

Health development planning in the African Region: a status report

Introduction

The last century saw the greatest medical advances in history, reflected in healthier populations and rising life expectancy.¹ Many of these advances have yet to reach the poorest people in the African Region.² The underlying causes of many of today's health problems are well known, and effective key health interventions as well as effective and affordable medicines often exist. However, in most countries in the African Region, potentially effective policies and programmes frequently fail to reach the households and communities that need them the most. This is because of a number of problems related to socio-economic decline, political instability, civil war, lack of good governance, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as problems related to the provision of goods and services to rural and low income populations.

Many countries in the African Region have embarked on health sector reforms in order to improve the health status of their people, particularly those with the greatest needs and expectations. In that context, health development planning has been widely promoted in recent years and is usually linked to national health policy (NHP), the health component of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), sector-wide approaches (SWAs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The aim is to set clear and implementable priorities for the use of available and potential resources in the most appropriate and cost-effective manner.

The growing numbers of actors and health agenda in the health sector have revealed that health development planning should be seen as a response to

the need for sound leadership and coordination of the health sector. This is especially crucial at this time of considerable challenges, including very limited resources, and complex and increasing health needs.

Health ministries in the majority of countries within the African region have developed or are currently developing their own national health development plans (NHDP). Most of these countries have requested WHO technical support for guidance in the process.

What is health development planning?

Health development planning is a process of setting agreed priorities for the health sector in the light of given resource constraints.³ A health development plan provides the framework within which the NHP and other policies and strategies are implemented, taking into account the vision and strategic orientations defined by the country, as well as global and regional health initiatives. Traditionally, national health development plans have focused on the actions within the public sector, with little attention to the private sector and others that have influence on health. If, however, the NHDP is intended to cover the whole health system, then it needs to give adequate attention to the actions of both the private sector (including NGOs) and the public.

Health development plan formulation

The responsibility of a national health development plan belongs to the Ministry of Health. The plan must be



**Saidou Pathé BARRY*



***Dr Omer Ayayi Mensah*

decisive, targeted, owned and implemented by the national health authorities for the purpose of resolving priority public health problems.⁴ However, the Ministry of Health alone cannot significantly improve the health status of the population. Thus, the Ministry of Health must analyse the health implications of other sectors and use advocacy and dialogue to influence their actions.

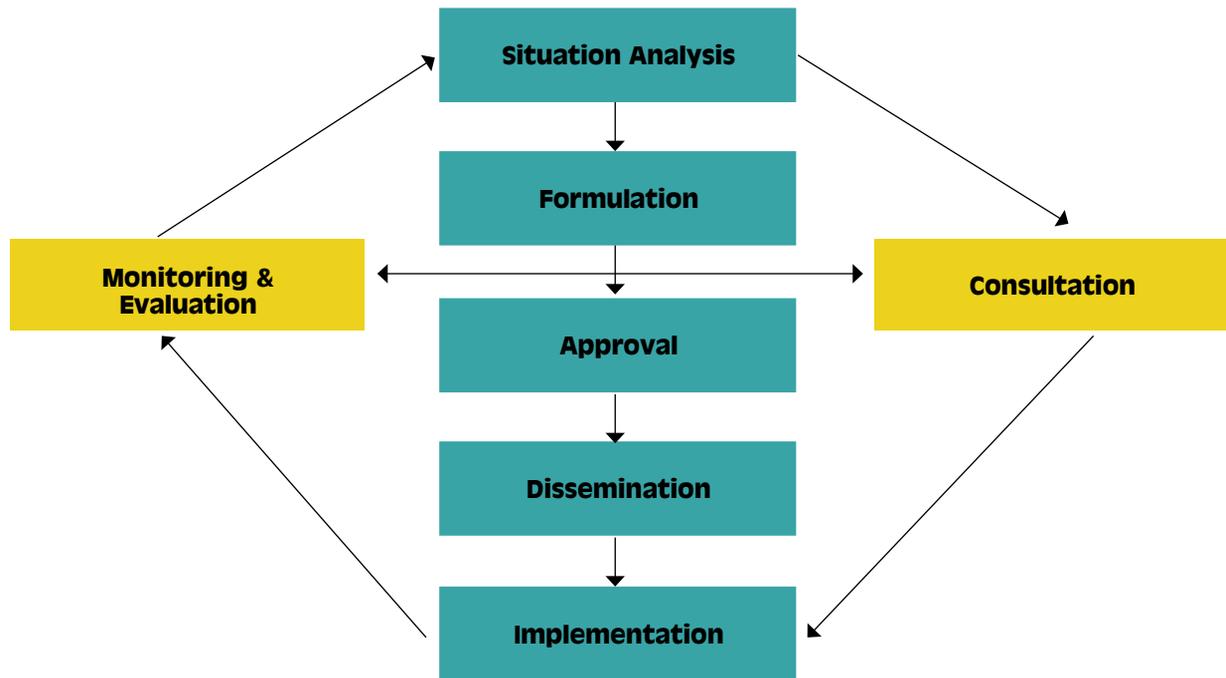
¹Anon, Challenges for the new century, Health Action, 23 January -April 1999.

²There are 46 countries belonging to WHO African region, all except Algeria situated in sub-Saharan Africa.

³WHO, A guide for the development of national health policies and plans, Brazzaville, World Health Organization, Regional Office for Africa (forthcoming).

⁴Health systems reforms in the developing countries: what are the lessons of the past ten years?

Figure 1: Stages in health development planning



Source: Adapted from WHO AFRO guide for the development of a national health policy and plan.

Process of planning and implementation

The socioeconomic and political environments of each individual country can affect both the development and implementation of a national health development plan. When the economy of a country increasingly relies on international financial agencies (which is the case in many African countries), great attention should be given to the conditionalities imposed by donors in order to support the health sector.

Experience in the WHO African Region has shown that ministries of health usually create an NHDP through a decentralized (bottom-up) planning process, a centralized (top-down) process or a combination of the two. Each of these processes has its advantages and disadvantages. The decentralized process empowers local bodies and incorporates local priorities and objectives. Though this approach seems complex and time-consuming, it is the preferred process.

The centralized process is recommend-

ed when certain aspects need firm direction such as those related to health financing mechanisms. In the combined approach, there is usually an indicative plan from the centre that guides the lower level of administrative units and within which there is some autonomy to allow flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.³

Situation analysis

The formulation of an NHDP can be done in different stages as indicated in Figure 1. Many countries need to make greater efforts to move from focusing on symptoms to emphasizing systems; such thinking encourages enquiry into the underlying root causes of health systems weaknesses. A good situation analysis will (i) analyse the functioning of the different components of the health system⁵ and its environment; (ii) analyse epidemiological trends; (iii) identify the priority public health problems and the major potential challenges in addressing them and (iv) provide baseline information for future monitoring and evaluation. A situation analysis often considers the socioeconomic and

political environment, health context, health systems, resource constraints and other factors.⁶ It should also review a country's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOTs) to determine health priority issues and challenges.

Formulation

The principle that should underline the drafting of the NHDP is that of ensuring its ownership by national authorities and stakeholders. Clear objectives and agreed priorities for the plan as well as the means to achieve them need particular attention given their importance. Therefore, it is essential, after identify-

⁵The World health report 2000 defines a health system as "all the activities whose primary purpose is to promote, restore or maintain health."

⁶Strategic health planning: guidelines for developing countries, Nuffield Institute for Health, 2002.

ing the objectives and strategies, to determine the main actions that have to be taken. Human, financial and material resources necessary for the execution of the plan should be identified as a first stage in the preparation of a budget that will include investment and recurrent costs. In addition, the sources of funds for the prepared budget should be known as well as the available amount, including any gaps, in order to facilitate the mobilization of resources. Countries in the Region have used three methods for writing an NHDP, that is, formulation by an existing planning unit or department within the Ministry of Health, by a team of health people in the ministry of health, and external experts with a specific task to develop the plan in a limited period of time or by consultants. Each of these has its advantages and

disadvantages, particularly in terms of speed of delivery and ownership.

Approval

Each country has its own mechanisms for approving their plans. However, in all countries there are likely to be some approval requirements within the ministries of health and others at central and multisectoral level.

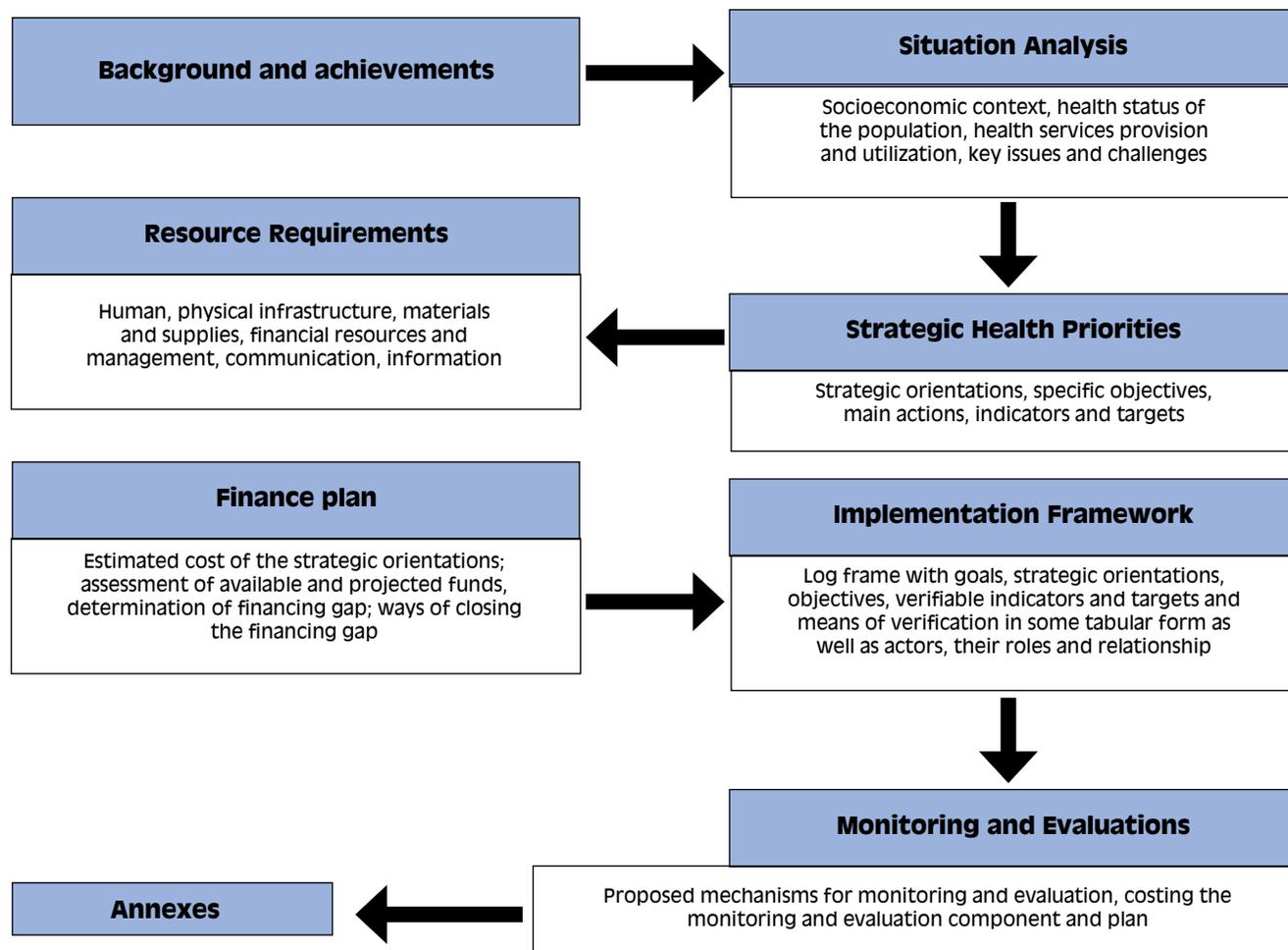
Dissemination

To obtain wide acceptance of the NHDP, countries should develop a dissemination strategy as part of the development plan. They should use various dissemination methods, going beyond the traditional public health methods which are likely to be insufficient.

Implementation

The final NHDP should take into account and harmonize the plans from the different levels of the health system (national, regional and district levels) including specific health institutions. An NHDP is of little use if not implemented, and yet in the African Region many NHDP remain unfulfilled aspirations. Thus, it is important that very explicit links are made between the strategic plan and operational plans and budgets as the mechanisms for implementation. It is important to link the NHDP to the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) and operational plans to annual budgets for implementation purposes. Funding for NHDP can be sourced from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and

Figure 2: NHDP content



Source: Adapted from WHO AFRO guide for the development of a national health policy and plan.

Figure 3: Status of NHDP in the African Region

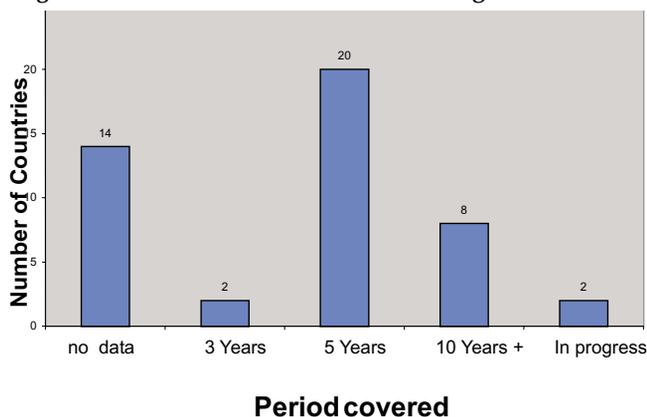
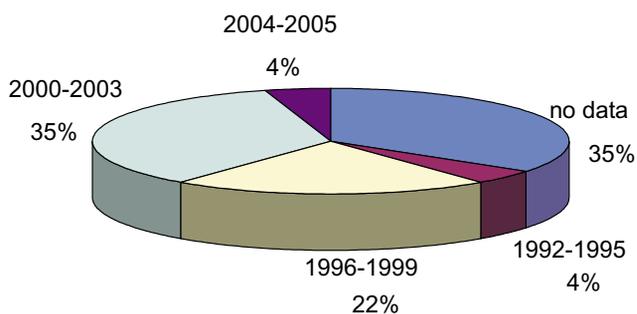


Figure 4: Formulation of NHDP in the African Region



Malaria, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, and the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative.

Monitoring and evaluation

While designing the NHDP, it is important to consider how its progress will be measured and its achievements evaluated, indicating the needs for clear indicators for both the NHDP and operational plans. Monitoring and evaluation will indicate progress and constraints encountered during the implementation phase and help to address the underpinning issues.

Consultation

It is important that sufficient attention be given to the process of consultation during the formulation of the NHDP. Communities, parliamentarians, political parties, key ministries, health professionals, private sector health care providers and others should be consulted in the early stages for views on priorities and strategies.

Content

The content of existing national health plans varies from country to country. The most common elements are featured in Figure 2.

Timeframe

The timeframe varies from country to country and is sometimes influenced by donor interests. In some countries, the NHDP is a continuation of the process

for national health policy formulation, while in others it is linked to SWAps, PRSPs and MDGs.

NHDPs in many countries were developed for a five-year period (20 out of 32 countries for which information is available at the Regional Office (Figure 3). Previously, some countries had long-term plans covering ten years (eight out of 32 countries). These were supplemented by shorter prepared plans with greater detail. The shorter 3- or 5-years plans were linked to the MTEF and were complemented by shorter operational plans and annual budgets for implementation purposes. Countries are showing growing interest in the development of their NHDP. For example, 35% of existing plans were written between 2000 and 2003 (Figure 4). However, many countries have yet to update their plans.

The role of WHO in health development planning

The WHO Regional Office for Africa has produced a guide for the development of National Health Policy and Plan. WHO will make this tool available to countries for use in order to enable them to undertake this important process and to assess their own planning systems which they can strengthen, as appropriate.

However, it should be stressed that there is no single blueprint for creating a NHDP. Each country has its particu-

lar environment in which the planning process takes place and specific requirements needed for different solutions for health planning. This guide, therefore, is intended to highlight the main issues that should be kept in mind while formulating an NHDP.

WHO will continue to provide technical support and build capacity within WHO Country Offices and Member States to develop plans which are realistic in their aspirations. WHO will also advocate for mobilization of more resources from both countries and partners for the implementation of existing plans.

Conclusion

The National Health Development Plan should be seen as an opportunity for placing health at the centre of development at country level, and for opening up the dialogue between ministries of health and partners, including private sector and civil society, among others, in order to maximize benefits from their contribution to achieve better health outcomes in the African Region.

**Dr Pathé BARRY is the Regional Adviser for National Health Systems at the Regional Office*

***Dr Mensah is with the Programme Planning and Evaluation Unit at the Regional Office*