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Dr. Peter Drobac shows Rwandan President Paul Kagame and First Lady Jeanette Kagame around the new Butaro Hospital in Rwanda.

Engaging Ministries of Health in service and creating change

Overview

Public sector partnership is a core value at Partners In Health (PIH). Through lessons in Haiti and elsewhere, we have seen that only a government can ensure human rights of its citizens, and only with government buy-in can service delivery innovations be brought to scale and sustained in the long run. The partnership between Inshuti Mu Buzima (“Partners In Health” in Kinyarwanda) in Rwanda, working directly with the Ministry of Health (MOH) has paid off for the communities we serve.

We first set out to develop HIV programs at a limited number of facilities in two districts. But we did so with the explicit intent of using smart investments in HIV care delivery to rebuild public health infrastructure and critical primary health systems. From the health and broader social outcomes within the IMB-supported communities we have been able to scale our engagement to 40 health facilities – all public – in three districts, serving a population of 800,000 and contributing to health systems improvements across Rwanda.

The end goal of the service, training, advocacy and research model of PIH is to strengthen entire health systems. Comprehensive, integrated services – the district health management team to district hospitals, health centers and the community level – allowed us to both better establish and build out our model, while relentlessly supporting the Ministry of Health’s goals.

Read the article below to find out more about:

- Engaging with Ministry representatives
- Finding a middle ground in discussions with the MOH
- Using evidence to make your case with the MOH ▣

The Ministry of Health (MOH) establishes the country’s health priorities, develops strategies for addressing the health needs of the population, and implements the policies that move the health agenda forward. Your organization can help strengthen the country’s public health system by helping the MOH achieve its goals.

Engaging with the MOH at multiple levels

One lesson that PIH has learned throughout its work is the importance of establishing strong relationships and engaging with the MOH at multiple levels – community/sector, district, and national. For an implementing organization especially, it is worth taking the time to show how your nongovernmental organization (NGO) is different from other NGOs. The MOH can sometimes perceive NGOs as working in their country only for the short term, and following their own agendas. Your organization can show the MOH that you are interested in building a long-term relationship, basing your work on their priorities, not your own.

It is worthwhile investing time and effort in getting to know Ministry people on a personal level. For PIH-supported sites, their proximity on the ground to the MOH at the district level enables those at the sites to do this. It also helps to participate in a variety of meetings with the MOH at different levels: technical working groups at the national level, planning and budget meetings at the district level, and collaboration with local leaders and other community organizations at local levels.

While PIH has often been fortunate to work in settings with strong, stable governments, this has not always been the case. In other less stable settings, senior MOH officials, particularly at the central level, tend to come and go, while local government leaders are around for longer: this is another reason why it is so important to engage at all levels.

A key idea here is to avoid considering the MOH as a monolithic organization instead of it being made up of several decision makers who operate at different levels. First, find out all the different stakeholders and their motivations; then figure out what would need to happen for each stakeholder to work with you; and finally set out a campaign strategy to make those things happen.

Pilot study/operational research

Implementing a pilot project or an operational research study can establish the effectiveness of strategy while giving organizations some breathing space to collect supporting evidence. Although some MOHs may not support pilots, these smaller interventions are less costly than a full-scale program and are unlikely to disrupt the Ministry structure. In conducting a pilot project, the organization would need to bring together a group of stakeholders who would be willing to try a new or bolstered approach, plan how to implement the pilot, and ensure that its impact could be measured.

Sharing resources

Sharing time, energy, and expertise at each government level and on each relationship is worth the effort. There are ways at all levels to contribute to the MOH that do not involve money, such as seconding someone to work at the district or

national level to help with budgets or strategic plans; finding the latest research on issues the MOH is concerned with, or coordinating work with fellow implementing organizations on a particular service or resource that fills a gap in MOH priorities.

Working away from the capital

A particular challenge for those organizations working in rural areas is their location far from the capital cities where much decision-making takes place. It is difficult to be present, and being present is often essential to build a relationship with the MOH at the national level, and to keep updated on MOH activities. One option is to consider basing someone from your organization in the capital city to directly engage with the MOH central office. Another option is to have regular contact with an organization based in the capital city, one that shares your values, is strategically aligned with your organization, and works closely with the national MOH. This link can keep your organization abreast of decisions that could impact your work and help you to decide when you should invest staff time and effort in being present in the capital city.

Finding the middle ground

Working out how you can realize your organizational mission and goals and at the same time contribute to achieving the government's priorities will often involve discussion with the MOH, at all levels. In some cases, you may be asked to carry out activities or establish programs that are not within your expertise; here it may be relatively easy to decline and point out the work is beyond your capacities.

However, there will be other instances when there may be a difference of opinion on how a particular program should be implemented; or when you are asked to carry out programs that are within your competence, but will present problems to your organization.

For example, you may have established a community-based program in a particular area where your community health workers have been providing HIV care and prevention activities for one community. In recognizing the increased health-outcomes to patients, the MOH may offer your organization some small funding to scale up the program to sites outside of your catchment area. Agreeing to do this will overstretch your staff, while the funding being provided will be insufficient to work at all sites. Your organization can decline the MOH's request and opt out; or in your discussions, you can let the MOH know what it would take to do the project correctly, such as more resources, scaling back the number of new sites, or an alternate strategy of training others to run the programs in the new sites. Hard-lined stances are often necessary to find the middle ground with the MOH.

Once your organization has built up a good working relationship with the MOH, it can be difficult to say "no" to their requests as this response may damage the trust and credibility that has been established. This is a dilemma that PIH faces, and

sometimes the answer is “no”, but many times the answer is “yes”. One suggestion that is helpful in these discussions is, “Under-promise, but over-deliver”.

In the end, if your organization can meet even the bare minimum of what it sets out to do, it may be worth taking on the work. If it is your organization’s core work and a unique value proposition, it is hard to withdraw from the opportunity you have been given. In these instances, it is important to be honest with close partners and let them know what they can expect to get from the project. ■

TIPS

- ✓ Engage with MOH officials at all levels – community/sector, district, and national. Get to know Ministry people, and show how your organization is there for the long term, working with the government’s agenda, not your own.
- ✓ To build a consensus around a policy/project/strategy with the MOH, identify all the stakeholders at different levels. Find out the reasons why each would join you, what you need to do to make that happen, and campaign to ensure that they all end up on your side.
- ✓ When making your case to the MOH, offer to carry out a small-scale pilot project to prove your approach or back up it up with data or best practices from other settings as evidence of its success.
- ✓ In your discussions with the MOH, push for what you need to do the job. Even if the project may be under-funded or stretch your capacities, if it is a core part of your work and your organization’s values, take it on and try to accomplish the bare minimum. “Under-promise but over-deliver” and be realistic with your partners, making sure they know what to expect from you and the project.