

EHealth strategies: guiding the development of ICT in health

Professor Yunkap Kwankam on the need to create the right regulatory environment for eHealth



The Americas launch their eHealth strategy

On September 27, 2011 the 51st Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the regional arm of the World Health Organization in the Americas, passed a resolution to support countries in North and South America in developing public policies in the area of eHealth. Our readers will recall that I touted the importance of eHealth strategies in the July issue of *Africa Health*. The PAHO eHealth strategy seeks to improve access to and quality of health services through the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Like other regional strategies, it addresses the eight eHealth priority action areas approved by the WHO Executive Board in January 2006. There are three application areas, namely: building and supporting the health workforce; health promotion to empower citizens to be more engaged in their health; and delivery of health services. These need to be supported by a number of enabling actions, namely: an appropriate legal and regulatory environment, norms and standards, access to information, private–public partnerships for ICT R&D, and gathering intelligence on eHealth – what works, why, under what conditions, and how can the learning be transferred?

Why emphasise strategies

Why is there so much emphasis on regional strategies? Well, strategies are the rails on which the eHealth enterprise runs. They provide a roadmap and a guide for coherent eHealth activities across geographies, institutions, and providers within a country. And when undertaken on a regional basis, they enable countries to derive mutual benefit through a common approach to eHealth. This is why in 2008, the Commonwealth Health Ministers created the Commonwealth eHealth programme to leverage the ‘Commonwealth factor’.

The African Union Commission (AUC) is in the process of doing something similar. As a first step the AUC sought to carry out a landscaping exercise – to identify who was doing what, where, and how well it was working (see my column in the May 2011 issue of *Africa Health*).

If carried out properly, the value of the strategy

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development exercise lies not simply in the production of a strategic plan – a document to guide future development of eHealth in the region, country or institution – but also in the buy-in by those who will either be charged with implementation of the strategy or who are expected to benefit from this implementation. In a word, ‘ownership’ of the strategy. A strategy that is owned by a broad coalition of stakeholder groups is more likely to have the intended impact on health in the country and region.

Beyond strategies to structures for implementation

Of course a strategy document alone is not sufficient to ensure proper eHealth activities – it is necessary but not sufficient. However, the document must identify structures and institutions that need to be created, if they do not already exist, or strengthened if they do, so as to ensure further development of eHealth in the country. Institutions are indispensable to address the perennial issue of sustainability of projects and programmes that tend to fade away with the end of donor funding. And to end the eternal proof-of-concept and demonstration projects and pilots, even for concepts which have been tried and proven and only need to be taken to scale to reap the anticipated benefits.

Why, then, do some countries not have published eHealth strategies? The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) reports that in its National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) process, as of May 2011, 44 African countries had finalised their ICT policy, 3 were in progress, while 6 were yet to begin the process. Of the 44 with policies, only a small minority have a sectoral policy on ICT for health.

Technical assistance is available

But how do countries go about developing a strategy? WHO recommends a nine-step participatory process for developing strategies for technology in the health sector. The International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH) – see www.isfteh.org – is in the process of preparing a set of tools and guidelines for this, for publication on its website.

Another useful resource is one that can tell us what has been done, where, and how well it worked – a repository of knowledge on eHealth projects, successes, and failures with associated ‘lessons learned’. The ISfTeH is committed to providing technical support through frameworks and tools for what works and building of a knowledge base for what doesn’t.