

Systems Strengthening Working Group Update

Alan Bornbusch, USAID, Coalition Membership Meeting, May 23, 2008

The SSWG focuses on

> information systems to strengthen the use of standardized data to align financing and supply systems with programme needs;

> financing systems to increase the predictability and efficiency of financing, in particular public financing, for RH supplies and supply systems; and

> supply systems to effectively and efficiently manage products, from the manufacturer to user

Most of the SSWG's work aligns with the second goal of the Coalition's strategic plan. Some of the WG's work helps to achieve the first goal, and, like all the WGs, we contribute to the third goal.

Here are some examples of what the SSWG has been doing and latest developments in certain work streams. These are only some examples, not a comprehensive list of all the SSWG's activities.

In the area of information systems, the RHInterchange (RHI) is the major focus of the SSWG's work. This is a website of contraceptive ordering and shipment information. A subgroup of the SSWG serves as the RHI's management group. The management group met earlier this week to plan the next phase of the RHI. The second phase will end in August 2009, and the management group is planning for the third 3-5 year phase. The planning includes how to finance the RHI, what should be the RHI's priorities in a third phase, and the transition of the RHI from JSI to UNFPA/Copenhagen as the next operator/host.

The RHI is a tangible outcome of what the Coalition can achieve and offer to the public when we successfully coordinate, collaborate, and harmonize. You can see and use the RHI at <http://rhi.rhsupplies.org>. The first phase of an ongoing review of the RHI endorsed the RHI's value and public good that the tool is providing. The review showed

how flexible the RHI is in addressing the needs of diverse communities: supply chain managers, the advocacy community, researchers, manufacturers. The second phase of the review is ongoing and will consider how the RHI is meeting the needs of country stakeholders. The results will be available later this summer.

As a result of recent data expansion, the RHI now covers 15 funding sources and 140 countries. It provides information on all USAID, UNFPA, and IPPF funding for contraceptive shipments. An additional 12 funding sources, including the World Bank and country ministries who use UNFPA as a third-party procurer, are also included in the RHI. We are looking forward to a further data expansion in the current phase of the RHI. The RHI team provides customized reports upon request and has done this for over 30 countries, e.g., on trends and current supplies of long-acting contraceptive methods. These requests have come from different stakeholders, including the advocacy and research communities. Users of the RHI are worldwide: Ethiopia, Ghana, Brussels, Washington, DC, etc. If you need to know how much of any contraceptive is being procured by IPPF, USAID, UNFPA, etc. you can find this information easily on the RHI. More information, brochures, navigation instructions, etc. are available from Mimi Whitehouse, Jane Feinberg, and Carolyn Hart.

The work of the SSWG on financing falls into two areas and is mostly about public financing. One work stream is about mobilizing the “more money” that is needed in a number of countries to finance RH supplies. Another work stream – the “better money work stream – focuses on how to make more efficient use of the resources that are available. You will hear more about the “better money” work later today in a presentation on the Minimum Volume Guarantee and Pledge Guarantee (MVG/PG) mechanisms. The SSWG is also engaged as an informal advisory group for work that is being financed by KfW to identify the feasibility of a regional financing mechanism for RH supplies in West Africa.

Another area that we work in to improve the efficiency of how public financing is used addresses emergency needs. A lot of the work of the Coalition and SSWG is to create stable, sustainable systems. However, there is always the potential that something can and will go wrong to interrupt supply availability. There is a need to manage risk

situations and provide some kind of “fire fighting” response. The Countries at Risk group (or CAR) is a subset of the SSWG that meets monthly by teleconference to share information about what we know about the stock status in different country programmes, and where there might be a programme that is at risk of shortages or experiencing a stock out. The CAR uses the information that it has to develop a coordinated response to each situation. If, for example, it is a bureaucratic paperwork issue, perhaps someone who has a presence in the country can work with the Ministry of Finance or Health to “unstick” the paperwork. Or, perhaps there is a need for an emergency shipment by a CAR member, as was the case earlier this year in Bangladesh. The CAR has proved itself to be another good example of how the Coalition can facilitate more joint, coordinated efforts for RH commodity security. The CAR improves the visibility that we have into country programmes, and uses that visibility to help members of the Coalition take actions to prevent stockouts. On the Coalition website (http://www.rhsupplies.org/about_us/who_we_are/systems_strengthening_working_group/countries_at_risk.html), people can put in a request to ask for assistance from the CAR. There is an annual report on CAR that I can share with those people that are interested.

In the third area of the SSWG’s work plan, strengthening supply systems, one activity has been to commission a review of six software packages that have been separately developed with USAID and UNFPA funds to support the management of RH supplies. The genesis of this work came from UNFPA voicing a concern that this proliferation of software has produced confusion among supply chain managers and technical assistance providers as to what software to use for what supply chain function. A consultant team from the University of Maryland used several methods to review the six software. They found that the different software do not overlap much, and collectively approximate end to end support for supply chain functions, although there are gaps. Most critically, there is limited or no inter-operability among the software. Whereas supply chains need to operate seamlessly, there are seams between the different software. Users complain about the need to enter and re-enter data multiple times for different software. This can be a real “killer” for supply chains and introduce errors and inefficiencies. The consultants also found that as IT systems improve in countries, we need to better

anticipate and leverage these advances to provide more real-time visibility up and down the supply chain, which is also essential for effective and efficient supply chains. Altogether, there is a need to look at the “legacy” that we have created with these software and ask how we can make incremental steps towards more state-of-the-art software support for supply chain management. The current work will produce a user’s guide for the six software that will help users, technical assistance providers, etc., to know which software does what and where there are gaps. There will also be an internal document outlining existing deficiencies and possible next steps to address them. What is needed is a “game changing” approach to how we jointly work for future software development. We have created a fragmented legacy of separate software by working separately. Now we have an opportunity to fix this by working with a vision guided more by collaboration. The Coalition can be the facilitative forum for this that we did not have a few short years ago. There is an expressed political will to change how we approach software development. This will be tested in the coming months as we try to build a collaborative software development group.

Other work streams within the SSWG address prequalification, procurement strengthening, and essential medicines lists. Regarding the WHO prequalification programme in particular, since it has been mentioned in previous presentations, we do not see the programme as a so-called barrier to market entry. We look at it as a necessity. We focus on systems, of which prequalification is one, that need to be of the highest standards and sustained in order to ensure that markets are providing safe and effective products, whether public or private. We focus not as much on strengthening the capacities of manufacturers to be prequalified; we see that as more for the Market Development Approaches (MDA) group to address. We focus more on the standards expressed by prequalification and on how to sustain the prequalification “system.”

Lastly, a few words about how the SSWG works. We work in a decentralized manner, with a coordinator. The engines of the WG are the work streams, each of which have its own members and work stream leader. Work stream leaders are:

RHI – Mimi Whitehouse, Jane Feinberg

MVG/PG – Sangeeta Raja
West Africa – Sandra Rolet
CAR – Kevin Pilz
Software review – Alan Bornbusch, Jagdish Upadhyay
Procurement strengthening/prequalification/essential medicines –
David Smith

In yesterday's breakout with an expanded membership, we brainstormed about how to strengthen current and add new work streams. Some ideas for new work streams include:

- standardizing how we talk about and do forecasting, quantification, procurement planning. There needs to be public consensus on defining terms that are being used too loosely and how you do good forecasting, good procurement planning, etc.
- professionalization of public health logisticians. There is widespread concern that logisticians are undervalued in many countries. We can look at promoting more professionalization through developing and raising awareness of training programmes, certification programmes, etc.
- role of the private sector in supply chains. Where does the private sector have a role to contribute to more effective and efficient supply chains?

Finally, there are other initiatives, in addition to the Coalition, that address issues of access to medicines and health systems strengthening. The Coalition and SSWG might consider how they can dovetail with these initiatives/agendas – coordinating with them, ensuring that RH supplies are part of their agendas, etc.

With this meeting, I step down as coordinator, having been coordinator of the SSWG for its first three years. All the credit for everything that I have talked about here and more goes to the SSWG and the people who make the work streams happen. David Smith of UNFPA/Copenhagen will be the next SSWG coordinator.

Thank you.

