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Health worker shortages, a government's failure to be accountable

Councils' Human Resources Officers and President's Office for Public Services Management (PoPSM) officials should look to their laurels by addressing council specific medical staff shortages that compromise quality and quantity of healthcare service delivery. They should closely collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW) and Prime Minister's Office Regional Administration and Local Governments (PMORALG) to employ new health workers as per annual Councils' requests.

Following a recent visit to Temeke Hospital by the Minister for Health and Social Welfare, poor quality of health service delivery at the hospital and critical Staff shortages were discovered. While the MoHSW officials laid blame to the Municipal Director for not requesting enough health workers, media reports quoted Temeke Municipal Director, Steven Kongwa saying that in the fiscal year 2009/10, they requested for 250 health workers but only 20 were provided.

Following these contradictory reports, Sikika, a nongovernmental organization working to stimulate governance in the health sector, did analysis of human resource planning by looking at annual health plans for 32 councils IN Tanzania. This was followed up by anonymous interviews with few officials from various levels of government. Our findings indicate that various forms of problems lie at different levels of government.

First, Council health departments do not produce quality and realistic annual plans hence the central government is misguided about nature and magnitude of various problems at Council level. Most plans are "cut-and-paste" of previous year plans. Data and statistics are not usually updated annually and contain a number of arithmetic errors. As for Temeke Municipal, there is no evidence of formal request of 250 health workers. This number is only mentioned in their 2009/2010 annual health plan, which is not usually submitted to PoPSM.

Second, even if arithmetic were accurate, Councils' Human Resources Officers do not usually submit to the PoPSM actual annual human resource for health requests as planned. Mandate of granting employment permit is with the PoPSM. Third, even if actual annual requests are submitted to PoPSM, number of employment permit will only be given by the PoPSM, following unclear criteria.

PMORALG and MoHSW could assist councils to negotiate for enough employment permits at PoPSM. In fact, both ministries have Departments of Administration and Personnel with competent staff who are familiar with government employment policies and procedures. It is a joint mandate of both PMORALG and MoHSW to ensure quality healthcare delivery at council level.

Sikika reminds all responsible officials that health workers are an important element in the healthcare delivery system and their shortage compromises quality and quantity of healthcare services offered to citizens. PoPSM in particular is most responsible in this while PMORALG and MoHSW should offer the best cooperation. Quality and accurate planning at district level is a pre-requisite and Human Resource Officers at each council should play their role.

Failure to put in place adequate and qualified health workers at all levels of health care delivery is failure in the delivery of services hence failure of the government to be accountable to its citizens.

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