knowledge to policy and practice.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) made this effort possible by embarking on a programme of research into extending social protection in health by their innovative funding strategy. This background is narrated in the Research Note that closes the review.

We invite everyone to join us in this thinking process.

Celia Almeida

*Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública Sergio Arouca, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.
calmeida@ensp.fiocruz.br*