

DELIVERY OF EFFECTIVE HEALTH INTERVENTIONS: A MEANS FOR ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Increasing recognition of the role of health in human development is both an opportunity and a challenge to health systems. It has begun to spur almost unprecedented global efforts to invest more in the health of the poor and focus on interventions that can achieve the greatest health gain possible within prevailing resource limits. Because this window of opportunity may not remain open for long, capitalizing on it is imperative. But such a shift in the use of resources by governments and development partners poses a significant challenge to current health systems, because they must become capable of absorbing the increased investments and translating them into improved health. In the countries where investment in health is most crucial, health systems are the most fragile. They need significant support and strengthening to reach the capacity to make the investment in health effective and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals realistic.

Achieving a significant health gain for the poor will not be feasible without ensuring the maximum possible coverage of effective interventions against critical health problems such as HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria and reproductive/maternal and child health conditions. The differentials of health outcomes among socio-economic groups are striking. These differentials reflect, inter alia, inequalities in access, availability and quality of care. Progress towards the health goals of Millennium Declaration is critically dependent on making progress towards improving the delivery of critical health interventions and reducing existing inequalities in health. This requires an intensive search for best practices in the delivery of health services; better understanding of the impact of key health-system functions on the performance of health-service delivery; and identifying effective strategies to implement policies that are known to work.

The main issues in the delivery of health services are still access to health care, availability of sufficient human and physical resources, community-centred services and quality of care.

Key questions with regard to service delivery are:

- How to successfully target poor and vulnerable populations with effective health interventions;
- How to increase efficiency in using available human and physical resources;
- How to improve availability of key inputs into health service delivery such as essential drugs, vaccines and other technologies;
- Which service delivery models are most conducive to achieving high levels of effective coverage;
- How to improve the performance of providers and quality of services.

In order to increase the capacity of health systems, and of health-service delivery in particular, the role of effective stewardship is crucial. It involves setting and enforcing the rules of the game and strategically directing all the actors involved. It entails giving ministries of health the role and capacity to oversee and steer the health system in its entirety and set and implement regulations. One of the most important tasks of stewardship is to systematically monitor and assess the performance of health systems. It is the role of policy-makers—stewards—to use evidence on the performance of health systems to communicate with stakeholders and make policy decisions.

Key questions with regard to stewardship are:

- How to strengthen the capacity of countries to formulate politically feasible and technically effective health policies;
- How to ensure political will and commitment to increase resources for health systems, particularly for the benefit of the poor;
- How to equip national policy-makers with tools to exert influence and steer the process;
- How to set up information systems to collect evidence on the performance of health systems;
- How to forge effective public–private partnerships .

Health systems cannot perform without financial resources. The external investment in health systems advocated by the recent report of the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health should be viewed as a vital injection in health systems that will provide energy to internal mechanisms to mobilize resources and sustain the outcomes of investments. The health-care finance function should regulate these mechanisms of resource mobilization and ensure maximum allocative efficiency. The key requirement for the health-finance function is to guarantee a fair financial contribution from each individual and eliminate catastrophic health-care expenditures, which often pull even average households into absolute poverty. In many places, poor people still face formidable barriers to care in the form of excessive user fees and unofficial payments.

Promotion of more equitable prepayment mechanisms and larger risk pools is necessary to lower the financial barriers to health care for the poor.

Key questions with regard to health care finance are:

- How to reduce financial barriers to health care at the point of health-service delivery (user fees, unofficial payments, etc.);
- How to reduce the risk and burden of catastrophic health expenditures on the population;
- How to extend prepayment-based health-finance schemes to the population outside the formal employment sector and build large risk pools;
- How to set priorities for resource distribution in order to achieve the maximum health gain, especially for the poor.

Health systems require a significant amount of human and physical resources. Production of an adequate quantity of those resources and ensuring their quality and their needs-based distribution are keys to improving health-service delivery. In poor countries and regions where health-care needs are greatest, the availability and quality of human and physical resources are often far less than adequate. Obsolete technology, lack of essential drugs, commodities and supplies, dilapidated buildings, empty hospital beds, understaffed health facilities, poor communications networks and a chronic shortage of basic utilities such as water and electricity is a picture often seen where the toll of ill-health is the highest.

Key questions relating to resource generation for health systems are:

- How to establish evidence-based and strategic investment practices;
- How to reach an appropriate balance of human resources, reduce shortage and improve quality;
- How to harness maximum benefits from health-care technologies to achieve higher health gain in resource-limited environments.

Issues in health systems are numerous; solutions for most of them already exist or can be identified through research. Only strong and effective health systems can ensure the expected contribution of health to human development and guarantee sustainability of outcomes of investments in health.

Due to time limitations, this round table can address only the following key issues in health-service delivery, which have significant implications for attainment of the Millennium Development Goals:

- How to successfully target poor and vulnerable populations with effective health interventions;
- How to improve the availability and efficient balance of human and physical resources to deliver high-quality health interventions;
- How to forge effective public–private partnerships to improve coverage of populations with critical health interventions.