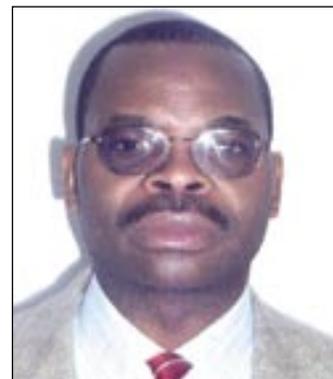# Using the Long-term Perspectives Approach in National Health

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Introduction

Most decisions made by policy makers and senior managers in the health sector concern actions and events which have implications on the future of the health system and health status. These decisions require a vision of a future health situation and health status that fulfills the aspirations of all, and that is coherent and motivating enough for all key stakeholders to participate in its achievement.. Without a national health vision for the 21st Century and an effective well-costed strategy to achieve it, countries in the African region will not effectively and rapidly achieve their health goals including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Since the future remains unknown and highly uncertain due to the rapid and dynamic changes characterizing the 21st Century, it is critical for national authorities and health sector planners to attempt an analysis of the future health situation before offering any solutions to current (and future) health challenges. Setting proper long-tern and medium term health goals as well as appropriate contingency plans in preparation for any unforeseen circumstances will determine which countries will do better in their efforts to achieve the MDGs . This will avoid rush decisions, mistakes and a "fire-fighting" approach to sudden or unforeseen developments in the external environment which require adequate lead planning time if they have to be tackled effectively.

The long-term health development (LHD) approach has three basic elements: a strategic situation analysis to determine what is happening in the health sector; a futures analysis to determine what could likely happen and to derive a vision for health development; and creation of a sustainable long-term strategy and policy framework for health development.

Strategic analysis of the current health situation

It is important to systematically collect and analyze strategic information for building scenarios of health development in order to derive a proper health vision and the strategic plan for its achievement. One tool used to collect such information is the *Strategic Intelligence Matrix* (SIM)[1]. National brainstorming sessions of key health stakeholders are organized to fill in the matrix focusing on information abbreviated as F.A.C.T.S. – S.W.O.T. meaning:

F for *Future-bearing events* (events whose impact on health issues will be felt for a long time to come);

A for *Actors* (a key players/stakeholders or groups whose actions/motives have a significant effect on the health issues at stake);

C for *Critical uncertainties* (events, phenomena, outcomes, trends etc. whose nature, future direction, magnitude or effects are uncertain or unknown);

T for *Trends* (manifestations of phenomena across different time-frames from past, present, to future as demonstrated by the behaviour or direction of a particular indicator);

S for *Strategies* (courses of action being pursued to deal with the issue – including their effects);

S for *Strengths* (strong or positive aspects/characteristics inherent in the country which policy-makers have the power to manipulate to the advantage of health development);

W for *Weaknesses* (weak or negative aspects/characteristics inherent in the country which policy-makers have the power to minimize to the advantage of health development);

O for *Opportunities* (positive aspects in the external environment which are beyond the direct control of policy-makers but which can be leveraged for health development);

T for *Threats* (negative aspects in the external environment which are beyond the direct control of policy-makers but which need to be mitigated in the interest of health development).

Since health status and health development are affected by economic, social, political, environmental, cultural and technological factors, it is important to thoroughly search for the **FACTS-SWOT** information in all these six domains focusing only on the *health determinants* under each domain. Typically, an additional technique called *Environmental scanning* maybe used to gather the required information more adequately. This involves identifying external threats, opportunities, emerging issues and extra information critical for scenarios building, designing the country's national health vision and strategy and reviewing it whenever necessary.

[1] *Source:* Ben Caiquo and O. Adesida (1994) 'Gathering Information for National Development Strategy' Paper prepared for *African Futures' Scenarios Training Workshop,* Franceville, Gabon. Organised by the UNDP/African Futures Project.

Figure 1: **Strategic Intelligence Matrix (SIM)**

Issue/Theme: (e.g. stopping brain drain of health workers)

Domains	F	A	C	T	Strategies		S	W	O	T
					Past	Present				
Political										
Economic										
Social										
Cultural										
Environmental										
Technological										

Strategic analysis of a country's future health development

Health policies and plans are proposed interventions to be implemented in the future. They should therefore be based on a thorough analysis of the most likely health future situation in the country and the aspirations of all the citizens . *Scenarios* are just one among many tools used to conduct a strategic analysis of the future health situation by making *creative* use of the information collected through the SIM. They are logically consistent but different and credible *stories* of what could likely happen in the future. Scenarios show how the future could unfold[2] and, as stories, they are largely qualitative and rely on quantitative data to strengthen the evidence and argumentation through projections, extrapolation etc. Scenarios are NOT predictions nor are they forecasts because the future is too uncertain to be predicted or forecasted. Each story inter-weaves the range of *key uncertainties* in the *six domains* of the SIM in a coherent, plausible manner exploring new and challenging ways in which the elements in the SIM could possibly combine to create a desirable or undesirable future health situation. The group of experienced health stakeholders from all sectors and levels of society construct-

ing the scenarios elaborate these stories using the *"What if…"* to show the likely decisions and actions of various key players and their consequences on health status and health development as the future unfolds. In this way, the planners can explore possible conflict situations, problems, emerging issues and the actions that could be taken to lead the country into one health situation or the other.

Using scenarios is like rehearsing the future in advance, thus living in it conceptually before being there in reality. By recognizing the warning signs and reviewing what is likely to happen, the planning team can plan to avoid surprises and adapt to act more appropriately The scenarios convey powerful messages to all concerned stakeholders allowing them to communicate, learn and plan together for a more positive future in an uncertain and rapidly changing health environment[3]. Such planning is done with an understanding of the total health system and the cross-impacts of actions and events between the seven domains of the SIM. It opens the mind, challenging conventional thinking, and stimulating strategic thoughts and actions to be considered for a better health future. Typically, at a minimum, there should be at least three scenarios –

the worst case, the best case and a middle case scenario - in order to learn the best lessons for creating a realistic vision and strategy. Each scenario will have its *moral* or *lesson* that can be interpreted into policy and *strategic implications* and the actions that could be taken given the said policy and strategic lessons. These actions will have to be woven into the overall final strategy for achieving the health vision – including the contingencies that need to be considered in case the various scenarios begin to manifest themselves. Once the scenarios are constructed and their lessons drawn, the vision of health for the country can then be crafted.

The national health *vision*

The health vision for a country is an expression of the shared long-term goals and aspirations for health development. The vision, as a *picture of the desired future* that all key stakeholders in the country aspire to have, will guide all national health development plans, poli-

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[2] WHO-AFRO, *Health Futures: Scenarios based health development guidelines, Harare,* 2000, p.22
[3] *Ibid.,* p.23.

cies and strategies aimed at health development in the country. It is the *guiding light* for all actions, and provides the spark that will ignite the energies of all stakeholders and empower them to take unified action to create the best possible health status of the country's inhabitants. In most cases, the vision is an attempt to avoid the worst scenarios and get the best scenario into focus. Thus, in creating the vision, it is important first to review the scenarios and information contained in the SIM, to learn what is the most desirable health system to create the best health status as seen by all the stakeholders. These lessons will assist in understanding all stakeholders' *aspirations* of the best possible health future for the country. These ideas, aspirations and lessons of *what is most desirable* become the key elements or ingredients in crafting the Vision Statement. This statement, besides containing the grand aspirations and goals of the stakeholders, also alludes to a broad approach for its realization. It is this broad allusion to how the vision will be achieved which gives the platform for developing a more detailed strategic plan and appropriate policies for health development. The health vision and strategy should be presented to the wider society for comment and inputs through various media before being finalized.

What should be done to realize a country's health *vision?*

A national health development strategy has to be put in place to achieve the vision and has to be supported by appropriate and relevant health policies and legislation informed by the goals and aspirations contained in the vision. Methods and approaches to strategic planning are used to complete this stage which involves marrying the goals and aspirations of the vision for health with information from the SIM.

To begin with, the vision as a composite set of health goals and aspirations, is broken down into its specific themes for which specific interventions or strategies can be proposed. At this stage, all the information collected so far from the previous stages, including the SIM (such as the SWOT, results of past and present strategies, trends, etc.) and the scenarios, is collated and used to suggest the interventions. For example, the "strengths" in the economic and political domains can be deployed to mobilize resources domestically and internationally for health systems development to achieve the vision. Those elements listed as "weaknesses" can be eliminated using the strengths or opportunities identified earlier, since weaknesses fall under the control of policy makers. The scenarios are also strategic in that contingency plans/actions can be proposed and their lessons taken into account when proposing the strategies and policies to deal with specific aspects of health development. At the end of this exercise, *each theme/issue* in the vision will have an associated set of proposed interventions to achieve the *desired status* in the short, medium-term to long-term.[4] The final overall strategy should be assessed for internal consistency, compatibility with its external environment, appropriateness in light of resources, degree of risk, effectiveness, and flexibility.[5] This will indicate the need for *policy* i.e. the guiding principles, values, norms and a framework that will underpin the strategy implementation process and keep it focused in one direction – that of achieving the vision. Health policy will guide decision-makers and strategy implementers how they will handle any issues including emerging ethical questions or other matters likely to be encountered during implementation of the strategy. Some of these matters may even require *legislation* to ensure stronger incentive for compliance from all concerned actors.

Implementation, monitoring and review

This strategy is put into action through operational plans showing who would do what when and how to achieve which short, medium and long-term objectives. An appropriate organizational structure is needed for implementing the strategy in line with the health vision. This may involve reviewing existing structures, budgets and institutional arrangements to ensure their alignment with the strategy. Constant monitoring of processes and outcomes is essential in the context of a strategic 'learning" approach to health development where goals and strategies are periodically reviewed through continuous environmental scanning to ensure adherence to the national health vision.

Where are we with the LHD approach in the WHO Africa Region?

The LHD approach has already been accepted by some WHO member countries in the African Region as the method for elaborating national health strategic plans and policies based on a widely shared national health vision.

The LHD Programme of the WHO Regional Office for Africa was conceived to support African countries in their efforts to develop and manage national health development plans and policies in a new and most appropriate way for the dynamic and rapidly changing world of the 21st Century.

Since the Programme's creation in 2000, regional sensitization workshops for Anglophone and Francophone countries have been conducted, followed by national ones in several countries. The countries are now seek technical assistance to develop their health policies and plans using the LHD approach at the national, sectoral and sub-sectoral levels. As a result, regional and national health policy and plan guidelines for the WHO African Region incorporate aspects of the LHD approach.

However, this new approach is still being established as awareness of its usefulness grows. The challenge remains how to meet this growing need and interest amidst limited financial and human resources for the Region in this field. The full LHD process can also appear to be a long and elaborate

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[4]The medium to short-term plans can then be considered in the context of the country's poverty reduction strategies such as PRSPs as well as the Medium Term Expenditure Frameworks (MTEFs).

process that requires time, patience and concetration due to its comprehensive nature, but the results at the end can be mind-opening and are certainly critical for strategic planning and policy development. Part of the strategy to meet these challenges is to publish shorter **user-guides** focusing on specific aspects and phases of the approach. These can be used by any interested parties for different planning and policy elaboration needs apart from using the full LHD approach. For example, shorter and simpler guides and training manuals should be produced for *strategic* situation analyses using scenarios and other futures analytical tools as well as for vision and *strategy formulation.* As for implementation, monitoring and evaluation, a guide and training manual on how a country can be an effective "*learning*" entity with regard to national health development would be most useful in guiding the implementation of health policies and plans.

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