

Contribution to the Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health

The WHO department of Human Resources for Health commends DG Sanco of the Commission of the European Communities for its thoughtful and informative Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health. The health workforce is widely recognized as a critical issue for health systems. Given the current and forthcoming challenges faced by the European Union Member States, this Green Paper is very timely.

It is the view of the WHO that the Green Paper identifies well and reviews key health workforce issues very effectively that are common to many WHO countries.

WHO is strongly supporting the development of actions/policies addressing health workforce concerns for the EU. Actions/policy options proposed in the Green Paper are very much in line with WHO policy options to address key health workforce challenges. Country experiences show that a combination of different actions/policies tend to be more successful rather than a single action/policy approach when addressing health workforce issues. Also, it would be important for the EU to also consider potential adverse consequences of such actions/policies on countries outside the EU, in particular regarding international health worker migration.

The WHO is encouraging and supporting the European Commission in its discussions on the European workforce for health. Such discussions are essential for having a better understanding of common health workforce challenges and facilitating the establishment of platform debates on potential actions to be taken.

WHO shares similar health workforce concerns to those expressed in the Green Paper. Indeed, demography, public health capacity, training, international health worker retention and migration, data collection and monitoring are key challenges in virtually all countries. It is therefore important to develop further and strengthen work in these areas.

WHO would encourage the European Commission to integrate and emphasize primary health care when considering the European Workforce for Health. The renewal of primary health care has been identified by WHO as a major policy focus area for which health workforce plays a central role. It was the object of the latest World Health Report "Primary Health Care: Now more than ever".

WHO is very appreciative of the fact that the Green Paper adopts a large scope to define the workforce for health by including not only clinical workforce, but also social care workforce, informal carers, administrative and support staff, and public health and disease surveillance workforce. This approach is very similar to WHO, which includes all paid workers employed in organizations or institutions whose primary intent is to improve health, as well as those whose personal/voluntary actions are primarily intended to improve health, but who work for other types of organizations (World Health Report, 2006).

With regards to international health worker migration, the WHO has developed a comprehensive programme of work on the issue of health worker migration, particularly focusing on the development of a WHO code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel. This is a result of the World Health Resolution WHA57.19, which requests among other things, the Director-General to develop, in consultation with Member States and all relevant partners, including development agencies, a code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel.

Following consideration of and encouragement for the development of the proposed code in several global fora, including the First Global Forum on Human Resources for Health held in Kampala, Uganda in March 2008 and the G8 Summit held in Toyako, Japan in July 2008, the WHO prepared a first draft of a code of practice in August 2008. The WHO then launched a global, web-based public hearing on the first draft of a WHO code of practice in September 2008. More recently, in January 2009 at the WHO Executive Board, Member States expressed appreciation to the Secretariat for the work done in preparing a draft code of practice and it was agreed that more consultations and effective participation by Member States was essential to finalize and adopt a code. WHO is very appreciative of the EU support in the development of a WHO code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel.

In addition, should an EU code of conduct on the ethical recruitment of health workers from non-EU countries be developed, WHO would be pleased to contribute to the discussions regarding its development.

Furthermore, attracting and retaining health workers in remote and rural areas is critical in order to address the health workforce crisis and to deliver universal coverage and people-centred services and is directly linked to both international migration and within the international context of renewal of primary health care. This issue is of relevance for both higher and lower income countries, which tend to suffer from a geographical maldistribution of their health workforce between rural, remote or poorer areas and urban, central, and richer localities. Ensuring access to health workforce is essential for the attainment and maintenance of universal coverage.

In response to this situation, the WHO has launched a new programme of work to help countries tackle the thorny issues of health workforce retention and equitable distribution. This programme of work aims to provide up-to-date and evidence-based recommendations to Member States on effective strategies that can be employed to ensure health workers are where they are most needed in a sustainable manner.

The retention programme of work consists of three strategic pillars:

- building and sharing the evidence base on effective strategies that increase access to health workers in remote and rural areas
- supporting countries to evaluate, adapt and implement such strategies
- developing and disseminating evidence-based recommendations on this topic

As many factors affect the decision to locate and stay in rural and remote areas, it clearly appears that there is no single “magic bullet” that will enable a country to satisfactorily improve health workforce distribution in rural and remote areas, but rather a set of combined interventions to address this challenging issue.

WHO looks forward to collaborating with the European Member States for this programme of work and hopes that this complementary focus on retention will contribute towards the success of international ethical recruitment of health workers efforts.

WHO would like to express its gratitude for the ongoing work of the EC and strongly believes the Green Paper will complement international and WHO efforts to address the challenges of international migration of health workers.