Addressing Unemployment and Ethical Externalization of Health Workforce in Uganda

A policy brief on the paradoxical dual challenge in Uganda of rising unemployment among health workers and the need to manage the externalization (migration) of excess health workforce.



Africa needs a skilled motivated health workforce

Introduction

Uganda is grappling with a dual challenge: rising unemployment among health workers and the need to manage the externalization (migration) of excess health workforce in line with ethical standards outlined in the WHO Code on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel. This policy brief outlines strategic actions to tackle unemployment locally while considering opportunities and challenges associated with health workforce migration.

Current Challenges

The National Policy Dialogue 27–28 June, 2024, convened by WHO and the MOH on the health workforce situation in Uganda highlighted a significant issue; namely that despite increasing numbers graduating from training institutions, shortages persist, many health workers face unemployment, leading to the underutilization of valuable skills and contributing to brain drain as skilled professionals seek opportunities abroad.

The main challenge for the Government is closely tied to the dwindling fiscal space, with a substantial portion of the national budget allocated to servicing the debt burden. This financial constraint complicates the identification of investment priorities, which should be guided not only by economic benefits but also by the moral imperative to sustain essential social services such as health, education, gender equality, labor, and social development.

It was reported that despite recent enhancements of the salaries of health workers, there has been little improvement in their commitment to their work, particularly among senior-level health professionals. This has sparked a general public outcry regarding the quality of service delivery, particularly in public health facilities. Addressing this issue requires increased focus on support supervision and motivation of health workers across all levels. Moreover, engaging senior professionals in the governance and management of service delivery could enhance accountability and effectiveness in the sector.

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In a nutshell, addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes sustainable investment in the health workforce, prudent fiscal management to safeguard social services, and effective governance structures to ensure quality service delivery in Uganda's health sector.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Strategic Workforce Planning and Local Employment:** It is strongly proposd that government conducts a comprehensive assessment to align health workforce production with actual needs. Such assessment should lead to the development of a national health workforce plan that ensures geographic distribution and specialized skills. At the moment there is skewed distribution of highly skilled health workforce in the cities and urban areas. In addition, there is a need to strengthen partnerships between the Ministry of Health, training institutions, and healthcare providers to create pathways for local employment. It is also proposed that hiring be incentivized through subsidies and infrastructure improvements.
2. **Promoting Entrepreneurship and Innovation:** Government should explore the possibility of supporting some cadres of health workers to establish private practices or healthcare-related businesses through training and financial assistance. Furthermore, Government should encourage innovation in healthcare delivery to create new job opportunities, particularly in underserved areas
3. **Improving Service Delivery and Utilization:** To enhance Service Delivery and Utilisation, it is crucial to promptly assign unemployed health workers to underserved rural and remote communities. This should be facilitated through government-managed placement programs. Additionally, integrating telemedicine and mobile health initiatives could maximize their expertise in providing healthcare services effectively.

Externalization under Ethical Standards:

During the national dialogue on Uganda's health workforce situation, there was a discussion on the externalization (migration) of the workforce, but consensus on the way forward was not reached. To explore policy options further, we outline here the benefits and challenges that require careful consideration.

Benefits:

1. **Economic Advantages:** Externalization allows health workers to send remittances home,T thus stimulating local economies. It may also provide opportunities for professional growth through exposure to advanced medical practices abroad.
2. **Global Knowledge Exchange:** Externalization provides opportunity for participation in global health initiatives, which enables health workers to bring back valuable knowledge and skills to enhance local healthcare delivery.
3. **Temporary Relief of Unemployment:** Above all, migration of health workers can temporarily alleviate local unemployment pressures within the health sector.

Challenges:

1. **Brain Drain Concerns:** Migration may exacerbate health worker shortages in rural and underserved areas, weakening local health systems.
2. **Ethical and Legal Issues:** There is always the inherent challenge of adhering to ethical recruitment practices outlined in the WHO Code which is essential to prevent exploitation and ensure adequate support for migrant health workers.
3. **Dependency Risks:** There is a risk of economic dependency on remittances if migration becomes a primary economic strategy.
4. **Implementation Challenges:** If the government chooses to institutionalize the externalization of the health workforce, it's crucial to consider the following implementation challenges that may arise.
    i. **Regulation and Monitoring:** Effective regulation of recruitment agencies and monitoring of working conditions abroad are crucial to protect migrant health workers.
    ii. **Policy Coordination:** Coordination between sending and receiving countries is critical to manage migration flows and ensure mutual benefits.

Conclusion

Addressing unemployment among health workers in Uganda requires a coordinated intersectoral approach integrating local employment strategies with ethical management of health workforce migration. By implementing these recommendations and adhering to the WHO Code, Uganda can optimize its health workforce, improve healthcare delivery, and mitigate the challenges associated with migration.

Policy Recommendations for Action:

i. Develop and implement policies that promote ethical recruitment practices as per the WHO Code.
ii. Strengthen monitoring and regulation of recruitment agencies and working conditions abroad.
iii. Foster partnerships with receiving countries to ensure mutual benefit and facilitate return migration of skilled health workers.

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