

# Enhancing health information systems: The Health Metrics Network

Sound information is essential to public health decisions. It informs policy, programmes, budgets and evaluation and forms the basis of accountability for governments' commitments to their citizens. In many developing countries, however, underinvestment in health information systems has left gaps in data collection, dissemination and analysis. With health challenges on the rise, and the deadline for the health-related Millennium Development Goals drawing ever closer, fulfilling the demand for sound information is imperative.

The Health Metrics Network (HMN) is an international partnership between developing countries, international agencies, foundations, global health partnerships and technical experts that aims to strengthen health information systems. Such systems incorporate all the multiple subsystems and data sources that, taken together, contribute to generating health information: vital registration, censuses and surveys, disease surveillance and response, service statistics and health management information, financial data and resource tracking. In line with current trends in health-system development, HMN seeks to broaden the base of health information and statistical systems beyond specific diseases and to foster leadership in the production and use of health information at the national level. These objectives require enhanced coordination and cooperation between countries and international partners, and a harmonized plan to develop health information systems. A further aim of HMN is to focus donor participation on a unified, country-owned plan to develop health information systems, thereby reducing duplication, fragmentation and overlap.

Central to the harmonized plan is the development of the Framework and Standards for Country Health Information Systems – known as the HMN Framework – which the

partnership intends to set as the universal paradigm for data collection, reporting and usage by 2011. At the core of the framework is the HMN tool, a standardized questionnaire with which country stakeholders assess the current status of the health information against specific criteria. The tool provides a gauge of baseline status, critical gaps in health information results, processes, context and resources, and an assessment of performance and achievements. Countries receiving technical and financial assistance from the partnership are required to undergo an assessment using the HMN tool.

The purpose of the HMN Framework is twofold: to target investment on the standardization of health information, and to enhance access and, by extension, usage of better health information at the national and international levels. Rather than seeking to replace existing guidelines on health systems information, the HMN framework seeks to build on appropriate standards and promote best practices. The process is envisaged as a dynamic one, which will evolve through the incorporation of better evidence and wider experience.

In addition to developing the dynamic framework, the HMN has two related objectives: to deepen health information systems through providing technical and catalytic financial support to implement the HMN Framework; and to broaden access, dissemination and usage of health information by stakeholders at all levels. The partnership is based on a single and sound premise: It is not because countries are poor that they cannot afford good health information; it is because they are poor that they cannot afford to be without it.

*See References, page 112.*