

IHRIS RETAIN: A TOOL TO COST RETENTION STRATEGIES

BACKGROUND

Skilled and motivated health workers in sufficient numbers in the right place and at the right time are critical to deliver effective health services and improve health outcomes. However, although almost one half of the global population lives in rural areas, they are served by only 38% of the total nursing workforce and by less than a quarter of the total physician workforce. As these statistics illustrate, health worker retention in remote and rural areas is a serious impediment to achieving access to quality health services. The 2010 WHO global policy recommendations on rural retention suggest that to motivate health workers to serve in hard-to-reach areas, health service organizations must implement a package of well-selected retention interventions.

THE CHALLENGE: DETERMINING AFFORDABLE RETENTION STRATEGIES

While country stakeholders recognize the need to address health worker retention, health sector budgets in developing countries are limited. Which retention strategies should be pursued? And, more importantly from the feasibility standpoint, how much they will cost? Faced with multiple priorities within the health sector and constrained resources, policy-makers want to know upfront what a retention strategy will cost in order to weigh its potential for cost-effectiveness, results, affordability, and sustainability.

Historically, most costing exercises have required a high level of expertise and have often relied on external technical assistance from international health economists, which can be expensive.

A SOLUTION: THE IHRIS RETAIN TOOL

In collaboration with the WHO, CapacityPlus developed an open source software tool to cost health worker retention strategies at the district, regional, or national level. The resulting cost figures are useful to country stakeholders to determine the feasibility of various combinations of retention interventions within the available fiscal space and to budget for the implementation of a broader retention strategy.

iHRIS Retain (<http://retain.ihris.org/retain/>) is designed so that human resources for health (HRH) managers can take advantage of the tool—perhaps with some limited assistance from a local financial expert—and understand and use the results.

The newest addition to the iHRIS suite of health workforce planning tools, iHRIS Retain is structured around the WHO policy recommendations to increase access to health workers in rural and remote areas through improved retention. The software guides the user through the costing process step by step to capture all relevant financial, operational, and health worker cadre data. Based on the inputs entered for each activity, iHRIS Retain calculates costs and

generates disaggregated financial reports for each retention intervention package and targeted cadre, as well as the aggregated cost of a retention strategy, and compares it to available health sector funds. iHRIS Retain users have the flexibility to review and compare costs for any number of different scenarios and combination of interventions to find the most feasible options. These results can then be presented to stakeholders for discussion and evidence-based decisions regarding retention strategies based on economic feasibility.

BENEFITS

iHRIS Retain is intended to eliminate some of the mystery of health economics by placing a powerful costing tool in the hands of HRH managers. It is likely to yield results on par with a traditional costing exercise at less cost, without the need for extensive external assistance from international health economists. The software provides the flexibility of inputting different options for retention interventions and targeted cadres to obtain the most accurate financial scenarios for decision-making.

With its focus on self-reliance, the retention costing tool promotes country ownership by reducing reliance on international technical assistance, increasing self-sufficiency of host country counterparts in making and acting on health workforce decisions, and empowering stakeholders to implement economically affordable retention strategies.

COMBINING TOOLS FOR MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

iHRIS Retain can be combined with another CapacityPlus tool, the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit: Designing Evidence-Based Incentives for Health Workers (<http://www.capacityplus.org/rapid-retention-survey-toolkit>), which is based on the discrete choice experiment (DCE) methodology. The DCE is a powerful, quantitative method to determine the importance health workers place on different employment options and to predict health workers' job preferences. CapacityPlus has operationalized the DCE methodology through a step-by-step retention survey tool that quickly allows HRH managers to determine health workers' motivational preferences to take up posts and remain in rural and remote facilities. While many viable retention packages are revealed through using the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit, iHRIS Retain can compare the costs of various combinations of retention packages to determine the most financially feasible options. When the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit and iHRIS Retain are used together, the result is an affordable, cost-effective retention strategy designed for specific country contexts.