HEALTH SYSTEM STRENGTHENING IN SIERRA LEONE

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Background

The Health Systems Strengthening (HSS) cluster is one of three technical clusters driving the work of the World Health Organization in the region. The work of the HSS cluster is organized into several domains including: policy and strategic planning, human resources for health, district health strengthening, health financing, and health information systems. The HSS cluster works closely with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, particularly the Directorate of Policy, Planning, and Information.

In recent years, the health sector in Sierra Leone has seen a rapid expansion and diversification of policy and plan development. Health sector fragmentation, a high number of donors and partners acting in the sector, and a tendency towards vertical programs and funding have contributed to this trend. This was further fueled by the influx of resources and attention that occurred during the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak.

Surpassing the one-year anniversary marking the end of the Ebola crisis, the country and health sector are now transitioning from the recovery phase to a longer-term vision for a stronger, resilient, and responsive health system. A critical piece guiding this trajectory and providing an overarching strategic direction for harmonization of health sector activities is the National Health Sector Strategic Plan (NHSSP) 2017-2021.

The Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS), in partnership with the WHO HSS cluster, has been developing the NHSSP 2017-2021 over the past year. Over the course of the practicum, I had the opportunity to participate in and contribute to several stages of this process, from document and literature reviews to regional and national level consultations, culminating in a draft NHSSP 2017-2021.

Objectives

❖ Contribute to the development of a draft NHSSP 2017-2021 that will provide an overarching vision for the health sector over the next five years.
❖ Gain insight into the factors spanning national to community levels that impact and interact with health system performance, accessibility, and responsiveness.
❖ Gain exposure to different approaches, strategies, and challenges encountered in HSS in a post-conflict and resource and capacity-constrained context.
❖ Understand the roles and relationships of different stakeholders and partners involved in HSS and health and development sectors in Sierra Leone.

Strategies

❖ Draw on extensive base of available information and knowledge including literature, databases, team members, and other colleagues.
❖ Support MoHS and partners in facilitating, documenting, and synthesizing findings from regional NHSSP 2017-2021 consultations.
❖ Pursue diverse learning and engagement opportunities including attending workshops, meetings, conferences, and field visits.
❖ Collaborate across teams, projects, clusters and with partners, stakeholders, and MoHS representatives.

Development of the National Health Sector Strategic Plan 2017 - 2021

Deliverables

❖ National Health Sector Strategic Plan 2017-2021 contributions:
  • Document review of all sector-wide and sub-sector policies & plans
  • Summary tables of population health indicators and GBD values
  • Summary of findings for regional consultations
  • Populated WHO Country Office database of national health indicators
  • Contributed to development of district health profiles
  • Paper One: Multisectoral approach to tackling health-related SDGs in SL
  • Paper Two: Health sector fragmentation in Sierra Leone

Capstone Statement

There is no formal health financing strategy in Sierra Leone, roughly 90% of the population work in the informal sector, fiscal capacity is limited, and out of pocket expenditures on health are catastrophic. With my capstone, I am interested in exploring innovative health financing strategies that could be applied in this context.

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Reflections

Our work with the HSS cluster brought us all over the country from the busy streets of Freetown to ‘hard-to-reach’ health facilities in the most remote districts in Sierra Leone. This was a remarkable opportunity to explore the dynamics, frustrations, and opportunities of working in health systems strengthening in this context and to bear witness to the resilience, dedication, and perseverance of Sierra Leoneans in the face of adversity. The following are a few reflections and lessons that I will be carrying forward - each introduced by a phrase in Krio.

Tek tɛm
“Take time” (Be careful on your journey)

Coming into a new context, it is important to be critical in generalizing strategies, theories, approaches, and research. The stories found in textbooks, the literature, and high-level discourses don’t always translate directly to the realities on the ground. Take the time to seek out the insights, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives held by the people who live and work in the context; take time to listen and find the stories you might be missing.

Osi ai go go?
Where are we going?

Health systems strengthening is a complex pursuit that can at times be challenging and demoralizing in the face of stagnating progress. But achieving meaningful change requires sustained commitment and long-term orientation; and so, it is important to situate health sector efforts and activities within a broader vision for a stronger, more responsive, and resilient health system.

Siid3m, Tinap
Sit down, stand up

Navigating power dynamics is not always straightforward; at times it is a balancing act between knowing the moments to create space for others’ voices and when to take up space with your own. This experience was an opportunity to learn to recognize, redirect, and challenge inequitable power dynamics when assigned a misplaced position of power. Other times, it was an opportunity to learn to assert my voice and get comfortable with ‘taking up space’ in the context of a competitive, hierarchial, and high-pressure organization and sector.