



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

HEALTH POLICY  
INITIATIVE



# SUPPORTING COUNTRY-LED INITIATIVES TO STRENGTHEN NATIONAL HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

**AUGUST 2010**

This publication was produced for review by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It was prepared by Tito Coleman and Anita Datar Garten of the Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1.

Suggested citation: Coleman, Tito, and Anita Datar Garten. 2010. *Supporting Country-Led Initiatives to Strengthen National Health Information Systems in Southern Africa*. Washington, DC: Futures Group, Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I.

The USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I, is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Contract No. GPO-I-01-05-00040-00, beginning September 30, 2005. The project's HIV activities are supported by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Task Order I is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA), White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood (WRA), and Futures Institute.

# SUPPORTING COUNTRY-LED INITIATIVES TO STRENGTHEN NATIONAL HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

**AUGUST 2010**

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the U.S. Government.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Acknowledgments ..... iv
- Executive Summary ..... v
- Abbreviations ..... vi
- Introduction..... 1
- Pre-Forum Survey ..... 2
  - Methodology..... 2
  - Findings ..... 2
    - Key Challenges*..... 3
    - Promising Practices at the Country Level* ..... 3
- Conclusion ..... 4
  - Next Steps..... 4
- Annex A: Pre-Forum Survey ..... 5

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors wish to acknowledge the efforts of several individuals and entities in supporting implementation of this activity. The authors thank John Novak and Emily Osinoff of USAID's Bureau of Global Health for their continuous encouragement and support of the Leadership Forum on Health Information Systems (HIS). Special thanks go to Stephen Settimi, Health Management Information Systems Advisor for the Office of HIV/AIDS/Bureau for Global Health, for his leadership and vision for the forum; the Training Resources Group for its invaluable leadership and facilitation of the event; and colleagues at the Analysis, Information Management, & Communications Activity for their leadership and overall management of the HIS forum planning team. Gratitude is also extended to the United Nations co-sponsors of the forum, including the World Health Organization, World Bank, International Telecommunications Union, and Health Metrics Network, as well as to our partners at Management Sciences for Health.

The authors especially thank the individuals interviewed as part of the qualitative survey that informed the forum agenda: Erwin Nakafingo of Namibia; Puumue Katjiuanjo of Namibia; Edwin Mpeta of Zimbabwe; Tendaye Mharadze of Zimbabwe; Chanda Chipoya of Zambia; Hassan Ebrahim of South Africa; Norah Stoops of South Africa; Victor Chalwe of Zambia; Calle Hedberg of South Africa; Mark Blecher of South Africa; Peter Barron of South Africa; Dr. Augustin Ntilivamunda of Swaziland; and Joana Mangureira of Mozambique.

Finally, sincere thanks go to the host country of Namibia for its gracious hospitality in welcoming the planning team and forum participants.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In response to growing recognition of the importance of reliable and timely health information systems (HIS) in improving decisionmaking for public health action and health systems strengthening, USAID supported a regional forum in East Africa that focused on engaging HIS champions from key public sectors—including health, finance, telecommunications, and vital statistics—and building country ownership of HIS. To that end, delegations from six PEPFAR focus countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda), with Namibia and Sudan as observers, convened for a three-day meeting, titled “Country Ownership Strategies: Leadership Forum on Health Information Systems,” in Addis Ababa from August 10–13, 2009. As part of preparation and planning for the forum, the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1 designed and conducted a semi-structured qualitative survey to capture the current state of HIS in each focus country.

Building on the success of the first leadership forum in 2009, USAID continues its support for the HIS leadership forum and has scheduled a five-day meeting for Southern Africa to take place in Windhoek, Namibia, from October 25–29, 2010. As part of preparation and planning for the 2010 forum, the Health Policy Initiative adapted the 2009 semi-structured qualitative survey to capture the current state of HIS in six of the nine participating countries.

This report highlights findings from the survey to date and includes background materials that supported the survey process. Although Task Order 1 of the Health Policy Initiative will conclude in advance of the 2010 forum, the survey team hopes to continue to support forum planning efforts under another USAID mechanism.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
HIS	health information systems
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HMN	Health Metrics Network
ICT	information and communication technology
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
PS	Permanent Secretary
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank (WB), and other key United Nations (UN) agencies and implementing partners, hosted a high-level forum, titled “Country Ownership Strategies: Leadership Forum on Health Information Systems,” in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in August 2009. The forum was designed to strengthen and accelerate country-owned and -led strategies for managing health information systems (HIS) in six focal countries in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). Namibia and Sudan participated as observers. Building on the success of the first leadership forum in 2009, USAID continues its support for the HIS leadership forum and has scheduled a five-day meeting for Southern Africa to take place in Windhoek, Namibia, from October 25–29, 2010.

Donors and national governments are increasingly recognizing that reliable and timely health information is essential for evidence-based decisionmaking for public health action and health systems strengthening. Health information systems that foster data collection, processing, and reporting and timely use of such information improve the quality of and strengthen health service delivery at all levels of the health system. Efforts to strengthen HIS must necessarily engage all actors and institutions with a stake in the health sector, including, but not limited to, ministries of health, finance, telecommunications, and statistics. Historically, donor funding has been tied to specific diseases or health needs such as HIV and thus has fostered countries’ formation of vertical, parallel systems. Given the systems’ duplication of effort and increased inefficiencies in data collection, analysis, reporting, and use, countries need to move away from vertical structures and toward a horizontal approach to health systems strengthening. The 2009 leadership forum provided a venue for sharing approaches to HIS strengthening and linking countries with potential sources of technical and financial resources.

Objectives of the 2010 leadership forum in Namibia are to

- Develop an appreciation of other perspectives, challenges, and roles related to HIS by interacting with colleagues from other countries and sectors;
- Build a shared awareness of the options and strategies for improving coordination of country HIS;
- Work together as country teams to draft a preliminary stakeholder engagement agenda to promote ownership of HIS;
- Raise awareness on the part of donors about new opportunities to strengthen country ownership of HIS; and
- Identify follow-on resources (information, financial and technical assistance) available through national and international partners committed to supporting country-level HIS strengthening.

The forum’s target audience includes senior-level leaders and policymakers from four key sectors: health, finance, telecommunications, and statistics. The Permanent Secretaries (PS) in each country will nominate delegates, who will play a critical role in promoting the improvement of national HIS.

The forum’s expected outcomes include the following:

- Country teams will appreciate the value of owning and managing health information as a national asset.
- Participants will gain the understanding and skills needed to assess current HIS capabilities, manage health information as an asset, learn strategies to enhance HIS, and identify emerging opportunities.
- Country teams will become aware of available technical and financial resources and know how to identify, access, and use them to respond to existing and new HIS challenges.
- Country teams will appreciate the multisectoral efforts and skills required to advocate for and lead efforts to strengthen country HIS.

- Country teams will commit to leading and championing the execution of multisectoral action plans to apply strategies and techniques acquired during the forum.

At the time of this report, the delegates from each country had not yet been nominated.

With a systems understanding of Data Demand in Use and strategic information, the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1 supported efforts to field a pre-forum survey, using the semi-structured qualitative survey instrument developed in 2009 for the first leadership forum.<sup>1</sup> Although Task Order 1 of the Health Policy Initiative will conclude before the forum takes place, the survey team—with USAID’s approval—submits this activity report to document the survey findings to date and will continue to support forum planning efforts under another mechanism. Finally, although project funding for the forum was tied directly to HIV results reporting per guidance from the Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator and USAID, such activities funded under the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief will benefit the entire health system, not just the portion dealing with HIV.

## **PRE-FORUM SURVEY**

### **Methodology**

In 2009, the Health Policy Initiative team developed a semi-structured qualitative interview survey, with input from USAID and UN agency co-sponsors, including WHO, WB, International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and Health Metrics Network (HMN). The survey team sought HIS technical experts in the health, finance, telecommunications, statistics, or other allied sectors primarily by conducting outreach through Futures Group country offices and professional networks. The team conducted telephone interviews with 13 technical experts from six of the nine participating countries—Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.<sup>2</sup> Eleven respondents represented the health sector; at the time of this report, the survey team was able to conduct only one interview each with the finance and telecommunications sectors.

Interviews focused on the following basic questions (see Annex A for all survey questions):

- Who is currently coordinating, contributing to, and using HIS data?
- Who else could be coordinating, contributing to, and using HIS data?
- What steps have been taken to strengthen HIS?

Due to the challenges of identifying interviewees and conducting telephone interviews, responses were not representative of all sectors in each country. Instead, interview data were illustrative of HIS, providing a top-line perspective from three sectors and six countries, resulting in thematic summaries.

### **Findings**

Interview data provided a snapshot of the current state of HIS in each country. Thematic summaries revealed common challenges and promising practices across countries. Below are some of the identified challenges and promising practices.

---

<sup>1</sup> The AIM project is leading the overall execution of the forum and will support follow-on work, including the development and production of a final forum report to USAID.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this report, the survey team was unable to secure responses from Angola, Botswana, and Lesotho.

## Key Challenges

- Respondents expressed an urgent need to use data for evidence-based decisionmaking. Interviewees explained that resource allocation decisions are often based on historical data. Data need to be used in a timely manner to ensure strategic use of scarce resources.
- Likewise, respondents expressed a need for data feedback across all levels of data flow—from donors to the national level, national to district level, district to facility level, and facility to community level—to ensure the flow of strategic information.
- Respondents overwhelmingly identified the need for trained and skilled human resources at all levels—national, district, facility, and community—to strengthen HIS efforts.
- Interviewees also identified the need to train healthcare workers in HIS. Respondents recognized a related issue—strengthening university involvement to ensure HIS training for graduates of clinical programs.
- In addition to university engagement, interviewees identified the need for expanded multisectoral engagement, particularly within the finance and telecommunications sectors, for HIS strengthening.
- The private sector also plays an extremely significant role in collecting and using health data. Still, interviewees identified challenges with respect to private sector compliance regarding reporting.
- As countries identify ways to increase coordination and collaboration within and across ministries and sectors, they continue to articulate the need for increased coordination among donors related to funding, data collection, and reporting.
- According to respondents, this lack of coordination has led to parallel, disease-specific HIS that lack interoperability.
- Finally, countries pointed to the importance of developing confidence in the national HIS. Countries are collecting a tremendous amount of data but are unsure about data quality.

In the face of these many challenges, countries continue to explore and apply innovative approaches to strengthening national HIS. The section below highlights some of the promising practices currently underway in selected countries.

## Promising Practices at the Country Level

- In response to a country-initiated assessment of the national HIS in 2004 and subsequent recommendations, **Namibia** rolled out the District Health Information System in 2007, with support from Health Information Systems Program (HISP), based in South Africa. Though challenges remain, including a lack of skilled human resources and sustainable funding for HIS, respondents reported that the introduction of a flexible system, the reduced number of parallel reporting systems, and the establishment of a minimum data set resulted in improvements in standardization and timeliness of data generated at the facility level and up through the district, provincial, and national levels.
- At the time of the interviews, **South Africa** was about to approve its first information and communication strategy (ICT) to enable the country to deal with health information. The strategy has two objectives: enablement of better healthcare and delivery of health and management information (e.g., finance information).

- **Zambia**'s Ministry of Health reviewed its existing HIS and identified several priority needs. Following the review, it introduced SmartCare, which allows for greater flexibility and interoperability. As a result, interviewees pointed to improved timeliness of reporting.
- Despite recent years of political and economic upheaval, interviewees in **Zimbabwe** reported several achievements, including the development of ZimStat, a strong central statistics system. Central Statistics conducts demographic health surveys in a rigorous manner every five years, yielding concrete, high-quality health data.

## **CONCLUSION**

The preliminary survey findings will serve as a basis for the 2010 leadership forum agenda and the country delegations' work in preparation for the meeting and beyond. Common challenges across countries provide a starting point for developing a preliminary stakeholder engagement agenda within each country and across sectors. The promising practices highlight country-owned and country-derived solutions already underway and encourage the countries to share the information and lessons learned within and across delegations and sectors.

## **Next Steps**

The Health Policy Initiative's support for the activity ends on September 20, 2010, when Task Order 1 concludes. The project is currently exploring ways—under other mechanisms—to continue supporting preparation for and implementation of the forum.

## **ANNEX A: PRE-FORUM SURVEY**

### **Country Ownership Strategies Leadership Forum on Health Information Systems**

#### **Participant Survey**

##### **Background and Purpose**

During the last few years, country health information systems (HIS)—systems for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating health data—have attracted greater attention and funding as stakeholders come to understand and appreciate the value of the systems. Building and strengthening the systems depends on how key institutions and units function and interact. The increasing complexity of healthcare delivery and financing, the ever-greater role of information and communication technology (ICT), and the potential impact on human and financial resources are some of the challenges facing countries in building systems capable of collecting, analyzing, and managing critical information about health services and systems.

The purpose of this brief survey is to understand the current environment for your country’s national HIS. As an advocate of and leader for your national HIS, you can offer insights and perspective that will help inform the design of an upcoming high-level, interdisciplinary forum on strategic management in HIS.

The forum will provide a venue for sharing approaches and linking country teams with potential sources of technical and financial resources on key topics covered in the forum. We are surveying HIS teams in six countries. We will use the results in aggregate form during the forum and will share the results of the survey with you and your country team.

1. Please briefly explain your role in the national HIS and how long you have been in this role.  
*(Interviewer to look for technical, strategic, line manager, etc.)*
  
2. In (name of country), what institutions and/or officials is/are responsible for the following?  
*(Interviewer to probe for Ministry of Health departments, other ministries/agencies, and donors and implementing partners.)*
  - Coordinating the national health information system
  - Contributing data to the national health information system
  - Using national health information system data for decisionmaking (planning, policymaking, management, and monitoring and evaluation)
  - In your opinion, what actors/agencies have the potential to play a strong role but currently do not?
  
3. What steps has (name of country) taken in the past three to four years to strengthen its national HIS?  
In answering this question, please address the following:
  - What national strategies/action plans are currently in place to address health information systems?  
*(Interviewer to probe whether country has a timeline; if plan is funded; and if country follows the strategic plan. How was the plan developed and who participated? Interviewer to ask for a copy.)*
  - In your opinion, what are the two or three most important ways that the strategies/action plans could be improved?

4. What two or three approaches have been most successful in strengthening the national HIS in (name of country)?
  - In the case of any interagency coordination or efforts, what are some of the examples that worked well?
  - What factors in particular contributed to successful collaboration and coordination?
  - What are some of the challenges?
  - How might these challenges have been overcome?
  
5. What external partners have been involved in efforts to strengthen your national HIS in (name of country)?  
*(Interviewer to probe for nongovernmental organizations, private sector partners, multilaterals and bilaterals, etc.)*
  - What are some examples of how these partners have contributed?
    - What factors have contributed to successful coordination and collaboration?
  - What have been some of the challenges to working with these partners?
    - What are some strategies that (name of country) might employ to address these challenges?
  
6. What other institutions that are not presently involved should participate in strengthening the national HIS?  
*(Interviewer to probe for Ministry of Health departments, other ministries/agencies, and donors and implementing partners.)*
  
7. Our team looks forward to supporting your efforts as you continue to strengthen your national HIS.  
*(Interviewer to provide more details on the forum.)*
  - What would you like to gain from your participation in a country HIS task force in advance of the forum?
  - What would you like to gain from your participation in the forum?



Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I  
Futures Group  
One Thomas Circle, NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20005 USA  
Tel: (202) 775-9680  
Fax: (202) 775-9694  
Email: [policyinfo@futuresgroup.com](mailto:policyinfo@futuresgroup.com)  
<http://ghiqc.usaid.gov>  
<http://www.healthpolicyinitiative.com>