

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
HEALTH MONITORING PROGRAM

ACTIVITY REPORT

CONCLUSIONS AND RACCOMANDATIONS

**Health Monitoring Systems in Europe:
Structures and Processes**

Editors

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Executive summary

A Health Information System (HIS) is a crucial tool to support public health programs and policies designed to improve health in Europe. In order to work properly, a HIS needs to be effectively and efficiently managed. Cumbersome processes, structures performing blurred or useless tasks, gaps and overlaps in key activities and lack of an overall design substantially reduce the capability of the HIS to enhance decision-making processes and lead to healthier populations.

The present project analyzes the different Member States' (MS) HIS using a managerial approach in order to identify weaknesses and strengths as well as opportunities and threats. The specific objectives are to provide: a) a fully detailed organizational description in terms of structures, resources and processes of the different MS' HIS with particular reference to selected Surveillance Systems and Health Services Monitoring Systems; b) a comparative analysis with identification of major differences and similarities in the information systems; c) operative, feasible, sustainable recommendations for the implementation of the European Information System.

In order to understand how HIS works we studied how MS divide labor concerning HIS and how they coordinate different organizations and steps. The project concentrated on the regional and national levels. Each MS studied at least mortality and health determinants among Surveillance systems, and examined at least data transmission among HIS processes.

Strategy and tools used to analyze structures and processes included quantitative and qualitative methods. Organizational structures and networks were analyzed using organizational charts, i.e. diagrams graphically depicting authority and communication channels. Mandates, missions, functions, roles and strategies were studied by reviewing official documents, specific studies and legislations. A series of in-depth interviews with key informants, such as high officials (policy makers and top managers) and middle level officials (HIS managers, national and regional managers) were performed to examine coordination mechanisms and actual tasks carried out by each organization.

Results show that the design of HIS is frequently based just on technical considerations such as what data and information are needed by whom and too often ignores basic managerial principles. Symptoms of this problem are overlaps and gaps in activities, poor communication and conflict between organizations. Managerial root causes of these symptoms were identified in the following flaws:

- Mandates of organizations managing HIS are too vague and legislation sometimes emphasizes restricted access to databases instead of sharing data and knowledge among analysts,
- HIS related missions, visions and even strategic plans are frequently missing or lack focus, clear direction and alignment,
- Distribution of tasks among units responsible for data collection, analysis and diffusion is rather haphazard,
- Coordination mechanisms are too often absent or informal, therefore weak,
- Some key organizational processes are not designed as a whole, i.e. explicitly linking each step, and thus ignoring that their function is to serve customers, i.e. internal and external people that need relevant and timely data, information or knowledge.

Some countries have managed to confront such issues more effectively. In particular, two experiences can be considered as benchmarks, i.e. examples to be followed, by other EU countries: the Swedish HIS and the Irish HIS strategy.

A managerial perspective is crucial to a smooth functioning of any organization and system, including HIS. These are complex endeavors because deal with multiple dimensions of health status, determinants and services and are run by a set of organizations located at central, provincial and local level some of which are outside the health sector. Results of this analysis are of particular importance: first, they may help MS to improve HIS performance in terms of data, information and knowledge's timeliness, availability and usefulness; second, they can be used by the EU as an information tool in support of the development of an integrated European HIS.

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