

## Issues paper

### **Day 4: Thursday, 6 November 2003**

#### **Theme: Building the knowledge base for health**

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

### **Health metrics**

#### **Background information**

A strong health information system is essential for sound programme development and implementation, and is a prerequisite for strategic decision-making. In short, a health information system provides the basis upon which improved health outcomes depend. As new resources are channelled into health-related initiatives, the drive towards performance-based resource allocation will accelerate. At present, the demand for health information, both within countries and at the global level, is often driven by specific programme needs, often in the context of international initiatives. This results in duplication, waste and a lack of standardization and overall coherence. To date, inadequate resources have been allocated to building streamlined health information systems, capable of generating data on the full array of health-related issues and of providing information with an equity dimension. Joint investment in the development of such systems should bring significant advantages, enabling decision-makers to:

- monitor progress towards international and national health goals;
- monitor and promote equity in health;
- detect and control emerging and endemic health problems;
- improve governance and ensure accountability for the use of health resources;
- strengthen the evidence base, facilitating the design of effective health policies and permitting the evaluation of efforts to scale-up;
- inform populations in order to promote healthy behaviour and to increase the demand for improvement in health policies and services;
- drive improvements in the quality of services;
- enable innovation through research; and
- mobilize new human and financial resources for health.

The main challenges facing WHO in the field of health information are as follows:

- To achieve effective and efficient coordination of data collection and analysis at country level.

- To improve the quality of health information through innovation and by creating a culture of transparency and data sharing.
- To ensure the availability of high-quality health information to facilitate the evaluation of global and large-scale national efforts.
- To strengthen national capacity to generate and utilize health information.

In January 2002, in response to these challenges, WHO initiated talks with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation regarding the improvement of information systems as the essential prerequisite for ensuring better health outcomes in developing countries. Since then, informal discussions with other potential partners have produced a partnership concept, called the health metrics network. Developing country governments, bilateral donors, global initiatives, and implementing agencies have confirmed their interest, although further clarification is needed regarding the goals, objectives, structures and functions of such a network. Following a first meeting of health metrics network partners in July 2003, an interim steering committee was convened to guide the further development of the network. Since then, a task force and seven issues groups with a broad and diverse representation have been formed. McKinsey & Company is advising on an appropriate structure for the network.

It is expected that these initiatives will lead to a broad, international network of experts and key stakeholders in support of efforts to strengthen country health information systems. These systems will be able to provide sound information for monitoring progress towards international health goals together with essential information for improved public health programmes within countries.

#### **Points for discussion**

- Investors in health information: What are their concerns? What role do they play?
- The objectives of the health metrics network: at the global, country, and subnational levels.

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