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**HEALTH POLICY
INITIATIVE**

TAKING THE PULSE OF POLICY:

THE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION ASSESSMENT TOOL

SUMMARY

“Policy implementation” refers to the mechanisms, resources, and relationships that link health policies to program action. However, policies, once adopted, are not always implemented as envisioned and do not necessarily achieve intended results. Even the best policies can encounter implementation challenges. Thus, attention to policy issues should not end with the creation of the policy, which is only the beginning of the *policy-to-action* continuum. Policies should be viewed as “living documents” that need leadership, resources, monitoring, and other inputs to thrive and achieve their goals. The USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1, has designed the Policy Implementation Assessment Tool to help government and civil society advocates to “take the pulse” of policies in their countries. With this information, stakeholders can better understand policy dynamics and identify recommendations for translating health policies into action (see Box 1). Through regular check-ups and renewed commitment, policies can keep on track toward achieving policy goals.

About the Tool

The Policy Implementation Assessment Tool comprises two interview guides: one for policymakers and one for implementers and other stakeholders. “Policymakers” refers to individuals, usually in high-level government positions, who are responsible for setting policy priorities, formulating policies and program directives, allocating resources, and coordinating overall policy implementation. “Implementers and other stakeholders” refers to the groups engaged in carrying out activities outlined in policies and strategies. They also include groups, such as civil society organizations, that are involved in advocating for policy issues and monitoring program accountability. The interview guides can be easily adapted to develop focus group discussion (FGD) guides to gather feedback from the full spectrum of stakeholders, including clients, community health workers, and other community leaders.

The interview guides are designed to be flexible so that users can adapt them to the country context, the specific policy, the topic area (e.g., reproductive health, HIV), and level of inquiry (e.g., national or subnational level). The

assessment approach calls for a relatively small number of interviews and FGDs, with the number and type of key informants or FGD participants depending on what will adequately reflect policymaking and implementation processes in the country.

Seven Dimensions

The interview guides are organized around seven dimensions that influence policy implementation.

The Policy, Its Formulation, and Dissemination. Are the policy’s goals, objectives, and strategies clear and appropriate given the issues to be addressed by the policy? Do key stakeholders agree on the goals and strategies? Has the policy been disseminated to and understood by those responsible for implementation?

Social, Political, and Economic Context. Implementation occurs in a context. Social norms (e.g., gender inequality), governing processes (e.g., decentralization), economic issues (e.g., poverty), and other factors can affect policy implementation. What are the effects and consequences of these factors?

Leadership in Policy Implementation. Strong leadership and commitment are essential to ensure the follow through, resources, and accountability needed for putting policies into practice—however, the leaders responsible for policy formulation might find their attention diverted elsewhere once the policy is adopted or the responsibility for leading implementation might shift to new individuals and groups. How effective is the leadership for implementation?

Stakeholder Involvement in Policy Implementation. Policy formulation is increasingly a multisectoral endeavor, yet this engagement might not continue during the policy implementation stage. What is the extent of stakeholder involvement in policy implementation? What is the nature of the relationships and collaboration among different stakeholders?

Planning for Implementation and Resource

Mobilization. Does an implementation plan exist? Do organizations need new skills and training in order to implement the new policy? How will funding for new initiatives be ensured? How reliable is the resource flow?

Operations and Services. New policies may call for changes in coordination mechanisms, operational systems, and capacity of individuals and organizations charged with delivering services outlined in the policy. What are the positive changes as a result of putting the policy into practice on the ground? What are the challenges?

Feedback on Progress and Results. Regular collection, dissemination, and use of feedback are essential for assessing progress and making mid-course corrections. Who is and is not receiving information about implementation? How is the information used? Are the perspectives of beneficiaries or clients considered?

Step-by-Step Approach

The tool is applied through a step-by-step approach, which typically takes about 4–6 months: (1) select the policy; (2) form a core country team; (3) make decisions about study parameters; (4) adapt the interview guides; (5) identify interviewees and/or FGD participants; (6) conduct the interviews/FGDs; (7) analyze data; and (8) share findings and discuss next steps.

The process of applying the tool is as important as the tool itself. The assessment should be led by a core country team, which will enhance credibility and buy-in for the activity. By working with a multisectoral country team and local interviewers, the assessment takes on the form of an internal study aimed at engendering positive change and addressing local needs, as opposed to an external critique. Positioning the assessment in this way enables candid viewpoints to surface, and helps to ensure that results are fully “owned” by in-country stakeholders.

The core team should review and adapt the interview guides to the country context and selected policy and synthesize key themes based on the study findings. Most important, the core team should engage other stakeholders in discussions about the assessment findings and possible next steps. It is dialogue—through the composition of the core team, the interviews/FGDs, and dissemination and follow-up activities—that inspires renewed commitment and tangible change.

Getting Started

The Health Policy Initiative has prepared a paper, *Taking the Pulse of Policy: The Policy Implementation Assessment*

Box 1. From Assessment to Action— Tool Inspires Dialogue and Results

The Health Policy Initiative has assisted core teams to apply the tool to assess national reproductive health and HIV policies and plans, as well as state-level health policies, leading to results. Based on findings from the assessment and advocacy by local partners, Guatemala’s Congress created a multisectoral Reproductive Health Observatory to monitor implementation of reproductive health, family planning, and HIV laws and policies. The Ministry of Public Health also allocated an additional US\$1.3 million for reproductive health programs in 2008. In Uttarakhand, India, the state government is amending the state *Health and Population Policy* to include equity goals and better meet the needs of underserved groups and regions. In El Salvador, the study findings are being used to design the new *National HIV/AIDS/STIs Strategic Plan* and improve coordination and monitoring of the national HIV response.

Tool, that provides more information on the seven dimensions, offers tips for forming a core team and conducting the assessment, and reviews experiences from country applications to date. It includes a CD-ROM containing the master interview guides for policymakers and implementers and other stakeholders, as well as Microsoft Excel datasheets for organizing data. The CD also provides sample materials from the country applications and selected readings. The full guide and online version of the CD are available at

www.healthpolicyinitiative.com/policyimplementation.

Questions or Feedback? We are interested in making the tool as useful as possible. If you have any questions about the tool or have feedback on how you have used it, please contact us at policyinfo@futuresgroup.com.

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