

UNDP INFORMATION NOTE

Strengthening systems for health: Considerations for capacity assessments

A capacity assessment is a participatory process that should consider the needs of a health programme or system as a whole, and where possible should look at all sectors and actors implementing complementary activities. In addition to supporting ministries of health, the assessment may address the capacity needs of national AIDS councils, health procurement bodies, health governance mechanisms, NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in the implementation of health programmes. The capacity assessment report provides the basis for defining a draft capacity development plan.

Aligning priorities with national strategic plans

The capacity development assessment should align with the priorities of the existing national health strategy and disease-specific plan(s). Countries should assess what capacity gaps the health system has which will prevent it from achieving the goals of the national strategic plan. The resulting capacity development plan should outline how the investment will help resolve problems and lead to better delivery of services.

To identify what is required for strengthening key focus areas vital to the health system, the assessment should address:

- What additional capacity is needed in the health system to scale up and improve quality and sustainability of services?
- What additional capacity is needed to reach and implement services targeting key affected and underserved populations?
- What current capacity-development activities are being funded and implemented in the country?

Additional points to be considered when conducting a capacity assessment include:

- **Consider an alternative term for “assessment.”** The term assessment often suggests an appraisal by an outside group to analyse risk; even though a capacity assessment is meant to be inclusive and owned by the organization being assessed. An alternate word to describe the capacity assessment (diagnosis, self-check, etc.) should be considered if this negative connotation exists.

Capacity assessments versus risk assessments

Capacity development is a way to manage risk, and capacity assessment exercises are often equated with risk assessments, as they both identify areas that need to be addressed. While the objectives are similar, they are not identical. The objective of a capacity assessment (led by the organization itself) is to find areas in need of strengthening; while the objective of a risk assessment (usually led by an external organization) is to focus on the financial interests of this external organization to identify the risks and put mitigating measures in place. This difference should be clearly understood by all stakeholders, as when a capacity assessment is being facilitated by an external group the target organization may perceive it as a risk assessment. Capacity development efforts can be used to manage risk but, more critically, to ensure longer-term systems strengthening and sustainability.

- **Use the term “need” instead of “gap” or “weakness.”** The term “capacity gap” may sound negative; therefore it is worth considering using “capacity need”, which sounds more positive.
- **Focus on capacity strengths as well as weaknesses.** Besides offering a more balanced and less threatening viewpoint, it is important to acknowledge an organization’s achievements.
- **Carry out a facilitated assessment or a self-assessment.** A decision about who will conduct the assessment is important. A self- assessment is appropriate when skills are available; an external or facilitated assessment may be necessary if skills are unavailable or may help to offer an independent perspective.
- **Rapid or in-depth assessment?** A capacity assessment should not become a major exercise. A “rapid assessment” approach might be considered when the focus of the assessment is very clear, or when there are constraints in terms of time. It is important to consider the results required, the time available and plan accordingly. However, it is important to still invest in stakeholder engagement at all stages to ensure national ownership.

Refer to the UNDP Capacity Development for Health Toolkit section on [“Conducting the Capacity Assessment”](#) for more information.