

## The importance of establishing a national policy for infrastructure

Andrei Issakov reports on a starting point in the journey towards better health delivery



Documents and resolutions by African policy bodies such as meetings of the WHO Regional Committees for Africa and Eastern Mediterranean and Conference of African Ministers of Health, and reports by numerous technical workshops, strongly emphasise that the lack of clear national policies is at the root of the widespread problem of under-utilisation and misuse of health system physical resources. They identify this as the underlying reason preventing countries from firmly putting healthcare infrastructure and technology to the full benefit of health service delivery, and resulting in decreased quality of care and high wastage of scarce resources.

They also urge all African countries to develop and adopt healthcare infrastructure and technology policies that are explicit and comprehensive, are embedded within and form an integral part of the overall national health policies and development plans. Although country diversity underscores the need for each country to formulate policies consistent with its specific needs, priorities, resources, and capabilities, there is a set of basic principles forming the core of a national policy, and the process of its formulation, adoption, promotion and implementation.

The international healthcare technology management community under the leadership of WHO has produced guidelines<sup>1</sup> and provided technical advice to address problems associated with the rational introduction and application of health system physical assets.

It is a statement of intent, mapping out a vision and outlining a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve expected outcomes. It is generally accompanied or followed by a strategy, which is a roadmap for the realisation of the policy. The strategy outlines a plan of action and sets out a timeframe, stipulating which resources will be made available when, which actions will be undertaken, and who is responsible for what.

The purpose of national policy is to encourage the effective and efficient selection, acquisition, utilisation, and management of healthcare physical assets. It also serves to define objectives for improving the impact in service delivery. It should be comprehensive and inclusive;

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encourage the improved access to quality care; address all aspects of physical assets such as installations and plant, medical equipment, information and communication technologies, energy, water supply, waste management, transport and logistic systems. It should involve all categories of stakeholders – government agencies, healthcare providers and users, health insurers, academia, industry and suppliers.

The policy should encompass a wide range of critically important issues such as needs assessment and strategic planning, macro and micro health technology assessment, pre-purchase evaluation, selection, procurement and/or donation acceptance etc. Above all, policy should ensure at all levels of the health system, the creation, operation and sustainability of adequate and appropriate organisational structures, management mechanisms, legislation, regulations and incentives, public/private partnerships, international cooperation in support of its implementation.

Over the last decade, several African countries have developed policies and strategic plans addressing healthcare infrastructure and technology related objectives. These include Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland, and Uganda. The implementation of these policies, however, required that significant investments be made, in terms of strong political will and commitment, high degree of awareness and understanding on the part of decision-makers and senior managers, strengthening of organisational infrastructure and managerial procedures, human and financial resources, and clear monitoring and evaluation mechanism. It is now becoming increasingly clear that in many instances the anticipated results of policy implementation have not materialised.

At this stage, an international effort lead by WHO is directed towards analysing the policy penetration into the health system, to try to determine and gauge the factors and mechanisms governing the effective implementation of healthcare infrastructure and technology policies. This analysis is to investigate why, despite policy adoption and implementation outcomes have not been as anticipated by the stakeholders. The lessons learnt will guide the further action by international organisations, donor community and national health authorities.

### Reference

- 1 Healthcare Technology Policy Framework, and Healthcare Technology Policy Formulation and Implementation, WHO Regional Offices for Africa and Eastern Mediterranean, WHO Regional Publications, Eastern Mediterranean Series 24 "Healthcare Technology Management", Cairo, 2001