Health systems need adequate numbers of competent and motivated human resources for health (HRH) with a good balance in their categories in order to function efficiently and effectively. However, most countries in the South-East Asia Region face a shortage and maldistribution of health workforce along with inappropriate mix of skills. In order to address national HRH challenges effectively, the actions to be undertaken must be derived from sound information and reliable research. Yet, the review of HRH country profiles conducted in February 2012 reveals that the HRH information system in most countries is inadequate to provide an evidence base for effective HRH planning and management.

The need for better HRH information to inform policy development has led to the creation of HRH observatories in various countries throughout the world. These observatories contribute to, among others, improving the information and evidence on HRH as well as informing and shaping health and health workforce policies.

Member States are urged to organize a national HRH observatory to facilitate the production, sharing and use of quantitative and qualitative information on HRH to support the development and implementation of evidence-based HRH policies and plans in the country. This document provides information on the objectives and core functions of the HRH observatory as well as suggested actions to guide countries in organizing the national HRH observatory.

Suggested actions for development of national human resources for health observatories in the South-East Asia Region
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The health workforce is the most important component of health systems. To function efficiently and effectively, health systems need adequate numbers of human resources with a good balance in their categories. Moreover, these health workers must be competent, socially responsible and committed.

The planning, development and deployment of the health workforce are complex processes that require multidisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration, particularly in providing valid information and evidence for policy development. It is therefore crucial that key stakeholders within and beyond the health sector actively engage in these processes in order to ensure an adequate and effective health workforce, particularly for rural and underserved areas. Cooperation and support are needed from other sectors in order to ensure that the social wellbeing and other legitimate needs of health workers, in addition to health systems issues, are fully addressed.

Experiences in other regions reveal that human resources for health (HRH) observatory is an effective mechanism for engaging HRH stakeholders, within and outside the health sectors, on HRH planning and development with the use of valid and reliable information. Member States are, therefore, urged to organize HRH observatories in order to provide a platform for key stakeholders to interact on HRH matters as well as to improve the information and evidence on HRH for informed decisions.
This document suggests practical actions that countries should take in order to prepare for and organize national HRH observatories. It guides countries on how to move forward in this endeavour. WHO is committed to collaborate with Member States in their efforts to strive toward achieving adequate and effective health workforce in the countries of the South-East Asia Region.

Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director
Introduction

It has long been recognized that a competent and motivated health workforce (HWF) forms the core of a high-quality and efficient health system. However, most countries in the South-East Asia (SEA) Region face problems of HWF shortage, maldistribution and inappropriate mix of skills along with limited capacity for effective HWF management. The *World Health Report 2006, “Working together for health”*, revealed that 6 of the 11 countries of the Region faced a crisis with respect to HRH, and had less than 23 health workers (doctors, nurses and midwives) per 10 000 population. Member States are committed to achieve an effective and well-motivated health workforce as enunciated in the Health Ministers’ Dhaka Declaration in 2006 on Strengthening HWF in countries of the South-East Asia Region and the Regional Committee resolution on Strengthening the HWF in South-East Asia that it adopted at its Fifty-ninth session. Consequently, the Regional Strategic Plan for HWF Development in the SEA Region was finalized and widely disseminated in 2007.

Since then, countries have been taking steps to address their HRH challenges. However, the review of HRH country profiles conducted in February 2012 reveals that countries with an HRH crisis continue to be in crisis$. Furthermore, it also reveals that the HRH information system in most countries is inadequate to provide an evidence base for effective HRH planning and management. HRH

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data and information in most countries are incomplete, scattered, fragmented and collected by various organizations with limited or no coordinated efforts. Data on private health workforce are not accessible to the health ministry.

In order to address national HRH challenges effectively, the actions to be undertaken must be derived from sound information and reliable research. Such a base of knowledge is essential to create real awareness of the situation and to ensure effective advocacy and interventions regarding HRH issues in the country. The need for better HRH information to inform policy development has led to the creation of HRH observatories in various countries throughout the world\(^2\). These observatories collect and analyse data on the HWF, and advocate and make proposals for more rational approaches for HWF development. They contribute to improving the information and evidence on HRH; inform, shape, validate and evaluate health and health workforce policies; and make the links between the health workforce, financing and organization of services and outcomes\(^3\).

It was against this backdrop that the regional consultation on strengthening the management of human resources for health in the South-East Asia Region (convened in Bali, Indonesia in February 2012) made recommendations for countries, among others, to “establish mechanisms, such as an HRH observatory, to generate an up-to-date HRH country profile and to facilitate evidence-based policy dialogue for HRH development”.

In the above-mentioned context, it is beneficial for Member States to organize national HRH observatories to contribute to

\(^2\) WHO-SEARO is taking action for establishing a SEAR HRH Observatory with the following objectives: (1) to provide information and evidence for formulation, implementation and monitoring of HRH development policies, strategies, plans and their implementation; (2) to provide a forum for partnership, sharing experience and policy dialogue in HRH development, and (3) to strengthen national capacity for evaluation and monitoring of HRH situation and trends within the framework of health sector reforms.

effective HRH planning and management. Countries are urged to take action to ensure that the critical functions associated with the observatory are performed. This may be achieved through either establishing a national HRH observatory or incorporating critical functions of the HRH observatory with the existing structure such as multisectoral coordinating mechanisms for HRH like a national HRH committee, national HRH commission, national HRH task force or a country coordination and facilitation team.

This document provides information on the HRH observatory, its objectives and core functions, as well as suggested actions to guide countries in organizing the national HRH observatory. It is drawn from experience sharing and lessons learned at the Global Meeting on HRH Observatories in Lisbon, Portugal, 4–7 July 2011. It is envisaged that national HRH observatories will facilitate production, sharing and use of quantitative and qualitative information on HRH to support the development and implementation of evidence-based HRH policies and plans in the countries of the Region.
Objectives

An HRH observatory is a platform where key HRH stakeholders from all concerned sectors interact on HRH matters in addressing the HRH challenges in the country with the use of valid and reliable HRH information.

The general objective of the observatory is to provide an opportunity to stakeholders to jointly review and monitor the HRH situation and strengthen the HRH information system (HRHIS) as well as to attain collective views and coordinated efforts for HRH development in the country.

The specific objectives of the HRH observatory are to collect and analyse HRH information from various sources as well as to generate and disseminate information to provide evidence and propose options for policy dialogue and for informed decision to contribute to effective HRH planning and management.
Core functions

Core functions of the HRH observatory

- Data and information gathering, analysis and dissemination
- Monitoring the health workforce and labour market
- Research and knowledge production
- Advocacy and facilitation of policy dialogue and policy development
- Capacity development

Based on experiences of HRH observatories globally, the HRH observatory may perform the following functions:

**Data and information gathering, analysis and dissemination**: The aim is to collate, synthesize and disseminate data on the health workforce and health-care labour market in the country or region. This can involve: validating available data on education pipelines and health comparisons; analysing trends across time periods; developing information systems; identifying trends (ageing, feminization, specialization, mobility within countries and internationally) and problems (geographical and skills mix imbalances, policy gaps, future unmet needs, attrition, unemployment, dual practice, quality maintenance); scanning the environment; and disseminating...

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information to stakeholders and the general public through various means including information technology such as the webpage.

**Monitoring the health workforce and labour market:** The aim is to track and assess the dynamics of the workforce and the labour market, identifying changes and trends relevant to policy-making and planning. This can include monitoring the health labour market; the mobility of personnel; labour relations; productivity; working conditions and compensation; management practices; the impact of policies (including those originating from other sectors, such as education, finance, public administration, which have effects on the health sector); regulatory measures; and expenditures on the health workforce.

**Research and knowledge production:** The aim is to improve the evidence base by conducting new research, policy mapping and analysis, evaluate interventions, forecast exercises to identify future needs, study the satisfaction and expectations of health workers, cost policy options, and carry out comparative studies (between occupational groups, sub-nationally and internationally).

**Advocacy and facilitation of policy dialogue and policy development:** The aim is to foster active engagement of stakeholders in the process of policy development and planning for effective health workforce through enhancing advocacy and facilitating policy dialogue between stakeholders. This can include interventions in the media, organizing policy dialogues between stakeholders, participating in relevant events, and promoting joint work between stakeholders as well as to support, inform, and guide policy and planning by identifying policy options; assessing the feasibility of interventions; planning scenarios; disseminating international good practices; and preparing policy briefs.

**Capacity development:** The aim is to improve and strengthen the capacity and understanding of senior policy-makers and planners,
technical staff and HRH managers on HRH issues. This is achieved through technical training and leadership development activities; tools development (guidelines, handbooks, research protocols and instruments, planning strategies and models); the provision of support to communities of practice; and networking among HRH planners and analysts.

All the above core functions may not be covered by a single national HRH observatory. The country must decide which functions should be the focus of its observatory, based on its needs.
Principles

The HRH observatory is guided by the following principles:

**Partnership and inclusiveness:** Appropriate opportunities and methods are made available to enable and empower all stakeholders, including intersectoral partners to participate in decision-making and work in an honest and open partnership. It is essential that all relevant stakeholders are actively engaged in the process throughout. Also, it is imperative for all partners to agree on common values (such as compelling vision and goal) for dynamic partnership engagement. This will ensure ownership and commitment from all concerned.

**Shared leadership:** Opportunities are made for partners/stakeholders to share leadership where appropriate. The observatory should not solely rely on one person for all leadership functions. It is crucial that leadership be facilitative, involving all partners in decision-making. However, it is recommended that the HRH unit of the ministry of health initiates the process for establishing the national observatory to facilitate its development and to ensure ownership from the health ministry.

**Building on existing structure:** The observatory should be built on the existing infrastructure and/or mechanism rather than setting up a new structure. Furthermore, the observatory should not be developed as a ‘parallel system’; it should not replace government functions, nor should it divert scarce resources from government and ministries.
Strategies and tools

The observatory uses a range of strategies and tools to achieve its objectives, such as dedicated web sites, HRH databases, technical publications, discussion forums, technical meetings, training activities and policy dialogues.

The observatory does not make or implement policies. Its role is to contribute to building capacity of the government and stakeholders in areas such as the collection, processing, analysis, synthesis and use of HRH data and information to inform decision-making processes. This requires the development of training/learning activities and tools, as well as strategies to ensure that the right audiences are reached, and that capacity is developed and used.
Facilitating factors

Effectiveness of the HRH observatory depends largely on the following:

- Political commitment and support from national and local governments to address HRH issues.
- Strong governance and leadership, combined with good technical capacity from a core technical team.
- The observatory’s priority actions reflect country-specific needs and context of policy development.
- The observatory’s work is conducted in a transparent manner with objective means of quality control.
- Being able to show results in terms of policy impact, which goes well beyond the production of reports and the organization of meetings, creates conditions that increase an observatory’s influence (i.e. success breeds success).
Priority agenda for HRH observatory

Each country will determine the priority agenda for its own HRH observatory based on the challenges confronted in the sphere of HRH. Since governance, information and research in the area of HRH require special attention in most countries of the South-East Asia Region, examples of contributions the observatory could make to overall HRH governance, how it could engage effectively in developing and using HRH information, and contribute to identifying and meeting HRH research priorities are provided below.

Governance

HRH governance can be defined as the system of values, policies and institutions by which HRH development is furthered. It comprises (i) the mechanisms and processes through which HRH strategies are developed and implemented; (ii) the capacities to effectively lead and implement policies, to address HRH issues, and to manage resources; (iii) rules that distribute roles and responsibilities among stakeholders; and (iv) the institutions that govern HRH and interactions among them.

The HRH observatory could play a significant role in supporting effective HRH governance. It can help in strengthening the critical dimensions of the HRH governance, i.e. the strategic vision; governance and technical capacity; participatory mechanisms and coalition building; knowledge and evidence; and oversight, accountability and the rules of law.

The observatory can help in brokering knowledge for health policy-making through different channels of communication such as
the Internet, communities of practices, newsletters, policy briefs, etc. The information and evidence collated, generated and analysed by the observatory can be instrumental in policy dialogues as well as in influencing policy decisions in countries. Moreover, the observatory can also promote collaborative work among stakeholders, enhancing their role and contributing to HRH development.

The observatory is generally regarded as independent and neutral in terms of its work and output, and inhabits a ‘space’ where policy analysis and dialogue, planning support and evaluation can be conducted in a way that is critical and objective, so as to better inform current and future policies and practices. This ‘neutrality’, therefore, needs to be fostered in order to maintain the credibility of the observatory.

Information
Identifying, analysing and developing HRH information is another key potential linkage between the observatory and the broader HRH policy environment.

The national HRH observatory facilitates stakeholders’ engagement and initiates open dialogue and helps to catalyse the process to establish stakeholders’ agreement and long-term commitment to the development of the HR Information System (HRIS). It can steer technical cooperation between national stakeholders to share knowledge and best practices. It can assess the quality, validity and relevance of HRIS data to identify the need for capacity building, whether it is for data entry, processing, synthesis or improved use. It can also enhance knowledge sharing such as the HRH information flow between the demand and supply sectors, emphasize the need for effective reporting of data that are suited to each level of usage (e.g. avoiding complexity and technical jargon for policy-makers), and in overseeing best approaches to knowledge management and international comparability.

Moreover, the observatory should contribute to appraising the performance of HRIS relative to a set of identified indicators.
It should also evaluate the use of the HRIS information in HRH planning, governance, finance and the critical associations to health outcomes.

**Research**

Another linkage between the observatory and HRH policy development is the support for HRH research. Each country will decide what research is needed to address its priority HRH challenges. Nevertheless, most countries in the South-East Asia Region are confronted with shortage and maldistribution of health workforce as well as inability to attract and retain qualified health workers in the rural, remote and underserved areas. Research studies to determine (i) to what extent incentives work in attracting and retaining qualified health workers in under-serviced areas, and (ii) how incentives can be used to optimize the efficiency and quality of health care, could have a major impact on health worker policies and, ultimately, on the health of the poor and the disadvantaged in the Region.

The HRH observatory can play an important role in supporting HRH research by:

- empowering producers and users in research;
- identifying priorities for research agendas;
- promoting research;
- identifying best practices;
- utilizing existing capacities such as post-graduate studies (masters, PhD) for some research – by publishing and generating discussion;
- optimizing available financial resources – equity, best practices, training, use of available expertise;
- mobilizing resources for research/partnerships;
- disseminating and translating results into policy.
Suggestions for organizing the HRH observatory

The way the HRH observatory is organized depends on the country context. The national HRH observatory can be organized in various ways. Careful planning must precede the organization of the HRH observatory. Activities may be carried out over the following two phases:

- Phase 1: Preparing for the HRH observatory
- Phase 2: Organizing the HRH observatory

However, it is not necessary to carry out the following activities in a linear and sequential manner. A number of activities take place at the same time, depending on the local situation. Some are one-off activities, such as formulating a preliminary plan of action, while others are continuing activities such as forging strong partnership and linkages.

Phase 1: Preparing for the HRH observatory

First and foremost, it must be ensured that the government supports the organization of the national HRH observatory as a platform for all HRH stakeholders to address HRH challenges in the country.

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5 For example, the Brazilian HRH Observatory presents a fairly large network of 22 academic (universities) institutions and research centres, called workstations, coordinated by the Ministry of Health, looking at different HRH issues in the Brazilian health system. It has close ties with the health departments at municipal and state (provinces) levels.
with improved information and evidence. Once the decision has been made to organize the observatory, a number of preparatory activities need to be carried out to ensure its smooth and efficient organization.

**Activities needed to prepare for the observatory**

1. Appoint a focal point
2. Form a core technical team to prepare for the observatory
3. Advocate widely for the need for the observatory
4. Identify current and potential partners and stakeholders
5. Forge strong partnership and linkages
6. Define objectives, core functions, and members of the observatory
7. Formulate a preliminary plan of action.

It is important for countries to:

1. **Appoint a focal point**
   
   It is imperative that an official be designated as a focal point or coordinator of the observatory to facilitate and collaborate with other relevant organizations within and beyond the health sector, both government and private ones, to drive this observatory forward.

2. **Form a core technical team to prepare for the observatory**
   
   It is beneficial to have a core technical team comprising few strategic partners supporting a focal point or the observatory coordinator in carrying out activities to prepare for the observatory. It is beneficial to keep the core team small
at the initial stage, so that activities can be carried out expeditiously. However, additional partners may be co-opted as and when needed.

3. **Advocate widely for the need for the observatory**

Commitment and motivation from organizations and individuals, who will be involved in the observatory, are critical for successful organization of the HRH observatory. Champions need to be identified to share the vision and lead the establishment of the observatory. Advocacy is also needed to motivate all partners and stakeholders to be actively engaged with the observatory.

4. **Identify current and potential partners and stakeholders**

All organizations that have a direct and indirect impact on health workforce development and management should be engaged with the HRH observatory. Special attention must be given to ensure that key stakeholders in other government sectors such as, finance, education, social welfare, and internal/home affairs as well as those in the private sector are represented.

5. **Forge strong partnership and linkages**

Strong partnerships and linkages should be developed between the whole range of stakeholders within and outside the health sector who will be involved in the observatory. Open and honest partnership must be fostered.

6. **Define objectives, core functions and members of the observatory**

With the involvement of key partners/stakeholders, proposed objectives and core functions of the observatory will need to be worked out in order to drive forward the observatory. In addition, it is essential to determine who should be the members of the observatory, e.g. whether to start with a core group of key strategic partners initially and to widen its membership later.
7. **Formulate a preliminary plan of action**

   It is desirable to have a preliminary plan of action formulated at the preparatory phase to guide the development of the observatory. The plan will, however, provide only broad activities to be carried out. A detailed plan of action for the observatory will need to be formulated when the observatory is organized.

**Phase 2: Organizing the HRH observatory**

For effective organization of the observatory, the plan of action for the establishment of the observatory formulated during phase 1 should be implemented.

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It is important for countries to:

1. **Form the secretariat team**

   There is a need to have a dedicated secretariat team responsible for the efficient functioning of the observatory.
The type and number of staff will depend on the functions of the observatory. However, secretarial support must be adequate to maintain close communication with all partners. The core technical team formed in phase 1 may continue to function as part of the secretariat team.

2. **Develop detailed plan of action**

Once the observatory is functioning, special attention must be given to develop a detailed plan of action with the involvement of all members of the observatory. This should be built on the preliminary plan of action for the establishment of the observatory formulated in phase 1. A detailed annual work plan should be developed for each of the agreed core functions. The plan should aim for shared leadership where a partner with comparative advantage in that specific area will lead the work. This plan should be endorsed by all members of the observatory.

3. **Determine and mobilize resources for effective organization of the observatory**

Based on the detailed workplan, the level and type of material and financial resources required will be determined. Shared cost from key partners should be pursued. Special efforts should also be made to mobilize additional resources from other sources such as donor agencies for undertaking key activities requiring intensive financial resources.

4. **Facilitate and coordinate the implementation of planned activities**

The observatory secretariat must pay special attention to ensure that planned activities included in the endorsed plan of action are carried out as planned and remedial actions are taken as warranted. Also, support should be mobilized for successful implementation of the activities as needed.
5. **Conduct stakeholders’ meeting**
   A stakeholders’ meeting should be organized as indicated in the endorsed workplan. For successful conduct of the meeting, special efforts must be made to ensure that the invitation, agenda and meeting materials are sent to all members well in advance for their perusal. The minutes of the meeting including discussion points and agreed actions should be circulated for their endorsement and necessary follow-up soon after the meeting.

6. **Organize policy dialogue forum**
   Participants at this policy dialogue forum should be inclusive. It is crucial that all key government officials responsible for policy-making in areas that have an impact on HRH, not only from the health sector but also from other sectors are present in the meeting. It is essential to seek their convenience before scheduling the policy dialogue forum. Moreover, the proposed agenda and meeting materials for this forum should be under critical review in the stakeholders’ meeting before their finalization. The finalized documents should be sent to all participants well in advance prior to the meeting.

7. **Monitor the progress**
   A monitoring system needs to be established to provide feedback on progress in line with the implementation of the detailed workplan. This will enable prompt action to be taken in response to any deviation from the plan and further refine the plan to reflect changes in the situation.

8. **Evaluate the observatory and identify lessons learnt**
   The evaluation should determine the acceptability and usefulness of the observatory. It should identify the achievements, problems and solutions, use of resources
and lessons learned. This evaluation may be done after the observatory has been in operation for a considerable period of time, say, for at least five years.

9. **Further strengthen the observatory**

Results of the evaluation of the observatory should be critically reviewed and key issues identified. How the HRH observatory is functioning should be amended and refined as necessary in order to enhance its contribution to national HRH development.
Conclusion

The national HRH observatory provides a platform for key HRH stakeholders from all sectors concerned to interact on HRH matters in addressing the HRH challenges in the country with the use of valid and reliable HRH information. It will facilitate production, sharing and use of quantitative and qualitative information on HRH to support the development and implementation of evidence-based HRH policies and plans in the country. Moreover, the observatory will contribute to strengthen the HRH information system in the country.

The HRH observatory should be built on the existing infrastructure and/or mechanism rather than setting up a new structure. All relevant stakeholders must be actively engaged in the process throughout with an honest and open partnership. Shared leadership as well as facilitative leadership involving all partners in decision-making is crucial for an efficient and successful observatory.
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Suggested actions for development of national human resources for health observatories in the South-East Asia Region