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Health-related Millennium Development Goals

Development of a strategy for strengthening health systems

Report by the Secretariat

1. The need to elaborate a new strategy for strengthening health systems, with early and full participation of all stakeholders, is urgent, given the mounting demand for policy guidance and technical support, the increasing number of channels for investment, the multiplicity of interested parties, and expanding opportunities for partnerships. By resolution WHA58.30 the Health Assembly requested the Director-General to report on progress in developing a coherent and adequately resourced strategy, with clear goals and deliverable products, to support Member States, in particular to strengthen health systems. The Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly also noted with concern that current trends suggest that many low-income countries will not reach the internationally agreed health-related development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, that many countries may achieve them only among their richer population groups, and that urgent action is needed. Furthermore, it acknowledged that rapid progress will require political commitment and scaling-up of more efficient and effective strategies and actions, greater investment of financial resources, adequately staffed and effective health systems, capacity-building in public and private sectors, and a clear focus on equity in access and outcomes. Echoing these concerns, Heads of State and Government at the World Summit (New York, 14 to 16 September 2005) committed themselves to increasing investment to improve health systems in developing countries and those with economies in transition.¹

2. Recent resolutions WHA54.12, WHA54.13, WHA55.18, WHA56.25, WHA58.17, WHA58.30, WHA58.33 and WHA58.34, variously related to strengthening health systems, urged or requested the establishment and implementation of associated policies or strategies. More specifically, in resolutions WHA54.10, WHA56.30 and WHA57.14 (on HIV/AIDS), WHA57.12 (on reproductive health) and WHA58.31 (on universal coverage of maternal, newborn and child health interventions) the Health Assembly urged Member States to strengthen their responses, including investments and financing, in high-priority health areas, in particular covering the needs of vulnerable populations. The Health Assembly made explicit the need to strengthen health systems to this end. The threats to global health such as avian influenza and HIV/AIDS and the crisis in human resources accentuated by emigration of health personnel from developing countries underscore the need for urgent action.

¹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 60/1. See also document EB117/12.

3. Fully-functioning and equitable health systems will reduce morbidity and mortality and contribute substantially to achieving internationally agreed health-related development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Strengthening entire systems will enable provision of effective services to all people in need, including through programmes financed by global health initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, or facilitated by initiatives such as the Stop TB Partnership, Roll Back Malaria Partnership and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. Such system-wide action will also respond to communities and nongovernmental organizations advocating for health.

4. Accordingly, the Secretariat has started work on elaborating a draft strategy on strengthening health systems that meshes with WHO's existing programmes and strategies, such as those on essential medicines and stopping tuberculosis, that confront system-wide constraints on improving access and health outcomes. The consultative process (see below) will engage all crucial stakeholders including Member States, international bodies and the private sector.

CONTEXT, GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

5. Each Member State has a uniquely organized health system and challenges to health that require context-specific solutions. Enormous diversity exists, but there are common issues that could be resolved by sharing health policy experiences across countries. Building on consensus around the goals and functions of health systems, the draft strategy intends to offer focused strategic areas for investments in strengthening health systems and to tackle system-wide constraints in areas such as human resources, financing, procurement of medicines, equipment and other supplies, and information for public choice and professional decision-making.

6. The draft strategy being formulated aims to ensure that Member States can be supported in their efforts to strengthen their health systems and attain their health goals. It will foster greater international solidarity towards universal coverage (delivery of effective services to all people in need) and social protection (against financial risk and with assured safety and efficacy of services and products) by providing a coherent, global approach to strengthening of health systems and a strategic framework for policy discussions for the period 2006-2015, particularly relevant in low- and middle-income countries. In defining key areas for action by the Secretariat, it will complement the Eleventh General Programme of Work. The draft strategy will also form the basis for more coordinated and consistent collaboration with partners.

7. Values that underpin health system goals should guide approaches for strengthening of health systems and need to be made explicit. Key values underlying the draft strategy reflect those enshrined in WHO's Constitution and reinforced through Health for All in the 21st Century and regional commitments to strengthening of health systems. Principles of social justice, equity, gender equality and participation of all peoples and communities, solidarity, and governmental responsibility further inform the effort.

8. The goal of the draft strategy is better health (both level and equity), improved responsiveness of health systems to the expectations of the population, and financial fairness, through the enhanced performance of health systems. The draft strategy will help to identify and support intermediate objectives that link generic health-systems functions and possible reforms to national objectives. These include increased **coverage** (including service-delivery management and support), improved **social protection**, increased **capacity building** (financial, human and institutional, and in the area of

acquisition and use of knowledge), and **strategic policy formulation and implementation** that is enhanced (i.e. coordinated, participatory and accountable).

CONSULTATIVE PROCESS

9. A consensus-building exercise across all levels of the Organization was initiated in mid-2005. Strategic directions were articulated by late 2005, drawing on the experience of WHO's existing global health initiatives that are investing in strengthening of health systems. A third phase to refine strategic directions will continue through March 2006, with the broad circulation of a draft strategy for comment, including extensive international and regional consultations with Member States and external partners through conventional and electronic means. Subsequently, a revised draft strategy that responds particularly to the needs and concerns expressed by Member States will be submitted to the governing bodies.

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