

1 **TITLE PAGE**

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3 Strategies for linking research to policy: Lessons learned from implementation
4 research on sexual and reproductive health

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8 **Authors and institutional affiliations**

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Introduction

Translating research into policy and practice remains a difficult and complex process, that is non-linear[1]. Research plays a vital role in providing evidence for health and social behavioural interventions that have the potential to impact health care delivery and utilization in many different health systems. It could also provide cost effective solutions to many governments by synthesizing evidence of 'what works best' and 'for whom'[2]. However, uptake of research findings remains slow and difficult, as this process is influenced by a myriad of societal factors including availability of resources and political context[3]. These are factors that are not always taken into account in developing and implementing research. Researchers especially those focused on sexual and reproductive health research often imagine that if their research is rigorous enough and the findings are published, uptake by politicians and service providers would be seamless. However, this is hardly the case and stakeholder engagement and direct lobbying with service providers and politicians is always required. These challenges are often encountered more in sexual and reproductive health research, as some of the interventions are targeted at vulnerable groups and at topics that are often the focus of political and religious debates, especially when working with politicians in different contexts.

The ANSER network was developed to address this gap between research and policy in sexual and reproductive health research. ANSER aims to become a global resource for SRHR policy research, education and service delivery by establishing an international platform for research on SRHR policy related topics; by developing a portfolio of education and training programmes on SRHR policy; and by fostering interaction between SRHR researchers and policy makers. The network is currently made up of twenty eight institutions in over 16 countries and 4 continents. A

workshop was organized to synthesize and pool the knowledge of these different experts on the best practices for translating sexual and reproductive health research into policies. Case studies were presented of best practices and interactive group discussions were done, to develop recommendations and a model for ensuring translation of sexual and reproductive health and research into practice.

91

92 **Methods**

The workshop was designed to be interactive and incorporated an experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb (1984) [4] to ensure that discussions were reflective and based on key learning points from the experiences of the researchers present. The experiential learning cycle has been used successfully in a myriad of adult learning processes gives the base for bringing together the three dimensions of social learning and change (individual, organizational and societal/institutional) in a full spiral of action and reflection. Learning according to this theory involves a four-stage cyclical process. These four stages involve:

- 101 • Discussion of concrete experiences
- 102 • Opportunities for reflexive observations
- 103 • Abstract conceptualisation
- 104 • Concrete application

Case study presentations of best practices were provided by experts and key learning points were discussed in the facilitated interactive discussions with other SRHR experts and programme implementers. The reflexive discussions were guided by the following questions detailed below. Concrete 'real world' applications of

109 lessons learned were proposed by the workshop participants. The summary of the
110 case studies are in the Appendix section.

111 1. What happened? What succeeded or failed?

112 What significant things happened? Describe the events. Who was involved, what did
113 they do?

114 How did stakeholders help/hinder this? What stakeholders? In what way?

115 2. Why did it happen? Why was it successful or not?

116 Why did it happen, what caused it? What helped, what hindered? What was
117 expected? What assumptions were made? Are there other experiences or thinking
118 that could help to view these experiences differently?

119 3. "So what"? What are the implications for the process?

120 What could have been done differently? What was learnt (new insights)? What new
121 questions have emerged?

122 4. Now what? What action will we now take to make improvements?

123 What does this mean for practice? What is the goal, how should things change?

124 What can be done differently? What is important to do in order not to repeat the same
125 mistakes? What steps can be used to build these new insights into practice?

126 The results of the interactive sessions and key recommendations, were manually
127 coded. Key themes and discourses were identified and linked with recommendations
128 that were researcher-specific and those targeted at how to influence the policy
129 context to promote uptake of research findings.

130

131 **Findings and recommendations**

132 Key themes emerged from the facilitated group discussions that are discussed below.

133 These recommendations were focused on two levels. Recommendations that were
134 researcher directed and recommendations directed at how to influence the political
135 context in favour of the research.

136

137 **Influencing the political context**

138 *Set the agenda*

139 Agenda setting should be a role researchers should take on. Researchers have the
140 opportunity to steer policy to address key SRHR issues encountered in their work.

141 Even though these issues might not be seen as priorities by policy makers, engaging
142 with stakeholders strategically and also with the media provides an opportunity to set
143 the agenda and make the issue a priority. Agenda setting can be done also with
144 effective media engagement.

145

146 *Build Trust and equal partnerships*

147 It is important to build trust with different stakeholders over time and not only at the
148 point when there is a need to translate research findings. Building of trust takes effort,
149 multiple engagements and also time investment. Developing ways for researchers to
150 situate themselves in policy dialogue as experts that can provide technical input to
151 policy formulation is important. It is also important to develop respectful and equal
152 partnerships between policy makers and researchers. As they often speak different
153 languages, it is vital that researchers take advantage of informal meetings to provide

154 opportunities for dialogue that is interactive and can be used for agenda and priority
155 setting in the field of SRHR.

156 *Align research to political priorities*

157 Understand the political climate regarding SRHR and frame research to strategically
158 address these issues. Frame research within global priorities like the Sustainable
159 Development Goals, as this is a priority for most policy makers, engage with
160 language and technical terms, that policy makers use to be able to engage with them
161 more effectively. It is important to strategically align research to political priorities,
162 interests and gaps. In planning advocacy activities, develop materials that provide
163 opportunities to align research to stakeholder interests and priorities.

164 *Develop strong communication channels and pathways*

165 SRHR researchers and programme implementers should take advantages of
166 opportunities to broaden support for SRHR, by engaging with stakeholders including
167 policy makers strategically. This could be through informal meetings, where there is
168 freedom to address myths and misconceptions about SRHR and what it involves.
169 This is important ,as during formal meetings, policy makers might take a defensive
170 stance which might hinder the opportunity to openly discuss myths and
171 misconceptions. There should be open and sustained communication channels
172 between researchers and policy makers.

173

174 **For Researchers**

175 *Multi-disciplinary teams*

176 Multidisciplinary teams are important, researchers should identify ways to work with
177 different experts on the SRHR issue they are dealing with. for example for sexual
178 violence this will involve working with lawyers, human rights activists, police officers,
179 health service providers and policy makers. This multi-stakeholder engagement
180 process allows for a more holistic approach to translating research findings into policy
181 and practice

182 *Synthesize existing evidence*

183 SRHR researchers can work together to synthesize existing evidence on the subject
184 matter. By drawing on evidence across different contexts, countries and across
185 disciplines they can make stronger arguments for policy change. Also being
186 knowledgeable on the subject matter, allows researchers to situate themselves as
187 experts in the field and this makes it more likely for their input to be seen as credible
188 by policy makers,

189 *Media engagement*

190 Media engagement is very important for publicly disseminating research findings.
191 Specifically, strategic engagement with the media, policy makers and advocates
192 provides an opportunity to lobby for translation of key research findings on SRHR
193 issues into policy and practice. Opportunities for using social media to publicly
194 disseminate research findings exist, like twitter. Other forms of media that should be
195 engaged with include newspapers and radio stations.

196

197 **Conclusions**

198 Translating sexual and reproductive health research findings into policy and practice
199 is possible but needs to be done with effective stakeholder engagement. There is a
200 need to also take into account the political context and priority.

201

202 **Key lessons**

- 203 •Trust building is important in translating research into policy/practice. However,
204 building trust takes time and resource investment. Building trust and fostering
205 partnerships with policy makers, service providers and other stakeholders should be
206 a continuous process and not only at the point of research dissemination.
- 207 •Informal meetings provide an important opportunity for researchers to network with
208 other stakeholders like policy makers and these should be taken advantage of, for
209 building trust and fostering partnerships between researchers and with policy makers.
- 210 •Researchers should engage with the media more to ensure public dissemination of
211 their research findings and draw attention to key SRHR issues.
- 212 •Researchers should identify knowledge gaps and target their research to address
213 these knowledge gaps. Opportunities exist to develop an accountability framework for
214 policy makers, for example, by providing a checklist for key issues policy makers
215 have to take into account when developing SRHR policy. This can help in ensuring
216 that health policies developed take into account current evidence and address the
217 most vulnerable populations.

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232 **Conflict of interest declaration**

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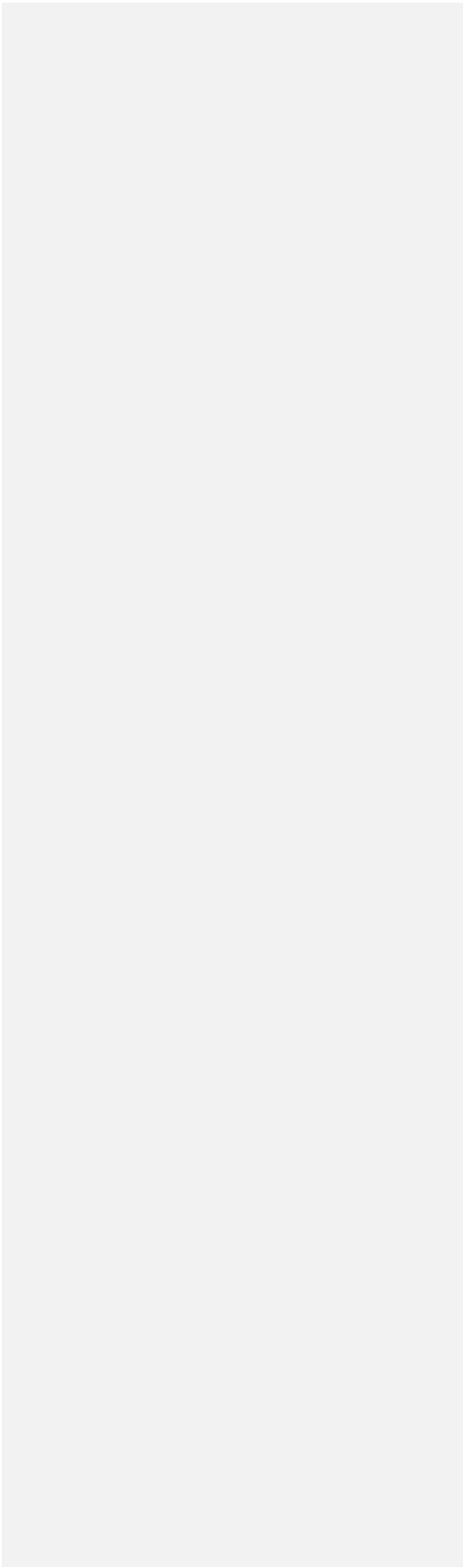
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246 **Appendix**

247 **Table Summary of case studies**

Focus of research	Region	Partners	Enabling factors	Disabling factors	Lessons learned
Instituting Comprehensive sexuality education in Schools	Ghana	International Funders, Academic institutions, Local NGOs	Good multi-disciplinary partnerships	Lack of political interest Backlash due to conservative views of programme	Understand the regional context and adapt key programmes and projects to acceptable language, that deliver the same quality but discourages backlash or conflicts with religious and traditional mores
Establishing a Sexual Assault referral centre	Belgium	Health Ministries, Teaching Hospitals, Academic Institutions	Extensive background research on subject matter Multi-disciplinary team including service providers and politicians Extensive stakeholder engagement in all parts of the programme implementation process	Working with different political priorities and interests. This sometimes posed as a barrier for effective implementation	SRHR researchers should create strong communication channels between themselves, policy makers and other relevant actors, to ensure that they are accessible and can be easily reached. This approach fosters dialogue and is strategic for promoting translation of research findings and outcomes into policies

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Providing comprehensive care to gender based violence survivors	Kenya	Ministry of Health, Local NGOS, National Hospitals and staff, International NGO and funders	Long term partnerships with stakeholders Recognition as expert in the field Community engagement	Lack of resources and initial expertise or political interest	Sustained multi--stakeholder engagement was necessary over a long period of time for the development of trust, this enhanced the implementation of the project.
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