

Is implementation overwhelmed by planning in the health sector of the Solomon Islands?

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Abstract

A group of middle level health service managers studying leadership and management in the Solomon Islands National University conducted a focus group discussion on the issues related to the balance between planning and implementation, where an overemphasis on planning has the potential to overwhelm implementation and delivery of health services. Participants expressed that they are frequently required on short notice to attend planning meetings and development partner issue specific conferences to a degree that interferes with their responsibilities to implement programmes for the populations they serve. Several solutions are presented to address this tension.

Introduction

The Solomon Islands is generously supported by development partners and NGOs to address important population health issues. These agencies have their own funding priorities and processes that may, or may not, interface with the priorities and processes of the Solomon Islands, but they invariably rely on the availability of national health staff for implementation. The availability of the staffing required to implement these agendas is commonly overestimated. The National Health Strategic Plan 2016-20 (p11) identifies a range of issues that have hindered service improvement over the last five years. Among these is the comment that “strategic leadership was primarily focused on donor-led, rather than Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) led activities”.

This paper expresses the concerns of health staff that the amount of time planning can overwhelm implementation of national priorities. It identifies a way that the communication of these concerns can be viewed as legitimate, system-wide and not merely the expressions of individual staff, who may potentially be regarded as lacking the capacity to implement services and attend multiple planning meetings and conferences. It was agreed that a group expression of these concerns was a better approach, more likely to be heard rather than dismissed.

Proposed strategic solutions

The group proposed the following strategies:

- That the group clarify how meetings and workshops are generated, whether by the MHMS or by development partners and agencies, who may at times act only as providers of facilitation funding.
- That the group represent the specifics of their concerns to the Partnership Coordination Unit through the Under-Secretary Health Care (USHC) and to request advocacy on their behalf in discussions and conferences.
- That a communication policy be developed to clarify issues related to communication with development partners, identifying who is endorsed to communicate with them and the protocols required to ensure communication is effective and does not disrupt larger issues.
- That where implementation will be compromised by attendance, and it is not possible to either attend or to send a delegate, that the PHD corresponds with the USHC, conveying their thanks for the invitation, apologizing for their inability to attend, citing the implementation reason for non-attendance, requesting a copy of the meeting's

minutes and offering commitment to address the issue when time becomes available (and implementation will not be compromised).

- That people with technical expertise relevant to a meeting agenda be sent as delegates of the Provincial Health Director (PHD) where their attendance does not compromise implementation of existing plans.
- To make a presentation to the annual National Health Conference (NHC) identifying the number of meeting and conference they have been asked to attend in the previous year and producing evidence on the implementation issues that have been delayed or re-scheduled because of their attendance.
- To hold side meetings at annual NHCs in which these issues could be discussed and a group statement be forwarded to the USHC for representation to the Permanent Secretary for Health.
- To communicate their concerns among peers by creating a social media group for mutual support, where common issues can be expressed, and effective solutions developed for discussions with higher levels.

Conclusion

It is not our intention to discount the importance of planning meetings and issues specific conferences, as they do introduce new ideas and strategies. What is required now is forward planning and the development of a meeting schedule well in advance, so that staff can weave these meetings into their schedules without compromising implementation of national priorities. The example was given of a neighboring country that allocates the months of July and September for development partner planning meetings and conferences. Such an approach would allow for planned attendance that does not compromise implementation of the priority actions identified in Annual Operational Plans and Budgets.