

5. STRENGTHENING PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS

Public health systems are overburdened and near collapse in many countries. They must be fully functional and well resourced if prevention, treatment, care and support is to be provided to all people affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. This must include improved terms and conditions of service for health professionals; better health infrastructure; and ensuring disease-specific funding, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, contributes to strengthening broader health systems.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

It is impossible to achieve universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support without a well-functioning, integrated, and fully operating public health system at local, regional and national level, staffed by well-trained, well-managed and well-paid workers.¹ Conversely, if realised, universal access will alleviate a major burden on health systems. Universal access to treatment will mean people are able to stay healthier and have socially and economically productive lives. Universal access to HIV prevention will result in fewer people acquiring the virus, reducing demand on health systems.² HIV and AIDS has had a huge impact on health systems as greater numbers of people require health care, and as health workers have left public health systems as a result of ill health, death, stressful working conditions and lack of career opportunities in a sector weakened by the impact of HIV and AIDS.

However, HIV and AIDS is not the only reason for struggling health systems. Lack of investment and prioritisation of health by national governments and donors; lack of human resources for health; skills gaps and the legacy of IMF caps on public sector spending have left health systems in a weakened state. Inadequate supply and distribution of medicines, weak management systems and insufficient infrastructure of clinics, hospices, laboratories and hospitals are the result of a chronic lack of investment in health systems: the HIV and AIDS pandemic has brought an already simmering crisis to the boil.³

KEY DEBATES

Many development professionals, particularly those working on broader health issues, believe that disease-specific funding (often called 'vertical programmes'), such as that delivered through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, can have a detrimental impact by directing funding away from health systems (often called 'horizontal programmes') development. Those working in the HIV and AIDS and other disease-specific sectors often disagree, arguing that focused funding responds to the scale, impact and specific responses required by these diseases and can enhance national health system development through integrated programming, which benefits the wider health system.⁴

VSO'S POSITION

VSO believes that a comprehensive response to HIV and AIDS must include strengthening health systems to increase the capacity of governments to respond more effectively to communities' health care needs. This must include:

- increased training for all health care workers, including community care providers
- a focus on the needs and rights of patients
- recognition of all types of community care providers
- improved terms and conditions of service for health professionals
- improved supply and distribution of medicines
- stronger management systems
- improved infrastructure, including clinics, hospices, laboratories and hospitals.

These changes would result in improved retention and motivation of existing health care workers, particularly in the context of the large-scale migration of health care workers.

¹ UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development's Policy Briefing (2007) *Strengthening Health Systems to Achieve Universal Access to HIV and AIDS Services*, p2

² Ibid, p2

³ VSO (2006) *Policy Brief: Reducing the Burden of HIV and AIDS Care on Women and Girls*, p5

⁴ VSO was very involved in developing the UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development's 2007 Policy Briefing: *Strengthening Health Systems to Achieve Universal Access to HIV and AIDS Services*. Hence, this paper was used as the basis for VSO's position on health systems strengthening.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- VSO supports vertical/disease-specific funding (that is, money that is ring-fenced by donors and made available to tackle solely an exceptional health issue such as HIV and AIDS, malaria, or tuberculosis), but this must also contribute to strengthening health systems.
- The state should be the main health service provider and should have responsibility for regulating health services provided by others.
- The state should ensure the work of community-based HIV and AIDS initiatives (including the provision of home-based care) is adequately acknowledged and supported. Community care providers should have access and links to government health providers, for example, community clinics, hospitals, government and medical staff.
- Donors and national governments must address the global health worker shortage and health worker migration by investing in increased salaries and improved working conditions involving health workers in decision-making; improving management systems to ensure health workers are consistently trained, managed, compensated and supported; and investing in health-training institutions.⁵
- Health systems should respond to the needs of women and men, girls and boys, and should address the inequalities between women and men in health care provision.
- Financing for health systems should be long term and predictable.
- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria must be fully funded.
- National governments should develop ten-year health plans.
- National governments should allocate 15 per cent of national budgets to health, as agreed by African health ministers at Abuja in 2006. All national governments should follow this lead.
- National governments and donors should abolish user fees for health services.
- Women and men living with HIV and AIDS should be involved in decision-making within health systems when policies and programmes are developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated. Women's voices must be taken into account when formulating policy, budgeting, planning and implementing programmes.
- Civil society (including VSO and its partners) should support, monitor and, where necessary, challenge governments to undertake their responsibilities in relation to health care delivery.

RESOURCES

- Africa Union (2006) *Africa's Common Position to the High Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly Special Session on AIDS*
- UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development (2007) *Policy Briefing: Strengthening Health Systems to Achieve Universal Access to HIV and AIDS Services*
- VSO (2006) *Policy Brief: Reducing the Burden of HIV and AIDS Care on Women and Girls*
- World Health Organization (2006) *Treat, Train, Retain*
- World Health Organization (2006) *Working Together for Health*

LANGUAGE

- **'Vertical funding'/'disease-specific funding'** refers to funding that is channelled towards a particular disease. In the context of HIV and AIDS, this is the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (commonly called the Global Fund).
- A **'health system'** is the organisation by which health care is provided. In calling for health systems strengthening, VSO is referring to strengthening of national health provision by the state.



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⁵ UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development's Policy Briefing (2007) *Strengthening Health Systems to Achieve Universal Access to HIV and AIDS Services*, p8