**Paper 3**

**Strengthening health policy dialogue and planning to promote universal health coverage: a realist approach to studying the World Health Organization’s role in the Universal Health Coverage Partnership**

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The Universal Health Coverage Partnership (UHC-P) aims at building country capacities for the development, negotiation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of robust and comprehensive national health policies, strategies and plans, with a view to promoting universal health coverage. Under the UHC-P, the Department of Health System Governance and Financing from the World Health Organization (WHO) is supporting 20 priority countries. In order to better understand the interplay of formal evidence, tacit knowledge of stakeholders, contextual factors and the processes that link these elements to policy formulation and implementation arrangements, the WHO commissioned research informed by a critical realist paradigm.

The objective of the paper is to present 1) the rationale for choosing a critical realist paradigm from WHO policymakers’ perspective; and 2) the research protocol and its pilot testing in Togo using theories of partnership synergy and policy entrepreneurs.

The UHC-P is a complex intervention involving multiple actors in many diverse activities in several countries, that aims at tackling policy issues to support countries pave their way to UHC. Faced with this complexity, traditional evaluation methods suffer from three major limitations:

1. to establish causal links between the role of WHO in the UHC-P and the expected outcomes, when such links are diffuse and strongly influenced by the contexts;
2. to highlight the specific contributions of WHO in supporting national health policy dialogue and planning, when multiple actors contribute in different ways towards the same goals;
3. to consider the context in the diversity of outcomes, and draw cross-country lessons.

There is room for innovation. A realist multiple embedded case study applied to policy is expected to provide new evidence on how, under what circumstances and according to what mechanisms WHO is able to play its role, and what the challenges and successes are. The protocol was pilot-tested in Togo, where the national health planning strategy was being assessed. This process was used as the entry-point to understand the role of WHO.

The pilot study shows that an in-depth research process is needed to grasp the specific contributions of the different partners involved in the national health policy dialogue and planning towards universal health coverage, to disentangle the added value of WHO’s role, and to understand its barriers and facilitators.