

Methodology for Health Policy Development: Introductory Paper

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Received date: April 11, 2016; Accepted date: April 21, 2016; Published date: April 27, 2016

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Abstract

Health policy is the frame work on which decisions for improvement of health status of people are made. This paper details the importance and issues regarding health policy development and discusses the methodological issues regarding health policy development. Most of the works in this area are quoted and methodological issues cited. After introducing the topic describing the need for health policy, there is description on the various perspectives in which the academia views it and also says what a health policy is. The steps of policy development cycle are described. This review article describes the health policy development cycle and discusses the methodological issues related it. The paper further stress on evidence based health policy followed by a description on the lessons to be learned from other policy development attempts in the past. The paper concludes saying the challenges for an effective health policy development and implementation.

Keywords: Health policy; Policy development cycle; Evidence based health policy; Health systems; Prioritization

Introduction

Generally we discuss why health policy is crucial for good governance. Rather than discussing why we need a policy, here we are discussing why methodology matters in the whole process of health policy development. To make health policy explicit is equally difficult as is to make it exclusive and complete by itself without overlaps. The inclusive approach reflects the inter-sectoral linkages and explicit nature gives scope for expert vetting, suggestions to make it people oriented and thus ensures flexibility. At the outset we wish to express that whether it is health policy or health care policy or policy for health the semantics hardly matter. The purpose of policy document is explicit statement of a commitment by the government and such a policy document should be ethically justifiable, epidemiologically sound, socially or culturally acceptable and economically rational. We consider the social and cultural dimensions of health policy as inclusive of political also which is more often concerned with the influence of power groups like the ruling political party, the opposition, and the trade unions. The traditional methodology for health policy development is by constitution of an expert committee, development of the draft policy by review of existing documents and health statistics appraisal, identification of issues, definitions of the issues, framing solutions or recommendations and modifications through multiple sittings of the committee and table top exercises. This is usually followed by vetting the initial draft by another short panel of experts, putting the whole document in public domain for opinion generation and finally getting endorsed by the legislature or house of commons [1,2]. Articles which describe basic method of policy analysis describe methodology without reference to basic scientific disciplines like epidemiology, sociology or economics [3]. The present article attempts to explore the scope for incorporation of scientific methodology in to this process of health policy development. The available literature in this regard is perused and the published health policy documents were reviewed [4]. The whole exercise is undertaken

with a purpose to develop guidelines for health policy development for the state of Kerala. This paper as such is not expected to be a policy guideline but can be considered as an introductory one explaining the importance of methodological considerations in policy development process. The policy development process of the state of Kerala and the country have passed through these stages many times thus repeating the policy formation cycle several times. In spite of all these efforts, a comprehensive final health policy for the state is yet to be published [5,6].

What is Health Policy?

The objective of national health policy is said as to create the conditions that ensure good health for the entire population. Health policy should not be synonymous with medical care policy which is only a variable under health policy [7]. Different definitions and the differences between these definitions are matters of discussion in literature. Public policy is defined as a course of method of action selected usually by Govt. from among alternatives to guide and determine present and future decisions. Health policy is a subset of public policy. Health policy refers to decisions, plans and actions that are undertaken to achieve specific health care goals with in a society. An explicit health policy defines a vision for the future which in turn helps to establish targets and points of reference for the short and medium term. It outlines priorities and the expected roles of different groups and builds consensus and informs people. Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines policy as a 1. Definite course or methods of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions. 2. A high level overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body. 3. Statement of decision regarding a goal in health care and a plan for achieving that goal for example to prevent an epidemic [8].

The Perspectives for Health Policy

Ideally there should be only one perspective for a health policy document and that is the people oriented nature or pro-people nature or societal perspective. As an academic exercise it can be undertaken by several groups of academia and these groups identify, define and scope various issues in the health sector.

The aim of the present document is to review the methodology for health policy development in a public health approach rather than a pure economic or social perspective. The economic perspective deals with the equity and efficiency considerations of resource use. The basic concept in economics is that demand is limitless and resources are limited. That is why and prioritization of resource use is important. The case for health economics in Indian setting is discussed in an introductory paper on health economics [4]. Other activities related to budget are also the major considerations for economic approach. Illness incurs considerable expenditure which is catastrophic in nature and mounts to 80% in many of the developing countries. This leads to household level loans, indebtedment, mortgaging and even suicide of the head of the household. The rationale for health insurance is protection against this risk and is the major area of concern of health economics and economic consideration of health policy [5]. A perfect competitive market is basically efficient but market failure in health care field is sufficient justification for Governmental intervention towards achieving pareto-optimality [6]. Illness is a creation of the social milieu or social ecology or social determinants and hence the mechanisms to address illness can be complete only if we approach illness in a social perspective.

Policy Development Cycle

This constitutes the following steps

Setting the environment for the health policy: This means an appraisal of the institutional structures like the governing systems, the media, other stakeholders and decision makers and the broader social and political context with in which health policy is formulated [9].

Policy making is a continuous and iterative process. The stages of the cycle consists of issue identification, Micro and macro policy formulation, policy selection ,policy advocacy, policy adoption, policy implementation, policy evaluation, policy reformulation [10]. The simplified model of policy formulation process by Easton is popular. Easton's model of political system says that health policy is characterised by diversity with public and private sector competing each other and the state may cover only the very old and the very poor [10]. The relevance of policy in relation to political process was also analysed by Michael Evans [11].

Methodological considerations: Methodology is important to develop a flawless or technically sound explicit policy in terms of its epidemiology limitations, evidence base, socio cultural acceptance and political sensitiveness. The methodological considerations are:

a. Need Assessment: This is basically by epidemiological methods for Health need assessment (estimates like prevalence of illness) and social science methods as Community need assessment and Rapid appraisal techniques for health related outcomes and quality of life.

b. Assessment of resources as a situation analysis or gap analysis. This can be sector wise like Fiscal/Human Resource/inventory, for areas of content.

c. Other specific methods as used in economics are needed for Prioritization and quantitative techniques like modelling. The approach or perspective can be at stakeholder level or national/state/micro or macro level or at domain or content levels (sectorial policies) or at the perspectives of groups like minorities, special disadvantaged groups.

d. Specific methodologies of social science as case study, worst case vs. best case scenario comparisons, network or path analysis, pictorial depictions like network models, etc. Involvement of public in the policy development process or ensuring pro people nature as discussed in [12].

e. Quantitative technique like micro simulation is important for impact evaluation [13].

Health policy as a part of public policy and the six key characteristics of public policy are applicable in this regard also. These are strategic, outcome focussed, joined up, inclusive, flexible and innovative and robust nature of the policy [14].

Health policy analysis: Health policy analysis is defined as a multidisciplinary approach to public policy that aims to explain the interaction between institutions, interests and ideas in the policy process [15]. Tools for health policy analysis are discussed in detail by Collins [16].

Evidence Based Health Policy

Health policy should not be merely a wish statement. Any policy document should be supported by scientific facts and figures. The concept of evidence based policy is towards this direction. In the situation appraisal level itself data gaps are identified. Academia and knowledge base are important elements of a prudent policy development process. Research contributes to evidence generation process which has led to the new concept of evidence based policy [17]. Every institution should have mechanisms for evidence synthesis, appraisal and integration of the current evidence in to the policy formulation process.

Learning from Experience

Learning from one's own experience as well as from other country experience is equally important. The frame work for public health policy in Europe is extensively reviewed by Walter Holland [18]. The implications for development in Asia are discussed in detail by John W Peabody et al. [19]. However properly done systematic reviews may not be available always. The policy document from Government of Bhutan and Sri Lanka are examples for attempts of health policy documents in developing countries [20,21].

Challenges for an Effective Health Policy Development

Health policy development is an exercise undertaken by the academia suitably vetted by the different stakeholder groups and endorsed by the house of legislature for implementation by the executive.

The biggest challenge is in implementation as per the stated explicitness. This is why; not having an explicit policy is the policy for many governments. This again may be due to lack of commitment and decisiveness of the ruling party towards its manifesto, lack of enough resources for implementation or conflicts between stakeholders which was not previously anticipated. The incompleteness of the policy is

another most important challenge. Though aimed as a comprehensive one it might have totally missed some groups or issues which are relevant in the society and later on noted by the critics. The conflict with other policies and maintaining the inclusiveness is another challenge. There can be considerable overlap between other public policies like education policy, tribal policy and also overlaps between sub-sectoral policies like drug policy, end of life care policy.

The extent of achievement of proper people orientation is another challenge. There is no single acid test to assess the pro-people nature of the policy and this can be undertaken afterwards by social auditing mechanisms.

Developing an appropriate explanatory model for health policy analysis is a challenge at academic level. A model explains the relationships between the elements of the system and health system is defined in a broader way to include all agencies and institutional mechanisms involved in improvement of health status of the community. A health system, also sometimes referred to as healthcare system, is the organization of people, institutions, and resources that deliver healthcare services to meet the health needs of target populations [22].

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