How can CSOs support human resources for health?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO 2013), there is a worldwide shortage of 7.2 million healthcare workers – and that number will increase to 12.9 million by 2035. As a result, an alarming 83 countries do not meet the minimum standard of 23 skilled health professionals per 10,000 people (ibid). Community health workers (CHW) were once considered a short-term solution to fill this gap, but over time this short-term solution has become quite long-term and has introduced a number of challenges. This factsheet discusses how civil society organisations (CSO) can (1) support CHWs; and (2) support overall health workforce strengthening.

> **Who is a community health worker?**
> A CHW is a volunteer, a semi-skilled worker, or a paraprofessional who is chosen by their community to provide basic health and medical care in their home community. There are about 1.3 million CHWs worldwide.

The role of human resources in health system strengthening

Human resources are one of the six health system building blocks. Gaps in this area are greatly problematic as, according to WHO, "A strong human infrastructure is fundamental to closing today's gap between health promise and health reality, and anticipating the health challenges of the 21st century."

Major reasons for the health worker shortage are:

❑ Aging workforce – 40% of nurses will retire in the next decade
❑ Poor worker retention – low pay and demanding work make healthcare less attractive to new and current workers
❑ Migration of skilled workers to higher income countries
❑ Growing world population
❑ Increase in chronic illnesses
❑ Inadequate training facilities – of the 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 11 have no medical school and 24 have just one

How do we SYSTEMICALLY strengthen human resources for health?

Strategies are most appropriate when they are country and context-specific. In general, however, good strategies for strengthening the health workforce include:

✓ Strengthen political and technical leadership
✓ Improve the collection and use of reliable data
✓ Maximize the role of midlevel and community healthcare workers
✓ Create incentives to retain health workers
✓ Provide mechanisms for the voice, rights, and responsibilities of health workers while working toward universal health coverage

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What can CSOs do?

CSOs have many potential roles in addressing the health workforce shortage. Depending on your skills, assets, interests, priorities, mandate, and identified needs, your CSO platform may engage in:

1. **Policy advocacy**. Policy determines the degree of support that human resources for health receive at local, national, or international level, and therefore is a key element in the ability to provide essential health services. Health workforce policies that you may advocate around include the number, type, distribution, skills, resources, work environment, compensation, authority to provide services, duties under law, rights, and protections of the health workforce.

2. **Recruit, train, retain, and supervise CHWs**. The formal health system often needs support to ensure volunteers are effective, accountable, and motivated. Support to task shifting is a particularly efficient use of resources.

3. **Build partnerships**. Partnering with the private sector, faith-based service providers, and others can increase the numbers of workers and encourage better coordination and joint planning.

4. **Support health policy development and planning**. CSO networks share grassroots information with policy makers and suggest practical ways the health workforce can be strengthened. You can find human resource planning tools [here](#).

5. **Work with service providers to strengthen human resource management**. This management includes supervision, performance assessment, quality assurance, credentialing, and the creation of staffing ratios. Find practical guides [here](#).

How can you learn more?

There are many resources available to help CSOs strengthen the health workforce – and, in particular, the skills and accountability of volunteer CHWs. Check out the following free e-learning certification courses:

- ❑ [Introduction to Human Resources for Health](#)
- ❑ [Human Resources Information Systems (iHRIS) for users](#) and [administrators](#)
- ❑ [An Introduction to Monitoring and Evaluation of Human Resources for Health](#)
- ❑ [Foundations of Gender Equality in the Health Workforce](#)
- ❑ [Human Resource Management](#)
- ❑ [Designing Evidence-Based Incentives to Attract and Retain Health Workers Using the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit](#)

For more information

- ❑ [Human Resources for Health (online resource centre)](#)
- ❑ [Community Health System Strengthening resources (APC)](#)
- ❑ [A Universal Truth: No Health Without a Workforce (WHO, 2013)](#)
- ❑ [Health Workforce resource page (WHO)](#)
- ❑ [Community Health Workers: What do we know about them? (WHO)](#)

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