Community Health Worker Data for Decision-Making

In 2015, the One Million Community Health Workers (1mCHW) Campaign and mPowering Frontline Health Workers (mPowering) conducted a series of interviews and held an online discussion, hosted on the Healthcare Information for All forum, on the need for improved data on community health workers (CHWs) to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Here's what we learned from the experts.

Why CHWs?

Community health workers are essential and cost effective. They strengthen health systems in areas that otherwise would have limited or no access to health services. Data on CHWs is vital to guide the evaluation of programs and services. It can provide CHWs with the information they need to respond to communities' needs. CHWs are critical to deliver health services directly to communities, and to meet immediate health needs and achieve universal health coverage (UHC).

CHWs make an Impact
Discussion responses

1 CHWs deliver life-saving health care services that can address health issues in poor rural communities.

2 They help keep track of disease outbreaks and overall public health, and offer a vital link between underserved populations and the primary health care system.

3 CHWs have been recognized for their success in reducing morbidity and averting mortality in mothers, newborns, and children.

4 They have proven crucial in settings where the primary health care system is weak, and represent a key solution to health workforce shortages in Sub-Saharan Africa.

5 CHWs are most effective when properly supported and deployed within the context of an appropriately financed health system.

"Investment in national CHW databases is one important step for governments scaling their CHW programs. Such databases can inform policy making, promote more effective coordination and support global analysis of comparative data across countries, as well help chart global trends and progress over time."
Lesley-Anne Long
mPowering

"The top three pressing challenges in the scale-up of CHW programs are 1) data availability 2) alignment and integration of CHW programs with national health systems and 3) harmonizing partner support for CHW cadres."
Diana Frymus
USAID

"Most health centers do not keep a good record of community volunteers. This is where we can start to close the gaps in CHW data. If organizations and governments start streamlining data at the health center level, this data can then be reported to other levels of the health system."
Dr. William (Bill) Brieger
Jhpiego/ Johns Hopkins

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One Million Community Health Workers Campaign

mPOWERING
FRONTLINE HEALTH WORKERS

Why data?

It is estimated that approximately 7.2 million health workers are needed to provide essential health services world-wide.[1] It is imperative to incorporate CHWs into health systems, but there is a large gap in information on how many CHWs are working, what they do, and how they affect primary health care. The lack of data on CHWs inhibits governments' ability to integrate CHWs into the health system, constrains national decision-making within Ministries of Health, and makes it difficult to overcome the severe global shortages of health workers.

Improving CHW Data
Recommendations from the discussion

Define CHWs while recognizing the diversity of CHWs worldwide and successful aspects of various models.

Improve data to help countries and organizations understand the roles of CHWs, the impact they make, and the effectiveness of CHW programs.

Collect needed data on CHWs; and create a culture of data use where information is useful to both decision makers and health workers.

Build the evidence base on CHWs and community health; document successes and discuss failures.

Develop flexible curricula for CHWs, taking advantage of existing training resources and creative training delivery tools.

Equip CHWs with the knowledge, tools, and support that they need to do their jobs. Integrate CHWs in the health and professional systems through clear roles, competencies, and a career path.

Scale up CHW programs to areas of highest need. This will require focused, coordinated efforts from governments and donors in CHW training and retention; but also in strong and resilient health systems.

Use data to advocate for the contributions made by CHWs; to evaluate where they can make the biggest impact; and to understand the returns on the investments made in CHW programs.

Invest in health systems so that the basic and preventive care given by CHWs is amplified by a skilled, trained workforce to provide high-quality care.

1mCHW and mPowering

The One Million Community Health Workers Campaign works with governments and key stakeholders to develop road maps and action plans to support on-going efforts. mPowering is a multi sectoral partnership that accelerates the use of mobile technology to improve the skills and performance of frontline health workers.

1. Campbell J, Dussault G, Buchan J, Pozo-Martin F, Guerra Arias M, Leone C, Siyam A, Cometto G. A universal truth: no health without a workforce. Forum Report, Third Global Forum on Human Resources for Health, Recife, Brazil. Geneva, Global Health Workforce Alliance and World Health Organization, 2013.

Resources

Operations Room: Access, sort, and share data on CHWs

Healthcare Information For All (HIFA): Global organization on accessing healthcare information

ORB: Access freely available mHealth training materials for frontline health workers

A Commitment to Community Health Workers: Learn more about the case for a common definition of CHWs, and core tasks and competencies for the cadre

USAID Community Health Framework: Read about key questions, elements, and case studies for a strong community health system