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DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL NATIONAL HEALTH POLICIES TODAY: ABOUT THE CONTEXT, THE PROCESS AND THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION AS AN ENABLER

1. Introduction

National health policies, strategies, and plans play an essential role in defining a country's vision, priorities, budgetary decisions and course of action for improving and maintaining the health of its people. Most countries have been using the development of national health policies, strategies, and plans for decades to give direction and coherence to their efforts to improve health. Policies, strategies and plans are not ends in themselves. They are part of the larger process that aims to align country priorities with the real health needs of the population, generate buy-in across government, health and development partners, civil society and the private sector, and make better use of all available resources for health – so that all people in all places have access to quality health care and live longer, healthier lives as a result.

The development of a comprehensive national health policy and strategy is inherently a political process. Various entry points can be used, such as addressing inequalities and the determinants

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of health, improving the performance of the health system, and developing a national non-communicable diseases strategy, for example, through action on food systems and tobacco. An inspirational overarching framework, involving a comprehensive range of stakeholders and sectors, can support shared values and foster synergy.

These and other factors – including today’s consensus around the importance of realistic costing and strong monitoring and evaluation – have translated into a renewed focus on strengthening countries’ capacity to develop robust national health policies, strategies, and plans that can:

- respond to growing calls for strengthening health systems through Primary Health Care as a way of achieving the goal of better health for all. This requires action in four policy areas: moving towards universal coverage, reorienting conventional care towards people-centred care, integrating health in all policies, and ensuring more inclusive health governance;
- guide and steer the entire, pluralist health sector rather than being limited to command-and-control plans for the public sector alone;
- go beyond the boundaries of health systems, addressing the social determinants of health and the interaction between the health sector and other sectors in society.

Additionally, in countries where external aid plays a significant role, national health policies, strategies, and plans are increasingly seen as the key to improve aid effectiveness.

Many countries struggle to develop the policy instruments and broker the complex dialogue necessary to see this process through from vision to implementation.

The development of national health policies, strategies, and plans is a complex and dynamic process. Its precise nature varies from country to country according to the political, historical, and socio-economic context. It is also influenced from regional/sub-regional and global developments.

2. The importance of the context

Understanding health policy environment is crucial to the national health policy development. Health policy analysis as a multi-disciplinary approach to public policy is helpful here. It aims to explain the interaction between institutions, interests and ideas in the policy process. It is useful both retrospectively and prospectively, to understand past policy failures and successes and to plan for future policy implementation.

Another crucial element of the context is evidence. Evidence-based decision-making is centered on the justification of decisions. In the shift from an individual-clinical to a population-policy level, the decision-making context becomes more uncertain, variable and complex. Context impacts on what constitutes evidence and how that evidence is utilized.

In addition to the national, international health policy context also influences national health policy development. Most recent European and global policy developments relevant to any national health policy development in Europe are presented below.

European context: H2020 as an inspiration and guidance for development of the national health policy development in the European Region of the World Health Organisation

Health 2020 -the the new European health policy framework identifies strategies for action that are adaptable to the many contextual realities of the WHO European Region. It aims to support action across government and society to: “significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality”. It gives policy-makers a vision, a strategic path, a set of priorities and a range of suggestions about what works to improve health, address health inequalities, and ensure the health of future generations. Health 2020 recognizes that governments can achieve real improvements in health if they work across government to fulfil two linked strategic objectives. The two strategic objectives are: a) improving health for all and reducing health inequalities, and b) improving leadership and participatory governance for health. (Box 1).

National Health Policy through the Health 2020 lens

Health 2020 aims to significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality.

Through the national health policy successful governments can achieve real improvements in health when working across government to fulfil two linked strategic objectives: i) improving health for all and reducing health inequalities, and ii) improving leadership and participatory governance for health.

(Health 2020)

The Health 2020 policy framework proposes four priority areas for policy action based on the global priorities set for WHO by its Member States, and aligned to address the special requirements and experiences of the European Region. These areas also build on relevant WHO strategies and action plans at the regional and global levels. These are not isolated areas of action but are frequently interdependent and mutually supportive. Addressing them requires combining governance approaches – hierarchical, dispersed and participatory – to make health and well-being possible for everyone. The four priority areas are to: a) invest in health through a life-course approach and empower citizens, b) tackle Europe’s major disease burdens of non-communicable and communicable diseases; c) strengthen people-centred health systems and public health capacity, including preparedness and response capacity for dealing with emergencies; and d) create supportive environments and resilient communities.

By articulating a common set of values, evidence and experience, Health 2020 calls for cross society engagement as a central part of health policy planning, development, implementation and monitoring at all levels. It makes the case for empowering people, citizens, consumers and patients as a critical factor in improving health outcomes. It argues strongly for the engagement of health professionals. The Regional Office supports countries in adapting Health 2020 by analysing public health situations; identifying assets; encouraging political commitment from presidents and prime ministers; making policy recommendations and monitoring progress; encouraging leadership and good governance for health; suggesting mechanisms for whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches; and supporting capacity development.

Global health context

The year 2015 is a historic year in global policy with the publication of three landmark UN agreements:

- 1. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030**, which aims to reduce disaster losses in lives, livelihoods and health (agreed in March in Sendai, Japan by 187 countries);
- 2. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** which are the successors of the Millennium Development Goals (agreed in September in Paris, France by 193 countries); and
- 3. The climate change agreements** (due in December 2015).

The rare coincidence of three such agreements is an opportunity of global significance for building coherence across these policy streams. Over the implementation period of these three agreements between 2015 and 2030, a real opportunity exists for improving people's health and preserving their environment.

Old and new health risks coexist in many countries with an increase in exposure and vulnerability of populations due to rapid demographic changes, rapid and unplanned economic processes including economic crises, urbanisation in hazardous areas, poor governance, and the scarcity of livelihood options particularly for the poor. These risks can be multiplied through the evolving and highly interdependent nature of economic processes. Four distinct and largely independent research and policy communities – disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, environmental management and poverty reduction have been working to reduce vulnerability to old and new risks that impact lives, livelihoods and health but face challenges in terms of facilitating learning and information exchange as well as overcoming misaligned financial structures.

Synergies across disaster risk reduction, sustainable development and climate change have been articulated by Member States in the Sendai Framework and present an opportunity if they are better recognized and utilized. For example, echoing the **Commission on the Social Determinants of Health** recommendations that *“action on the social determinants of health must involve the whole of government, civil society and local communities, business, global fora, and international agencies”* and that *“Policies and programmes must embrace all the key sectors of society not just the health sector”*, the Sendai Framework calls for the protection of health *“through the implementation of integrated and inclusive economic, structural, legal, social, health, cultural, educational, environmental, technological, political and institutional measures that prevent and reduce hazard exposure and vulnerability to disaster; increase preparedness for response and recovery, and thus strengthen resilience.”* The Framework has one expected outcome, one goal, seven targets and four priorities for action and is one of the UN frameworks with the strongest endorsement of evidence-based policy.

Voluntary commitments in the Sendai Framework with a specific public health focus that have been agreed include: enhancing the resilience of national health systems through training and capacity development; strengthening the design and implementation of inclusive policies and social safety-net mechanisms, including access to basic health care services towards the eradication of poverty; finding durable solutions in the post-di-

saster phase to empower and assist people disproportionately affected by disasters, including those with life threatening and chronic disease; enhancing cooperation between health authorities and other relevant stakeholders to strengthen country capacity for disaster risk management for health; the implementation of the International health regulations (2005) and the building of resilient health systems; improving the resilience of new and existing critical infrastructure, including hospitals, to ensure that they remain safe, effective and operational during and after disasters, to provide live-saving and essential services; establishing a mechanism of case registry and a database of mortality caused by disaster to improve the prevention of morbidity and mortality and enhancing recovery schemes to provide psychosocial support and mental health services for all people in need.

In addressing the call on health in the SDGs, it is notable that the health goal (SDG 3) is wide-ranging and includes non-communicable diseases, mental health, disease prevention, tobacco control, disaster risk reduction and intellectual property. The implementation of this goal will require the role of the global food system, the built environment, and socioeconomic factors such as education and employment to be addressed. This could be achieved through stronger links with Goals 4, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 16.

Seizing the opportunity presented by these synergies to create joint policy initiatives between the health sector and other sectors working on disaster risk reduction and sustainable development could considerably enhance national health policies and health system resilience, particularly if policy synergies are leveraged through coordinated action at local, national, regional and international levels. Science and research have a key role and Member States, during the negotiations of 2015, have called for greater use of science in decision-making, particularly at local level. Examples of intersectoral cooperation and successful evidence translation include the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and its summary for policy makers. However, it is clear that the health sector has an enormous role in advocating for health - with its remit for wellbeing, equity and its technical expertise - across sectors and ministries and that strong health leadership will be key to progressing the new global agenda for health and sustainable development.

3. The importance of the process

The process of development of a national health policy is indeed to be – a process; considering the needs of all and involving everyone to

achievement of goals, while encompassing various modalities to generate debate and reach consensus on the vision, mission, objectives and priorities for health. The process, thus gives both the opportunity and legitimacy to determine what good health and well-being are perceived to be in the given social, economic, environmental and cultural circumstances; the initial health status of each population group; as well as the possibilities for reducing health inequalities in the particular context.

While the process is of reiterative nature, it generally consists of common phases, aimed at ensuring the key values and principles on which national health policy should be founded: involvement of all stakeholders, fairness, sustainability, quality, transparency, accountability, gender equality, dignity and the right to participate in the decision-making.

There is no single blueprint for conducting the policy process. However, the WHO framework for national health policies, strategies, and plans identifies the following key elements of sound process : a) Engaging stakeholders, b) Situation analysis & priority setting, c) Bringing it all together, d) From vision to operational, e) Costing plans, and f) Monitoring & evaluation.

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Ensuring political support. Ensuring high-level political support is a necessary prerequisite for successful implementation; more so when health and wellbeing become intersectoral goal to economic growth and societal development. Initially health might not be high on the political agenda due to other pressures being perceived as more urgent – such as employment or education; health sector and its partners should work closely to raising the awareness of health sector as contributor to socio-economic development and wellbeing.

An additional challenge is to ensure the consistency of the political commitment in the long term in the face of short-term budgetary cycles and legislative periods. Long-term commitment to sustained effort is, however, essential due to the long-term and future impacts of improved health on the community and the society as a whole.

Utilising the technical expertise – Gathering evidence. Valuing the diverse expertise and experience that exists within all sectors is crucial to achieving health gains beyond the health sector itself. Very often, the upstream actions not directly undertaken to contribute to health actually provide evidence that are accountable to improved—or worsened for that matter - health. At the same time, increasing body of evidence suggests that the health inequalities arise from a number of social determinants arising usually from other than genetically inherited preconditions. It is therefore crucial to gather evidence and utilise the expertise from all sectors through expert-guided and facilitated process, ideally involving representatives of health and other sectors, the practitioners and experts, civil society and academia. This will contribute to development of vision and strategic directions, in form of goals, objectives and targets for the national health policy based on evidence, experience and possibilities.

Ensuring involvement of all stakeholders - Consultation process. Working for health is a complex cross-sectoral, multi-issue and multi-level decision-making and acting upon decisions made, and as such requires a certain set-up to ensure ownership, success, consistency and continuity. With the explosive advancement of new information and communication technologies, the processes of gathering information, exchanging and discussing around any issue is facilitated to the level of possibility of involvement everyone to the last. Consultative processes, encompass, besides face-to-face meetings, an array of online tools for faster achievement of broader consensus on the what, the who, for whom, the why and the how for health.

Reaching consensus and wider ownership. Stakes around and for health are different, but the common goal is single: better health and wellbeing on individual and community levels. The intersectorality of the goal itself is of relevance and direct or indirect interest to a wide range of stakeholders. Reaching consensus is thus necessary around the priorities, the pathways and the means to achieving the joint goal, while ensuring ownership. The engagement and participation of the stakeholders is key to the success of proper and sustainable implementation. Identification, involvement and management of different interests and addressing them in the policy making process is an important fine balancing act ensuring acceptance, adherence and ownership of the product and its achievements.

Maintaining political momentum – Endorsement. Great policies make even greater results if endorsed and finding their ways out of the shelves. It is the political will that moves a document beyond its writing, but a national health policy should also reflect the strategic orientation and commitment to multi-sectoral coordinated action – both systematically (“whole-of-government”) and socially (“whole-of-society”), and a well-structured governance with clear design of inter-sectoral coordination.

Coordinating actions, creating partnerships: Implementation. While ministries of health remain in the driver’s seat of the development and implementation of national health policies, their role is changing to encompass a stronger governance and stewardship role. It thus, become an imperative for the ministries of health to increasingly engage in initiating intersectoral approaches for health and acting as health brokers and advocates. This includes highlighting both the economic, social and political benefits of good health and the adverse effects of ill health and inequalities on every sector, the whole of government and the whole of society. Exercising such a leadership role requires using diplomacy, evidence, argument and persuasion. The health sector also has a partnership role towards other sectors when strengthening health can contribute to achieving their goals. All countries at the United Nations High-level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases and the World Health Assembly have endorsed such collaborative approaches – referred to as whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

Ensuring progress and gains: Monitoring and evaluation. More often seen as technical work and interest, valuing and assessing the achievements is much more a political necessity; for extending the grown support,

expanding partnerships of mutual gains and thus providing sustainability beyond the political cycles. In September 2013, a20 core and 17 additional indicators have been adopted by the 53 Member States of the WHO/EURO to measure progress with the six targets identified for Health 2020. The indicators are further specified in detailed technical notes that can serve as guidance to shaping the monitoring and evaluation frameworks and mechanisms thereof within the national health policies.

4. WHO role in supporting national health policy development

Supporting countries to develop and sustain their own health policies, strategies and plans is a core component of the mission of the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

WHO has a long track record of supporting Member States in this area through country-level technical cooperation, facilitation of national policy dialogue and inter-country exchange, as well as through normative work and high-level international policy frameworks.

WHO, at global level, has developed a range of resources and tools designed to assist health authorities – at national and sub-national levels – in elaborating health policies, strategies, and plans. These include diagnostic tools for assessment, monitoring and evaluation, as well as tools to support situation analysis and priority setting, identifying effective strategies, costing scenarios, resource planning and budgeting, and programming and implementation.

Attributes for assessing the strength of a national strategy are: a) Situation analysis, and coherence of strategies and plans with this analysis (known as ‘programming’), b) Process through which national plans and strategies have been developed, c) Financing Plans and strategies; financial management and auditing, d) Implementation and management arrangements, and e) Results, monitoring, review and dialogue mechanisms.

At global level, an IHP+ inter-agency working group developed a joint assessment tool, and its associated guidelines. These were reviewed by seven countries and endorsed by IHP+ partners at a steering group (SuRG) meeting in 2009 as ready for testing. In 2010, the tool was applied in several countries as part of the national health planning process. The tool has also been used for the assessment of program strategies, and for other reviews of national plans. Based on the lessons learned from these early applications of the tool, the latest version was developed under the oversight of a multi-agency group.

WHO core role in assisting Member States in relation to developing national and sub-national health policies, strategies and plans, include:

- dialogue with and strategic advice to policy makers on developing national, health policies, strategies and plans through inter-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches;
- technical assistance with policy dialogues, capacity building, strategic guidance events, individualized consultancy and multi country events and the development of mechanisms and processes addressing the whole policy development cycle. Special emphasis on strengthening national capacity in the identification of appropriate mechanisms for health policy development relevant to the countries needs and circumstances; and
- advocacy and advice for the enhancement of the leadership skills of health ministries in working with multiple stakeholders for health policy development using different entry points and shared governance approaches.

Executive summary

National health policies, strategies, and plans play an essential role in defining a country's vision, priorities, budgetary decisions and course of action for improving and maintaining the health of its people. The development of a comprehensive national health policy and strategy is inherently a political process, which is complex and dynamic in nature and varies from country to country according to the political, historical, and socio-economic context. It is also influenced from regional and global developments.

WHO, at global level, has developed a range of resources and tools designed to assist health authorities – at national and sub-national levels – in elaborating health policies, strategies, and plans. These include diagnostic tools for assessment, monitoring and evaluation, as well as tools to support situation analysis and priority setting, identifying effective strategies, costing scenarios, resource planning and budgeting, and programming and implementation.

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WHO engages as an important enabler in developing national health policies of today. Supporting the governments in developing evidence informed national health policies, aware of the national, regional and global context and responsibilities, it strives to contribute achieving real improvements in health when working across government to fulfil two linked strategic objectives: i) improving health for all and reducing health inequalities, and ii) improving leadership and participatory governance for health.

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Useful Links:

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