Strengthening Health Systems: The Role of Demonstration Projects

Demonstration projects are important in health system strengthening in that they bridge the gap between conceptual design of change or reform and large-scale implementation. They provide health care decision makers with first-hand experience in implementing system change before going to scale, whether the change involves multiple components of the system or is more narrowly focused. Demonstrations also offer an opportunity for policymakers, administrators, providers, and users to evaluate the actual result from the changes and to modify the design if need be. PHR’s work with counterparts to implement demonstration projects shaped the following insights on the value of such projects.

What are the functions of a demonstration project?

Demonstrations are laboratories that design and test new approaches and concepts to make health systems work better. They can provide design and implementation experience to a variety of counterparts when the counterparts are actively involved in all aspects of the demonstration.

In the Alexandria governorate of Egypt, the Ministry of Health and Population, with the involvement of other Egyptian stakeholders, PHR, and experts from the World Bank, the European Commission, and USAID, carried out a demonstration project to test a comprehensive health system reform that affected service delivery, financing, and regulation of care. In Jordan, two hospitals served as a demonstration site for a decentralization pilot. Hospital managers and staff helped to define decentralization in the Jordanian context and to test key concepts such as boards of trustees and decentralized management strategies.

Demonstrations are test models that can be scaled up and replicated. Participants in demonstration projects engage in problem solving at every stage so that the completed demonstration is feasible, works smoothly, and can be replicated on a larger or more complex scale.

The Egyptian MOHP is replicating the model tested in Alexandria in three governorates. Jordan is using its experience to design policies that support expansion of hospital decentralization as well as new hospital management systems.

In Rwanda, a PHR-supported prepayment demonstration in three districts allowed policymakers to gain experience in managing and evaluating the effects of such schemes. The demonstration showed policymakers that prepayment is attractive to Rwandans, allows better access to professional health services, and brings services more in line with the health needs of the population. The demonstration also gave managers and policymakers experience in adjusting premiums and designing subsidies to target the poorest.
Demonstrations are opportunities for providers and end-users to participate in system design and to experience proposed changes in health systems. Demonstration projects are an opportunity for policymakers to allow the user of health care to touch and feel the change, and to learn how the users feel about how the change affects them. Well-designed demonstrations also encourage the user of health services to participate in design modifications that can make the difference between a user-friendly system change and one that may be less acceptable to end-users. Techniques such as exit surveys, focus groups, town meetings, and informational interviews may be used to gather users’ opinions.

In both Rwanda and Egypt end-users had opportunities to let system designers and policymakers know how the changes affected them. Rwanda surveyed households in both participating and control districts and held regular meetings of community members to hear feedback. These activities provided important information about participation in the prepayment schemes as well as comparisons between those participating and those who were not. Egypt used both patient-satisfaction surveys and focus groups to evaluate the effect of the new care model.

In Senegal, PHR teams assisted communities in demonstration districts to assume their new responsibilities in a decentralized health system. Improved management of the decentralization process provided increased public funding for local health services, motivation of health personnel, and mobilization of community-based organizations to support preventive services.

Demonstrations are opportunities to evaluate the effects of system change. Demonstrations provide initial information on the results of the health system change. In the demonstration projects described here, collecting and using data allowed counterparts to engage end-users in dialogue, adapt designs, and increase reform effectiveness.

How can the usefulness of demonstration sites be enhanced?

The usefulness of demonstration project is enhanced if:

▲ There is wide involvement of counterparts from all levels of the health system and from community groups, providers, and end-users of the system.

▲ Demonstration projects are implemented during the design phase of planned reforms. This allows all stakeholders to participate in design changes as well as testing and evaluation of the design before scale-up.

▲ The demonstration project is flexible and allows for frequent changes in implementation strategy as more is learned about the approach.

This article is one in a series that describes lessons learned in the Partnerships for Health Reform Project. The follow-on PHRplus Project is drawing on these lessons to familiarize country counterparts and USAID Missions with project skills and capabilities, which are significantly expanded by the PHRplus partnership, which now comprises Abt and nine partner organizations, as well as several affiliate organizations. As these papers are brief, they cannot include all possible approaches to specific country needs; therefore, we welcome reader comments and discussion. Send comments to PHR-InfoCenter@abtassoc.com