Lessons in change: Adapting the World Bank’s ‘Flagship’ training course for the Pacific region

Over the past three years, the Health Policy and Health Finance Hub has collaborated with the World Bank Institute (WBI) and the Harvard School of Public Health to develop a world-class training program to strengthen cohesively health systems and policy making capacities across the Pacific region. Piloted in Fiji in June 2010, the WBI’s Flagship Program on Health Sector Reform and Sustainable Financing aims to give health officials a conceptual framework for analysing the performance of their health systems and for identifying the tools, policies and financing options that best meet their needs. After a series of evaluations and consultations, the Pacific Flagship Course on Health Systems Strengthening and Health Financing was held for a second time in Fiji in August 2012. Although it is too soon to evaluate the course’s long-term impacts, there are strong indications that it has delivered relevant planning tools and technical skills to build national capacities—and created a ‘critical mass’ of officials who will act as agents for synchronised and sustainable health reform across the region.

The challenge

The growing burden of obesity and cardiovascular disease in the Pacific has created a new series of health challenges for a sector already suffering from chronic underfunding, inefficient management and poor staffing resources. Unhealthy diets, tobacco consumption and widespread physical inactivity have created an epidemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in a region already reeling from endemic communicable diseases and poor maternal and child health. NCDs and their complications are now the leading cause of death in Pacific island countries, accounting for an estimated 70 per cent of deaths regionally, and more than 60 per cent of the adult population are reported to be overweight in at least 10 Pacific countries.

Despite the diversity of Pacific island health systems, some challenges are common to all: widespread underfunding, insufficient human resources, inefficient management, low access to technology and inadequate information for decision making—all compounded by the growing prevalence of NCDs and looming climate change. Pacific health leaders, managers and health service providers, as well as bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, are increasingly expressing a need for more robust and informed health policies and practices to address these simultaneous challenges. There is a clear and growing need for tried and tested global health policies and reforms to strengthen health systems across the region, and to develop a critical mass of health sector leaders capable of meeting the challenges of the Millennium Development Goals.

The response

Soon after its establishment in 2007, the Health Policy and Health Finance Hub identified the World Bank Institute’s Flagship Program on Health Sector Reform and Sustainable Financing as a potentially useful framework to meet some of the urgent needs for health systems strengthening in the Pacific. The Flagship Program, first launched in 1996 with the Harvard School of Public Health, is designed to give participants a conceptual framework for analysing the performance of their health systems and for identifying the tools, policies and financing options that best meet their needs. After a series of evaluations and consultations, the Pacific Flagship Course on Health Systems Strengthening and Health Financing was held for a second time in Fiji in August 2012. Although it is too soon to evaluate the course’s long-term impacts, there are strong indications that it has delivered relevant planning tools and technical skills to build national capacities—and created a ‘critical mass’ of officials who will act as agents for synchronised and sustainable health reform across the region.

The course aims to enable participants to: speak a common language about health sector reform; achieve a deeper understanding of health finance issues and sustainable financing options; assess how well their national health
systems are performing; determine alternative paths their health systems can take; and understand how to select and apply the most practical tools to make positive changes and assess their impacts. As well as strengthening health policies and planning across the region, the Pacific Flagship Program was designed to build the capacities of national health managers to deliver on the health systems goals of their partner-funded programs.

Initial discussions were held between the Hub, WBI, AusAID, the World Health Organization (WHO) and national academic and government partners about the potential to adapt and hold a Flagship Course in the Pacific. The first course was run over five days in Suva, Fiji, in June 2010 as a joint collaboration between the Hub, the Fiji School of Medicine and WBI, with co-funding from AusAID and WHO. The primary objective was to introduce the control knobs framework for identifying and addressing health systems weaknesses. Forty-three participants attended from a range of national health departments, aid agencies and academic institutes in 12 countries. Participant evaluations suggested that all of the modules were of significant relevance to their countries, but that the course content should be taught over a longer period and that the next course should be further tailored to the Pacific context.

Following the review process, the Hub ran a ‘training of trainers’ workshop for eight new trainers from the Pacific. The workshop aimed both to grow the number of professionals who could teach locally relevant versions of the Flagship Course and to identify national course materials to complement the WBI’s global curricula, including Pacific Island case studies.

After these efforts to improve the course, the second Pacific Flagship Course was held in Nadi, Fiji, in August 2012, convened by the Hub, WBI and Fiji National University. The Health Information Systems Hub and the Human Resources for Health Hub also prepared and presented course sessions. A total of 26 participants attended this two-week course, from the Health and Finance ministries of Nauru, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa, Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

The impact

During the second Flagship Course, the participants shared ideas for adapting and implementing concepts from the course to address specific health systems challenges in their own countries, including the ‘diagnostic tree’ analysis of systems problems, health financing reforms, health promotion initiatives and leadership and management change. In their post-course evaluations, the participants identified several topics that they wanted to address in their own countries, as well as various elements of their national and provincial governance structures that could benefit from specific reforms. These initial discussions in Fiji and the topics identified by participants in their evaluations thus became a baseline for identifying potential ‘stories of change’ and assessing their impacts.

The full evaluation report for the second course, released in December 2012, details some of the positive examples of change influenced and witnessed by participants from the nine countries. As an example, three participants from Samoa—a financial officer, a health SWAP coordinator and a senior health planner—all confirmed that they had used concepts and tools from the course to implement practical changes within their individual departments. Within a few months of their return, the diagnostic tree analysis had been used in financial and personnel reviews by the Ministry of Health; the control knobs framework had been presented to the entire ministry staff; and lessons from a Tongan trainer on the ‘amazing’ progress of that country’s health information systems had led to a positive restructuring of Samoa’s annual reporting protocols.

In addition, recommendations from the Samoan participants led their Ministry of Health to initiate groundbreaking policy discussions on its human resources management and to develop a national network of ‘Pacific Flagship graduates’ to conduct a mid-term review of the country’s Health Sector Plan, using the diagnostic tree and the control knobs framework.

Such positive feedback points not only to the rich potential of the Flagship Course to provide health leaders with the planning tools and skills to address their national challenges but also to the promise of increasing regional sharing of best practices to improve health systems and policies.

The future

It is clear that the adaptation and ‘contextualising’ of the Pacific Flagship Course since its 2010 pilot has resulted in a significantly improved curriculum that is highly relevant to health systems strengthening across the region. By adapting the course to the local context and vernacular, the Health Policy and Health Finance Hub has been able to enhance the technical competence of health sector...
personnel and to begin building a critical alumni of participants that the Hub, AusAID and other agencies can work with to ensure that health systems strengthening is both meaningful and sustainable.

The Hub is currently developing a sustainability strategy for the Flagship Program, including plans to deliver future courses with regional organisations and the possibility of locating the program (and associated training of trainers) within a Pacific university. The course materials now include regionally relevant modules on problem identification, health financing, payment, organisation, regulation, persuasion, politics and ethics.

As well as early feedback indicating that course participants have begun policy dialogue, health information systems reform and discussions about the development of ethical leadership, several participants have requested new versions of the course to target provincial and local health workforces. The course clearly has a strong potential for linkages with other national capacity-building programs, such as the Nossal Institute’s partnerships with the Tonga Health Promotion Unit and Fiji’s new Health Planning and Policy Development Unit.

The participation of Fiji’s Minister of Health in the second Flagship Course also served to raise the profile of health systems strengthening across the region, and has resulted in the Health Policy and Health Finance Hub being invited to provide training on the control knobs framework to the country’s Health Planning and Policy Development Unit. Course participants from several other countries also say they have been able to influence higher levels of their governments, participants from Samoa, Papua New Guinea and Tonga all identifying direct opportunities to discuss the control knobs framework with senior officials in their ministries of health.