

BetterHealthSystems

Strategies that Work

A series of briefs exploring the impact of Health Systems 20/20 worldwide

Building Vietnam's Capacity to Assess Its Health Systems

DECENTRALIZING THE HEALTH SECTOR

Over the past decade, Vietnam has made important achievements in both its economic and social sectors, including health. Compared to countries of a similar economic status, Vietnam is considered to have fairly good health outcomes. Life expectancy at birth, for example, has increased substantially. According to the World Bank, it was 60 years in 1980 and nearly 75 years in 2011. Similarly, the infant mortality rate dropped from 36.7 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 11.8 in 2008, and the under-five mortality rate fell from 42 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 13.6 in 2008.

Vietnam, however, faces two major challenges to maintaining these health system achievements: the burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases as well as regional disparities in health outcomes. To address these challenges, the government has implemented several national policies, including decentralization of the health sector. This policy has focused on devolving autonomy and accountability to provincial and district social service institutions, including health facilities, in terms of organization, rearrangement of administrative apparatus, and the use of human and financial resources. Another major initiative is the user-fee exemption policy for the poor, near poor, children under six years, and elderly over 85 years.



“We have conducted health system assessments in eight provinces, and made the instrument more relevant to the Vietnam context. This helped us to have strong evidence. With the HSA, we can provide evidence in a comprehensive way ... and now there is some action.”

Dr. Tran Thi Mai Oanh, Vice Director of Vietnam's Health Strategy and Policy Institute

Story page 3

STRENGTHENING THE HEALTH STRATEGY AND POLICY INSTITUTE'S CAPACITY

In 2008, Health Systems 20/20 partnered with the Health Strategy and Policy Institute (HSPI) to pilot a capacity-building approach for local ownership and institutionalization of USAID's Health System Assessment (HSA). The success of health systems strengthening activities depends on the capacity of organizations to strengthen the health system itself.

These organizations include research institutions, such as HSPI, that provide evidence for policy making and health system reform. Based in Hanoi, HSPI is a semi-autonomous organization under the Ministry of Health that conducts research to inform health policy development and also drafts policy legislation. HSPI employs 70 full-time staff and receives funding from international partners to conduct studies.

Several assessments of Vietnam's health system at the national level have been conducted, but the information proved too broad for use at the sub-national level. As a result, HSPI decided to test the HSA to determine if this tool could collect provincial-level data detailed enough to inform specific program planning, such as improving HIV/AIDS services at the local level.

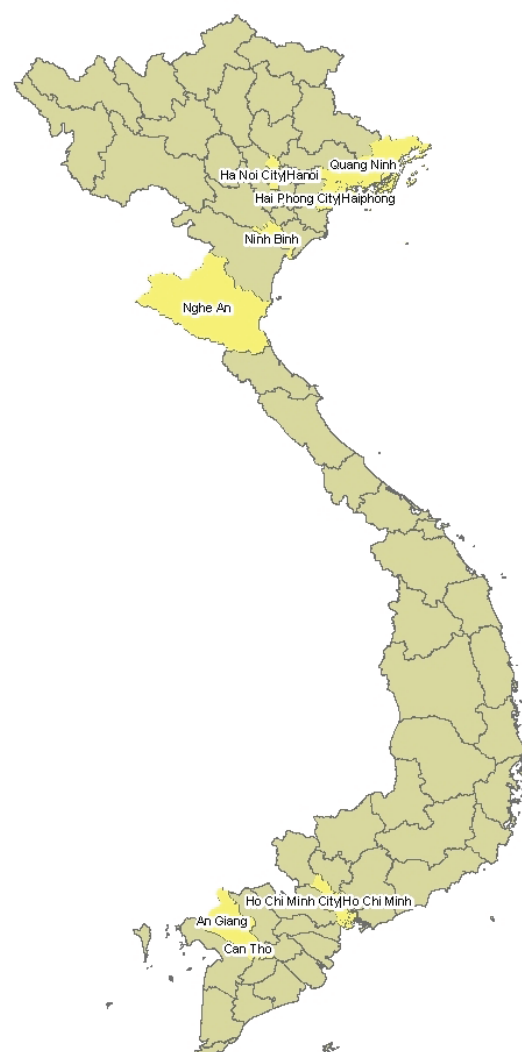
With Health Systems 20/20 assistance, HSPI revised the HSA tool for use at the provincial level. Together, we adapted the HSA to undertake a comprehensive review of the six major health systems building blocks – governance, financing, human resources, service delivery, pharmaceutical management, and health information systems – at the provincial level.

HSPI staff vetted the tool with a committee of local Ministry of Health officials. After ministry officials approved the new HSA, HSPI piloted the tool in Ninh Binh and Can Tho provinces with our oversight. This was the first HSA conducted by an all Vietnamese team. The activity built HSPI's capacity to carry out an HSA, including data analysis, interpretation of findings, and report writing. In 2009, HSPI conducted HSAs in six more provinces, and recently HSPI wrote a proposal to do HSAs in an additional 16 provinces.

As the HSA data collection expanded, HSPI's need for our technical assistance diminished. Today, HSPI is fully capable of conducting an HSA without any outside assistance, and is well placed to analyze the data, write excellent reports, and use the evidence to inform policy development. For HSPI to sustain its organizational capacity and not be dependent on donor funding, we also developed their capacity to mobilize resources. HSPI staff learned about market analysis, business planning, development of marketing materials, and proposal writing.

HSPI Has Conducted HSAs in Eight Provinces

The provinces were suggested by USAID Vietnam based on predetermined criteria. Half were urban centers – Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, Hai Phong, and Can Tho. The other four represent rural areas – Nghe An, Quang Ninh, An Giang, and Ninh Binh.



A LASTING IMPACT

HSPI's ability to independently assess local health systems is one of the lasting impacts of Health Systems 20/20's work in Vietnam. "HSPI researchers have built the capacity to influence policymakers. By using the HSA instrument, and making it relevant to the Vietnam context, we have a good monitoring tool for better management on an ongoing basis," says Dr. Oanh, HSPI's Vice Director.

In the eight provinces where HSPI has conducted HSAs, the findings reveal both strengths and weaknesses of the provincial health systems. This evidence has been used by health officials to prioritize recommendations, build on local capabilities, and improve equity in health service provision.

HSPI has also been able to influence health policy with this new evidence. Governance findings from the HSAs, for example, showed that health service quality could be improved by allowing civil society greater participation in policy formation. HSPI explained to the Ministry of Health the importance of including the citizen voice in its health policy meetings. As a result, the Ministry of Health now invites civil society organizations, such as professional associations, to all of its policy dialogue meetings.

The HSAs also showed that purchasing and provider payments were not aligned. Based on HSPI's recommendation, the Ministry of Health now provides a universal fee schedule for government health services. A new payment system is being piloted and should improve equity in payment for health services going forward.

HSPI's success in conducting HSAs and using the results to advance health policy shows the immense benefits that can arise from building the capacity of local institutions to evaluate and monitor their own health systems. Vietnam now has an institution capable of conducting an HSA at the subnational and national levels. Given HSPI's connection to the Ministry of Health and its ability to influence policy and health system reform, this capacity is especially valuable to strengthening Vietnam's health system.

From Evidence to Action

"From working with Health Systems 20/20, we can see that it has been very helpful for improving our capacity. We work with many donors, many development partners. The difference with Health Systems 20/20 is that we worked very closely ... together to explore our needs," says Dr. Tran Thi Mai Oanh, Vice Director of the Health Strategy and Policy Institute (HSPI) in Hanoi.

HSPI is a semi-autonomous organization under the Ministry of Health that conducts research to inform policy development. HSPI also drafts policy legislation. "We provide evidence for policy making, but evidence is limited in our country. Another big challenge is how to help the policymakers use our evidence," she says. HSPI now has the capacity to assess how well Vietnam's subnational health systems are performing – generating evidence that will help improve health services and delivery.

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Looking Ahead

In more than 50 countries, Health Systems 20/20 has partnered with governments and local organizations to build better health systems. We recognize that each country's story is unique. Our staff combines expertise and flexibility to craft solutions that strengthen individual health systems and eliminate barriers to the use of priority health services, such as for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, reproductive health, and maternal and child health care.

At this time of global economic uncertainty, health systems need to be even more efficient and, increasingly, must provide more services with fewer resources. To meet these challenges and build sustainability, Health Systems 20/20 collaborates with our partners to assess their health system, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and then choose the most effective strategies and tools to build a more effective health care delivery system.

Strengthening health systems is a process, not an outcome. Since 2006, Health Systems 20/20 has worked hand-in-hand with our partners to cultivate and grow the next generation of health leaders in their countries. While each country will progress at its own pace, depending on its health care needs, resources, and leadership, our goal remains the same everywhere – healthier men, women, and children.

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About the Better Health Systems: Strategies that Work Series

The Better Health Systems briefs explore Health Systems 20/20 strategies and tools, why they work, and how they contribute to better health systems. Collectively, the series will distill valuable lessons learned in an effort to share the project's wisdom with our partners and colleagues. For more information, please visit www.healthsystems2020.org.

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About Health Systems 20/20

Health Systems 20/20 is USAID's flagship project for strengthening health systems worldwide. By supporting countries to improve their health financing, governance, operations, and institutional capacities, Health Systems 20/20 helps eliminate barriers to the delivery and use of priority health care, such as HIV/AIDS services, tuberculosis treatment, reproductive health services, and maternal and child health care.

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