

African regional health technology policies: a decade after the promises

Without appropriate facilities and working equipment it is not possible to deliver effective healthcare systems. Andrei Kssakov reports on progress



The 49th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa held in Windhoek in September 1999 adopted the Health Technology Policy in the African Region. This was the culmination of a series of landmark events that led to the subject moving to the top of the policy agenda and set the scene for comprehensive action at country and regional levels. A Workshop on Healthcare Technology in sub-Saharan Africa was held in Cape Town in April 1994 during which the African Federation for Technology in Healthcare (AFTH) was launched. The same year, the World Bank published *Better Health in Africa* with the entire Chapter 7 devoted to infrastructure and equipment including sound situation analysis and recommendations. In 1996, the WHO Regional Director for Africa established the Regional Health Care Technology Task Force charged with the broad analytical, advisory, technical support and networking agenda. The first ever Regional Summit on Health Technology was held in Harare in April 1998 by AFTH and WHO producing the Harare Declaration on Health Care Technology in Africa: Vision 2020.

The regional Policy Statement and the strategy for its implementation aimed at assisting WHO African Member States in formulating health technology policies and plans that supported the achievement of their national health goals. It outlined a set of priority interventions at country and regional levels including: advocacy, institutionalisation of health technology management, sound situation analysis and needs identification; establishing and applying norms and standards for infrastructure and equipment; strengthening health technology management information systems; developing comprehensive human resources strategies with effective measures for training all categories of required staff, their needs-based deployment, and retention; promoting the use of health technology assessment and health technology management operational research for informed decision making and health practice; and improving communication and access to information. Strong political commitment, mobilisation of all national and international stakeholders, and putting in place rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have been emphasised as

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critical success factors.

Specific targets were set which stipulate that by the end of 2010 at least,

- 50% of countries would have developed national health technology policy;
- 30% of countries would have implemented priority interventions in the area of health technology;
- 20% of countries would have carried out country-wide situation analysis;
- 50% of countries would have established adequate structures for technology management at all levels of health system;
- 40% of countries would have included research on technology in health systems research plan;
- 60% of countries would have included technology information as part of their health information system;
- all countries would have included health technology management training as an integral part of their human resources for health development plan.

With the momentum which was evident in the Region at the end of 1990s, these ambitious targets seemed to be quite realistic. However, during the next decade the overall motion somewhat slowed down, and although several countries have made good progress in implementing actions outlined in the regional policy, the targets as they were set up are far from being achieved.

Only a handful of countries have formulated and adopted national policies and, more importantly, established appropriate mechanisms for their implementation. Even more worrying is the fact that in many instances the initial successful start was not sustained. The political commitment made at the highest level in Windhoek in 1999 did not materialise in embracing healthcare infrastructure and technology as an integral and critical part of the overall health policy and health system development plan, and mobilising all stakeholders for a concerted action throughout the region. Generally, healthcare infrastructure and technology remains the health system's stepdaughter.

In forthcoming issues of *Africa Health* we will call on countries and their international partners to share their success stories as well as failures to identify enabling and constraining factors and draw lessons. WHO AFRO in cooperation with the international health technology management professional community should take a lead in this analysis and in designing a rigorous action for implementing regional health technology policy.