Health Systems 20/20 and Human Resources for Health

The Challenge

Human resources for health (HRH) are the foundation of a health system. An adequate supply of appropriately trained and motivated health workers, distributed as needed across rural and urban areas, is a prerequisite to improving health outcomes. However, shortages of workers – doctors, nurses, health managers, and others – are endemic to many countries and a primary bottleneck to delivering effective preventive, curative, and rehabilitative health services.

In many of the countries where Health Systems 20/20 works, it is estimated that the number of health workers must be tripled in order to achieve health Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Country efforts to reach MDG and other targets have highlighted the need to draw more focused and sustained attention to the shortage of available and adequate HRH:

● The HIV pandemic has depleted the health workforce of many countries, just when the need to scale up treatment calls for more health workers.

● The lack of trained health care providers hampers the scale-up of global initiatives to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.

● Civil conflict and weak economies have resulted in health workers fleeing to safer areas within some countries, or to different countries that offer higher salaries and better working conditions.

The Health Systems 20/20 Approach

Effective policy making and planning for HRH requires accurate and timely data on the number, skills mix, and distribution of health workers employed in the public and private sector. In many countries, however, a lack of such data significantly constrains HRH policy and planning. Health Systems 20/20 provides methodologies and other tools and works with country counterparts to generate HRH data that inform economically sound and evidence-based actions. The project contributes to a growing body of HRH and related evidence through:

● Costing of HRH strategies, policies, and action plans to determine the most feasible of alternative HRH interventions and align work plans with budget realities and stakeholder priorities.

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- Operations research on the use of financial and nonfinancial incentives as a means to improve recruitment, retention, and performance of HRH workers, particularly in underserved areas.
- Evaluation of national HRH strategies with the aim of understanding what works and under what circumstances.
- Research to measure and optimize health worker productivity.

Health Systems 20/20 also provides technical assistance to build capacity of local partners. The project reinforces pre-service systems, strengthens curricula of medical and nursing schools, and promotes the deployment of health care providers to rural and other underserved areas.

> *"A shortage of human resources has replaced financial issues as the most serious obstacle to implementing national treatment plans…"*
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> WHO, Working Together for Health, 2006

Applying Our Approach

Examples of the Health Systems 20/20 approach to HRH include the following:

- In Cote d'Ivoire, Health Systems 20/20 assisted the Ministry of Health (MOH) to strengthen its HRH management systems by customizing and implementing a human resource information system at the MOH Department of Human Resources. In addition, the project helped the National Training Institute reference library update its collection of materials on HIV management, and its information and communication technology infrastructure so that it can access publicly available information on an ongoing basis.

- In Egypt, Health Systems 20/20 is working closely with the MOH to implement a workforce planning model that has been used across 26 clinical specialties in 30 hospitals. Furthermore, the project is strengthening MOH capacity to manage workforce planning activities by assisting with the development of the workforce planning taskforce, a group that will be involved in all workforce planning activities, including data collection, entry, and analysis.

- In Lesotho, Health Systems 20/20 is working with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare Human Resources Department to improve department capacity to work with a variety of funding and technical partners. The project is providing technical assistance to strengthen leadership and management skills and systematically implement the country's strategic and operational HRH plans.

- In Swaziland, Health Systems 20/20 conducted a costing assessment to determine whether restructuring the MOH to streamline its main functions and facilitate the provision of high-quality health care is financially feasible. The project has identified the HRH constraints associated with the organizational change, and has developed a costing model that can be used by the MOH to continuously track HRH gaps and needs.

- In Zambia, Health Systems 20/20 conducted a study to determine the productivity of local health workers, as measured by the proportion of their time spent on direct patient care, nondirect care, and other areas. Based on the findings, the project facilitated a stakeholder-driven process with hospital administrators to identify and remove barriers to optimize HRH productivity in hospitals.

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