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A Systems Thinking Approach to Critical Primary Healthcare Workforce Tutor Capacity Development in Nigeria

Context

Nigeria's critical shortage of primary health care workers and skilled birth attendants poses a risk to maternal and child health throughout the country. This lack of skilled healthcare workers and birth attendants can be traced back to the number of qualified tutors who play a key role in the training of Nigeria's health workforce. These tutors often do not have opportunities for professional development, due to the low status of the teaching profession in Nigeria, and the low salaries of tutors further compound the issues. The preservice health training institutions (PSHTIs) where the tutors serve are also faced with numerous challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and high student dropout rates. While several of the PSHTIs make efforts to address these challenges, they tend to relegate those that relate to the capacity development of the tutors.

This technical brief describes USAID/Nigeria's Health Workforce Management (HWM) Activity's adoption of a systems thinking approach to address the issues of PSHTI tutor capacity through the application of a series of targeted interventions. By identifying and addressing the complex factors that influence the success of tutors, this approach will ensure that tutors have the skills, knowledge, and support they need to provide high-quality training to new health workers and contribute to improved health outcomes for Nigerians.

Introduction

Nigeria continues to face critical shortages of skilled health workers, particularly at the primary health care (PHC) level. In 2019, the ratio of nurses and midwives in Nigeria per 1,000 people was 1.5, less than the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation of 2.5. The shortage of skilled health workers and skilled birth attendants at the PHC level poses a high risk to Nigeria meeting its United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to reduce maternal and under-five



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mortality by 2030.

In Nigeria, nurses, midwives, and community health extension workers (CHEWs) typically receive training at Pre-Service Health Training Institutions (PSHTIs). These institutions play a critical role in ensuring that Nigeria has enough skilled PHC workers to meet the needs of its population. To improve the quality and numbers of these critical healthcare workers, the USAID/Nigeria Health Workforce Management (HWM) Activity was awarded in 2020, under the Integrated Health Systems award, to improve the quality and increase the number of critical healthcare workers in Nigeria.

Through the USAID/Nigeria HWM Activity, Banyan Global and its consortium partners (Abt Associates, Institute for Healthcare Improvement and Solina Health) are contributing to greater health systems responsiveness and improved health outcomes, especially among women and children in the prioritized states of Bauchi, Ebonyi, Kebbi, Sokoto, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). One of the key areas of support from the HWM Activity is closing the gaps in the available PHC workforce, particularly in targeted rural and remote areas in the 4+1 states. The HWM Activity supports the training of nurses, midwives, and CHEWs in selected PSHTIs, including the Colleges of Nursing and Midwifery, and the Colleges of Health Technology in the 4+1 states.

Health professionals typically take on the role of tutors in PSHTIs, guiding and instructing new health workers during their training. These tutors are expected to fulfil their role diligently, ensuring the competency and updated medical knowledge and practice of the health workforce. However, the scarcity of qualified tutors presents substantial challenges in producing the required PHC workforce in Nigeria. PSHTIs encounter severe difficulties, including insufficient infrastructure, restricted funding, and elevated student dropout rates. Although efforts are made to address these challenges, those related to the capacity development of employed tutors tend to be overlooked.

Tutors face limited professional development opportunities and receive low salaries from their institutions, leading to underperformance and some leaving the teaching profession. According to a recent HWM survey, only 40 percent of tutors in PSHTIs in the 4+1 states reported that their employers offer any form of professional development or in-service training. The absence of training adversely affects the quality of education they can deliver to students. Despite these challenges, PSHTIs in Nigeria continue to produce a substantial number of health workers for the population.

As Nigeria embraces PHC as a crucial strategy to attain Universal Health Coverage by 2030, there is an immediate requirement for a systematic method to enhance the capacity of tutors to provide quality training to their students. To meet these challenges, the HWM Activity has adopted a systems thinking approach and applied a series of targeted interventions.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking has found application in various complex domains, including public health, as a means of formulating more effective strategies to address challenges specific to the sector. By utilizing systems thinking, decision-making can be enhanced through informed choices rooted in observations and data that reveal trends and patterns. This is why the HWM Activity has embraced the systems thinking approach to tackle the challenges related to PSHTI tutor capacity.

During the initial implementation phase, HWM invested in ways to better understand the complex system in which the tutors operate, as well as identify factors that influence the success of tutors and develop potential solutions. The HWM Activity applied systems thinking as a way of understanding the tutors' perspective on the interconnectivity of the factors affecting their success. HWM has identified these key factors, which include the quality of the training the tutors have received, access to continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities including coaching and mentorship, resources available to tutors to do their work, support and feedback mechanisms



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from tutor supervisors and colleagues, and a supportive school management and governance system.

Understanding the Need

HWM conducted annual needs assessments of tutor competencies, especially in relation to the tutors' ability to implement the curriculum, deliver lessons, and use innovative methods, and best practices in an environment that will aid teaching and learning. HWM used the Competency-Based Self Evaluation (CBSE) tool adapted from the Teachers' Self Evaluation framework to elicit background information on PHSTI tutors and their competencies. The tool focuses on self-improvement through self-analysis across a wide range of key areas including communication skills, content/subject matter competence, learning environment creation competence, professional development measures, digital competency, inclusive measures, gender sensitivity, ethics sensitivity, research competency, assessment strategies, and behavioral/critical thinking/adaptability. HWM also reviewed the existing CPD modules for the PHC workforce cadre to ascertain the relevance of the content to build the competency of the tutors.

Key findings from these assessments include:

- Lack of required competency to effectively deliver problem-solving-based curricula.
- Improvement required in the existing structures and processes for tutors to receive instruction, training, or learning support in areas such as curriculum development, teaching and learning strategies, assessment and evaluation, technology integration, mentoring and advising and professional development.
- On-the-job training opportunities are built around the CPD models which are designed and facilitated by the relevant regulatory bodies.
- Lack of modules that address tutor competencies in the professional mandatory CPD.
- Lack of resources and training on instructional design or how to design the learning environment to improve the

learning outcomes.

HWM Activity Interventions

The HWM Activity's strategy for capacity development aims to enhance the tutors' capability in designing and delivering effective training while supporting PSHTIs in attaining their objectives. HWM's interventions primarily focus on building the capacities of individual tutors and school management teams. This extended process involves close collaboration between HWM staff, tutors, and school management teams to cultivate the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources through the following interventions:

- A. Training aimed at enhancing the skills and knowledge required by tutors to deliver their training programs effectively, thereby building their students' competencies.**

The HWM Activity implements the following training initiatives:

1. **Face-to-face tutor training:** In response to the gaps identified from the competency assessments, the HWM Activity conducted in-person training with over 600 tutors, clinical instructors, and preceptors across PSHTIs in its focus 4+1 States and the northwest, southeast and northeast zones of Nigeria. The pieces of training aimed to improve the tutors' capacity to deliver problem-solving-based curricula and to improve tutors' teaching, facilitatory and leadership skills. The HWM Activity built the capacity of tutors in student-centered learning, information and communication technologies (ICT), e-Learning, research methodologies, gender-sensitive teaching, and delivery of instructional content using simulation labs. HWM also followed up the training with on-site mentoring for the trained tutors. Six months after the training for the preceptors, the HWM Activity conducted an impact survey. The preceptors indicated that the training improved their practice through:

- Providing more structured performance measurement methods;
- Improved preceptee training design;
- Improved application of student-centered learning practices; and
- A re-design of clinical areas to foster learning.

In the six-month post-training period, more than 5,960 student nurses and midwives on clinical rotations had been supervised by these certified preceptors.

2. Delivering educational content to tutors via an e-Library platform and facilitating access to e-Library resources:

To enhance the integration of technology in the technical support offered to PSHTIs, the HWM Activity has subscribed to the EBSCO e-Library. This subscription provides students and tutors with unlimited access to over six million records databases, full text for over 1,300 journals, indexing for more than 5,400 journals, and nursing, midwifery, and allied health eBooks. Access to current academic resources is now available to students and tutors without the need for additional investments in hardware or infrastructure. HWM actively monitors the e-Library's usage by tutors and students and has observed a growing trend in usage over the past year. To further encourage and augment continued usage, HWM conducts periodic end-user webinar orientations. These sessions aim to enhance the knowledge of PSHTI tutors and students regarding the e-Library platform, enabling them to fully leverage its resources for improved learning and practice.

3. TutorConnect Initiative: A Zoom-based learning support platform designed to equip PSHTI tutors with the competencies they require to design and deliver high-quality education in line with the current global trends and best practices for closing the Know-Do gap in education. HWM has over 500 tutors from PSHTIs across the country on its TutorConnect registration database and estimates an average of 300 tutors participate at each session,

with 100 unique devices registered and at least three tutors per device. HWM delivers the TutorConnect sessions using identified subject matter experts to cover a range of topics related to the following:

Design of Learning

- Effective teaching strategies
- Curriculum implementation
- Ethics and professional standards
- Reflective practice

Delivery of Learning

- Student engagement and motivation
- Classroom management
- Technology integration
- Adaptive learning
- Diversity and inclusivity

Monitoring and Evaluation of the Design and Delivery of Learning

- Assessment and evaluation
- Professional development
- Research and evidence-based practice
- Monitoring and coaching

In 2024, HWM transitioned TutorConnect to an online learning management system platform ([eAcademy developed by Kayzen](#)) so tutors can learn at their own pace, have improved access to learning resources, and earn license renewal credit points recognized by their professional regulatory bodies for the acquired content.

4. TutorConnectX: Tutors who participate in TutorConnect may encounter limitations in applying their newfound knowledge within their institutions. Therefore, TutorConnectX is designed to empower the leadership and



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management teams of training institutions, enabling them to provide a nurturing and enabling environment and offer the necessary support to tutors to effectively apply their newly acquired skills. TutorConnectX is a virtual community-of-practice-style intervention focused on enhancing leadership, management, and governance capacities.

B. Technical assistance to the PSHTIs.

1. Mentoring and coaching support to the school management committees to develop and implement staff performance management and retention guidelines. The guidelines detail PSHTI employee attraction, development, and retention policies, aiding the schools to attract, continuously develop and retain high-caliber staff and professionals. The guidelines also detail the commitment of the PSHTI leadership to promoting a healthy work environment that prioritizes the health and well-being of all staff.
2. Mentoring and coaching support to the school management committees to develop and use Institutional Strengthening Plans (ISPs). These plans have been identified by HWM as one of the ways the PSHTIs could drive the process of addressing their accreditation gaps. Each PSHTI develops an ISP to understand the root causes of their gaps, how to go about addressing the gaps and how to also run the affairs of the schools. HWM successfully tested the model for the creation and use of the ISP using the Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT).

C. Advocacy to the state government, regulatory bodies, private sector and, other key stakeholders to raise awareness of issues and mobilize support for change.

1. The HWM Activity aids PSHTIs in the 4+1 states to engage with key stakeholders in both public and private sectors for fund mobilization. This aims to address (re-)accreditation needs by recruiting additional tutors, enhancing tutor remuneration, and providing infrastructure, including dedicated teaching staff offices.

2. HWM also assists PSHTIs in collaborating with professional regulatory bodies to develop tools beneficial for tutors. HWM's assessments reveal challenges encountered by tutors and students in operating computers and navigating examination software platforms during Computer-Based Tests (CBT). This difficulty affects students' performance, especially considering the increasing reliance on CBTs in the National Exams conducted by the Community Health Practitioners Registration Board of Nigeria (CHPRBN) and the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria (NMCN). The students' and tutors' difficulties with computer-based programs create barriers to numerous opportunities in education and health. To address this, HWM collaborates with CHPRBN and NMCN to create a guide for tutors and students regarding CBTs.

Conclusion

Adopting a systems thinking approach for frontline PHC workforce tutor capacity development holds promise in tackling the shortage of skilled health workers in Nigeria. This approach involves recognizing and addressing the intricate factors influencing the success of tutors, ensuring they possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and support to deliver high-quality training to new health workers. Consequently, this contributes to enhanced health outcomes for the Nigerian population. In summary, a systems thinking approach emerges as a valuable tool for crafting effective solutions with enduring impacts.

Health Workforce Management (HWM) Activity is a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/ Nigeria task order under the Integrated Health Systems indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity contract. HWM supports the establishment of a cost-effective, well-trained, and motivated health workforce in targeted rural and remote areas of Bauchi, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Ebonyi States, as well as the Federal Capital Territory in Nigeria.

HWM strengthens the pre-service training learning environment and in-service training programs; supports the development of a robust human resources for health (HRH) information system to keep track of recruitment, deployment, retention, and continuing education; strengthens governance and management of the health workforce; and supports HRH research to improve HRH practices and retention mechanisms.

HWM is implemented by Banyan Global in collaboration with Abt Associates, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), and Solina Health.

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