

Supporting Sustainable Development through Research and Capacity Building

Invest in Human Resources to Accelerate Attainment of Universal Healthcare

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Human resource is an important input in healthcare delivery. Attaining universal healthcare in Kenya will therefore largely depend on whether insurance coverage will be wide enough and affordable for most of the population, and on whether there will be adequate healthcare personnel to provide the needed care at all levels of healthcare provision.

More specifically, the health sector workforce determines the scope of service coverage, which in turn influences healthcare outcomes. Without adequate supply of health workers, it is difficult to achieve, among other things, the desired quality of healthcare provision, immunization levels, child survival, and other healthcare targets.

With the devolved management of health workers, the number of workers has increased because of direct employment and deployment. As a result, this has improved the ratio of health professionals to that of the population across the country, although the ratio still falls short of the World Health Organization (WHO) target of 30 medical officers per 100,000 people and 230 nurses per 100,000 people. In the devolved system, the country has achieved 25 medical officers per 100,000 people and 77 nurses per 100,000 people.

That said, several supply challenges require urgent attention in improving health service delivery. For example, although most counties are investing to expand healthcare infrastructure and equipment, this is done without an equivalent increase in human resources and/or budgeting for specialists to operate the new equipment. Further, due to inadequate deployment framework, unengaged trained health professionals coexist with under-resourced facilities. Shortages are also experienced across some categories of technical staff, including community health workers, health technologists, health engineers, doctors, dentists and surgical staff, among others.

Other supply challenges include reluctance of health workers to relocate to rural and/or hardship areas with limited amenities such as housing, transport, water and electricity compared to urban areas that attract more healthcare professionals due to their advanced infrastructure. In addition, retaining health professionals is an emerging challenge due to caseloads per worker, the relatively high demand for health professionals across the globe, and attractive remuneration packages and better working conditions in other countries. For example, in the recent past, Kenya has seen about 300 nurses migrate annually. Most of these health workers migrate to the United States, Australia and Canada, which have put in place favourable policies such as less stringent visa requirements for health professionals.

In addressing these challenges, it is important to strengthen human resource planning and management practices, provide for better working conditions, and promote integrated investment planning. These will not only help determine future health workforce requirements but also ensure interventions are made in a timely manner, including on critical issues brought out in negotiations of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). A competent and well-motivated staff will go a long way in improving service delivery and supporting the achievement of universal healthcare.

Attracting and retaining health workers in hardship areas will require implementing special incentives to health workers, such as provision of housing (or

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better housing); appropriate hardship allowance; and provision of in-service training and targeted career progression opportunities. Other interventions include the creation of a formal support structure that facilitates the design and implementation of recruitment and retention interventions owing to the dynamic nature of health service provision and the management of its human resources. This, in the long run, will reduce caseloads for health workers in rural areas.

In improving the general working conditions, rechanneling healthcare resources to rehabilitation and upgrading of existing health facilities should be prioritized especially in areas with greater population concentration. Revamped and better equipped facilities will incentivize the working environment.

The government also needs to pursue modalities to attain harmony with the various health workers trade unions. This will smoothen the negotiation process for Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) and reduce industrial unrest. For example, if all public-sector agencies firmly supported the ongoing efforts by the government to streamline wages and remunerations in the public sector, it would help harmonize the remuneration packages and remove any discontents in the service. In addition, it is important that the collective bargaining process benefits from an objective assessment of the financial and fiscal implications of CBAs to ensure that concluded agreements are fiscally sustainable and therefore enforceable.

Emerging health needs in the country such as nephrology, orthopedic and trauma medicine specializations will require that health workers remain competitive and the institutionalization of life-long training for medical staff be prioritized. This will ensure that medical staff are continuously informed

on and conversant with current developments and trends in medical technology, procedures and patient care. This requires regularly undertaking comprehensive training needs assessment to implement targeted skills enhancement initiatives.

In addition, counties need to embrace technology in deepening skills to overcome the physical barrier to specialized training and continuous skills development for specialized medical staff. This can be done through online training platforms, which may in turn require additional investments in internet-related infrastructure; implementation of mobile training and exchange units; and expansion of the ongoing residence-based training initiatives. In addition, skills deepening exchange programmes between public and private facilities both within and outside the country are encouraged.

Improving the management of the health workforce migration is paramount in maintaining a resourceful health sector. Some jurisdictions, for example, capture and share the number and profile of migrating health professionals as part of the workforce information system to guide decision making within government. Kenya is a signatory to the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel, and regularly reporting on the status of health worker shortages can harness international support and attract health workers from other countries. In addition, government to government agreements, and effectively enforcing training contracts requiring government trained medical students to be deployed immediately after training, can strengthen management of health professionals. At local level, the effects of in-migration can be mitigated by, among other things, monitoring of health worker deployment, and institutionalization of sharing of health specialists across counties and health facilities.

About KIPPRA Policy Briefs

KIPPRA Policy Briefs are aimed at a wide dissemination of the Institute's policy research findings. The findings are expected to stimulate discussion and also build capacity in the public policy making process in Kenya.

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