

THE WHO STRATEGIC APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND RESEARCH

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Decision-makers and programme managers face questions about how to put into practice the ideals of the Millennium Development Goals, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and other global summits of the last decade. They ask, "How can we:

- Improve access to and the quality of family planning and other reproductive health services?
- Increase skilled attendance at birth and strengthen referral systems?
- Reduce the recourse to abortion and improve the quality of existing care?
- Provide information and services that respond to young people's needs?
- Integrate the prevention and treatment of reproductive tract infections, including HIV/AIDS, with other reproductive health services?"

Although initially field-tested in 1993 as a systematic approach to contraceptive introduction, it has been adapted for a range of reproductive health issues. Thirty countries have used the WHO Strategic Approach to Strengthening Reproductive Health Policies and Programmes to help answer questions such as these. Eight countries have used it a second time, focusing on different problems.

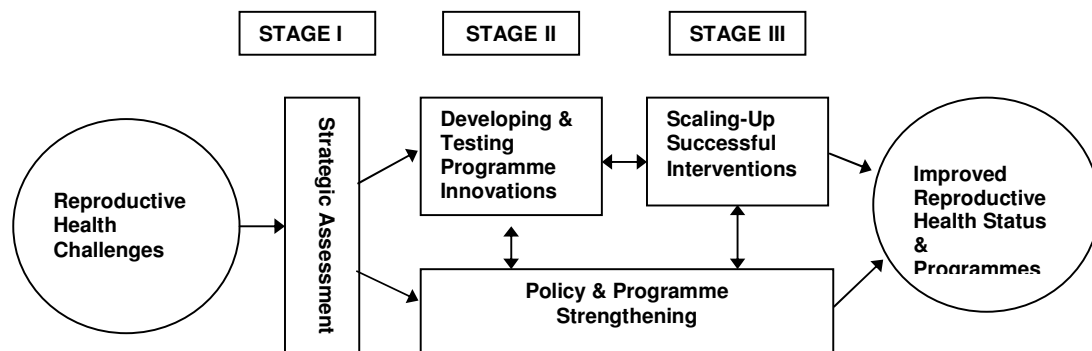
The Strategic Approach unites concepts and practices from public health, the social and management sciences with the principles of the ICPD in its essential features:

- **A staged implementation process** that links assessment, pilot-testing, and scaling-up.
- **A systems framework** to highlight the relevant factors for decision-making about appropriate services.
- **A reproductive health philosophy** of sexual and reproductive rights, gender equity and empowerment.
- **A focus on improving equitable access and quality of care** so that services are client-centred and responsive to community needs.
- **A participatory process**, to consider the concerns of all relevant stakeholders.
- **Country ownership** of the process and the results.

A Three-Stage Process for Strengthening Policies and Programmes

The Strategic Approach starts with the end in mind—stronger institutions for large-scale, sustainable services and effective policy that will lead to improved access and quality of care. Implementation of the approach has three stages: 1) a strategic assessment to identify needs and priorities; 2) testing of health service innovations on a limited scale; and 3) scaling-up so the benefits of proven innovations reach more people. The incremental process seeks to ensure that strategic decisions and subsequent investments in programmes are made based on evidence of local effectiveness and the input of stakeholders.

Figure 1. The Strategic Approach Implementation Process



The first stage is a **strategic assessment** to examine the current situation and alternative approaches to resolving an issue. After gathering and analysing existing information, a multidisciplinary participatory team, which includes senior decision-makers, conducts fieldwork. New data are gathered using a predominantly qualitative approach involving interviews and observations. Consultation with stakeholders throughout the process helps lead to consensus on recommendations for new or revised policies and improvements in service delivery, programme management and community-level interventions.

In the next stage, the recommended health service innovations—new or modified technologies, services, or practices—are developed or adapted and **pilot-tested** on a limited scale at different levels in the health system. Innovations often include processes for enhancing community participation; tools, guidelines, and protocols; training materials and

educational approaches; organisational development activities; and policy implementation. Evaluation, using qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, is essential to determine if implementing the innovations is feasible, acceptable, effective and sustainable in the particular context, and if the interventions do, in fact, improve access and quality of care.

After research has identified what works in light of existing opportunities and constraints, a strategy to gradually **scale-up** proven interventions is developed. Successful scaling-up requires guidance from a resource team or organization to ensure that essential features of the innovations remain intact as they are expanded to new areas. Substantial attention is given to establishing the policy, technical, programmatic and managerial capacities essential for success. Ongoing sharing of results, advocacy and community mobilization processes reinforce programme and policy expansion. The nature and pace of the scaling-up strategy varies according to the characteristics of the health sector and the broader political and social environment, including changes in leadership, and shifting national priorities.

Principles Guiding the Strategic Approach

A Systems Framework

The Strategic Approach uses a systems framework to call attention to the many critical factors that affect actions to improve reproductive health. The ability of a new technology or service to improve access and quality of care should be evaluated in the context of an overall health system. Attention to the dynamic inter-relationships among the elements of the framework guides decision-making throughout all three stages of the approach.

Figure 2. Systems Framework Guiding the Strategic Approach



A Reproductive Health Philosophy

The Strategic Approach views putting into practice respect for the universal ethical principles of human rights, individual freedom and dignity as a vital responsibility of the health system. It embraces the values of sexual and reproductive rights, gender equity and empowerment of women set out by ICPD and other international summits. Not only do women bear by far the greatest burden of reproductive health problems, but also that many of these problems arise from persistent gender inequalities.

Focus on Equitable Access and Quality

The Strategic Approach addresses both the quality of the care provided to and received by people, and the enabling factors that facilitate equitable access to good quality services. Interventions to achieve these include training, supervision and management activities to upgrade provider technical competencies; improved logistics and referral systems and enactment of new policies regarding resource allocation.

A Participatory Process

The Strategic Approach relies on learning from a wide range of stakeholders. It fosters consideration of the views and needs of programme managers, service providers and community members as well as policy-makers, researchers, technical experts and women's, youth and community groups and helps build consensus among them, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustainable policies and programmes.

Country Ownership

The Strategic Approach places decision-making in the hands of national participants. A country-led team establishes the reproductive health policy and programme agenda that directs the process. Technical and donor agencies play partnership roles, providing guidance, support, and facilitation.