

Issues paper

Day 3: Wednesday, 5 November 2003

Theme: Focusing on countries

During the discussion of this theme, participants are invited to address the following topic:

Challenges of health systems and structures

Background information

Lack of social protection has had a huge impact on access to health care, generating not only breaches in terms of equity and human rights, but also having a negative impact on the conditions essential for development. The inability of health systems to deal with these issues has excluded millions of people around the world from the basic mechanisms for solving their health problems.

This situation can be further complicated by deteriorations in public health infrastructure, partly related to the weakening of the State and the fragmentation of health systems after years of reform. This situation has increased the vulnerability of sectors of the population to traditional and emerging risks to health. The frequency of infectious diseases has been linked in many countries to the collapse of traditional public health functions, such as disease surveillance, regulation and control. In the context of globalization, the inability to protect public health and reduce exposure to health risks may result in severe economic consequences.

Underlying the two problems mentioned above is the current state of the health workforce: its composition, competencies and distribution. The development of human resources remains largely hospital-centred and urban-based, compounding the problem of accessibility to appropriate, community- and family-oriented health services and prevention. The migration of key health professionals only aggravates the situation further. The absence of public health leadership and a primary health care workforce with cross competencies in public health precludes the development of population-based programmes and interventions, including effective regulatory measures.

Exclusion in health is complex and multidimensional; it cannot be dealt with solely by improving health care provision. A new approach is needed to allow for health systems to confront current and future challenges associated with the above-mentioned problems in a setting in which health, human rights and development are intertwined. It is in this context that the extension of social protection in health and the strengthening of essential public health functions acquire significant importance – and require a firm place on national health agendas.

National health authorities must play a more active role in order to formulate human resources policies in support of health services based on primary health care and public health.

International agencies can play a key role in assisting countries to address effectively the challenges within the context of a sector-wide approach and a coherent framework of international cooperation.

Health systems must be redirected in order to confront the challenges. This entails the following: the development of strategies for the extension of social protection in health; the strengthening of essential public health functions; and the development of innovative human resources policies.

The extension of social protection in health requires a strong relationship between the ministries of health and social security; the integration of health policies with social policies; and the promotion of a social dialogue to build up citizenship and increase awareness of citizens' health rights.

The strengthening of public health requires the development of institutional capabilities to improve stewardship in terms of policy formulation, regulation, management and surveillance, and to ensure the provision of public goods.

An intersectoral approach is needed for the development of human resources policies, as well as the promotion of sustained collaboration between academic institutions, professional associations and health services. A promising example of this approach is provided by the Observatory of Human Resources in the Health Sector Reforms, an initiative promoted by the Regional Office for the Americas in the countries of the Region, and one which is encouraging the participation of all relevant stakeholders.

Points for discussion

- Ensuring universal access to quality health care, regardless of the purchasing power of the user.
- Supporting the development of policies and actions to improve the performance of essential public health functions.
- Assisting the development and expansion of human resource policies, through initiatives like the Observatory of Human Resources in the Health Sector Reforms, with special focus on the public health workforce.

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