Interagency Supply Chain Group

Strengthening Interagency Collaboration: Lessons Learned from Six Countries

About the ISG

The broad purpose of the Interagency Supply Chain Group (ISG) is to share information and seek greater alignment across supply-chain investments to bring more impact to individual agency supply chain strategies. The group promotes coordination both globally across programs, and locally through national leadership -with the overall aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of in-country supply chains.

The ISG is a partnership of 15 major actors involved in providing supply chain support to countries: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, DFID, Global Affairs Canada, the Global Drug Facility, KfW, the Global Fund, Gavi, NORAD, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, USAID, World Bank, WFP and WHO.

Lab technician Abrho Hagos summons patients at Korem Hospital in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in August 2013. ©UNICEF/Ose

Recognizing that the Sustainable Development Goals will depend on a clear vision and collaborative implementation around medicines supply chains, a review to further examine factors that could further the quality and impact of agency collaboration in supply chains for essential medicines, was undertaken by the Interagency Supply Group in 2016.

Over the past decades, efforts to strengthen medicines supply chains have yielded many positive results. Notable successes are the number of HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, immunization and family planning products that now reach the people who need them. What has remained elusive is a clear and unified vision of how medicines supply chains will support the needs of increasing populations and new medicines.

Low-and middle-income countries have an additional vulnerability to major shocks to consider, for example, the unprecedented impact of Ebola and the paralyzing effect of foreign currency fluctuations. Supporting agencies, UN Members States, donor agencies and civil society have contributed to progress.

Unintentionally, they have also contributed to the development of duplicative and competing systems which block advancement towards unified centers of excellence.

The approach to review interagency collaboration in medicines supply chain examined the subject in the context of current literature and evidence in effective collaboration. As such, it did not focus on the technical bottlenecks and responses to strengthen supply-chains, which are already addressed through numerous other assessments and reviews. This review was conducted in 6 countries (Ethiopia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia), and included both quantitative and qualitative data gathering.

There is a very real and positive trend towards greater integration of supply chains, with governments and partners moving away from fragmented and parallel supply chain models. There is still a long way to go, however, and the review confirmed that a more proactive and purposeful approach is required to address the collaborative relationships among the supply chain partners, with soft factors such as trust, leadership, transparency, etc. playing an important role.

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Key findings of the country review

- The **political economy of supply-chain** reality is often not factored into planning in donor supply chain investment cases. Agencies were perceived to focus on technical solutions but which lack necessary attention to the socio-economic and political ecosystem, in particular with regards to people and processes.
- Where coordination is working well, it is associated with **strong leadership** by the Government with a strategic vision and corresponding support from agencies. Conversely, when leadership is perceived as weak, **power balance, competition and positioning** exist to work against effective collaboration.
- **Innovations are encouraged,** but the potential can be hindered by fragmentation in implementation. **The relative importance of priorities** of what the major supply chain issues are, as understood between development agencies and Government, are not always aligned.
- There is **a lack of effective supply chain coordination platforms** in many countries or **a lack of leadership** amongst agencies in country to make this happen.
- **The complexity of government** and its own structures have also made the coordinating environment for development agencies less clear. At times, it is not very clear who the reporting lines of authority and decision making are, which leads to agencies working in silos.

Assan Traore 26 buys some medicine for her child in a pharmacy in Mopti, Mali, in March 2012.©UNICEF/Dicko

The sheer increase in volume of products and the increasing numbers of actors in the supply chain space, requires a concerted, and coordinated approach to achieving effective collaboration that builds and synergizes the investments towards a common goal.

However, the findings in the six countries show that while there has been significant progress made with many countries working towards integrated systems, increased use of technology, and increase financing to support the supply chain operations; the end goal of improving availability at the health facilities is still elusive.

The ISG partners are committed to working with all stakeholders to support these recommendations:

1. **Establish (or strengthen) country supply chain coordination platforms** to facilitate strengthening weak inter-programmatic coordination, transparency and trust and the disconnect between the vision and orientation of various stakeholders. Map agency investments at country level (in a work plan), document and share best practices for country coordination.
2. **Develop business plans and investment cases around supply chain management in countries they invest in.** All stakeholders must commit to working towards a common country-led strategy. This must be developed under the government leadership.
3. **Improve transparency and invest in building trust.** Transparency is the role of each of the institutions involved. Institutional leadership is critical in setting the tone for transparency and accountability. It is important to recognize that turf issues are likely to occur and cannot be ignored.
4. **Manage innovation.** Introducing innovation should be pro-actively managed by the coordination platform so that it is very clear to all stakeholders what added value the innovation might bring, how it links to existing systems, and what the pathway would be for potential scale-up.
5. **Encourage joint funding or pooled financing.** In cases where pooled funding and co-financing is not feasible, given the context, at a minimum greater flexibility is required from development agencies to allow in-country counterparts to seize the opportunity for greater integration and collaboration.
6. **Focus on results with the broader strategic framework.** The focus on results, while a simple concept, requires fostering a more in-depth, complex and nuanced policy dialogue that takes into account the financial investments required for meeting the results.
7. **Improve the global and country link.** Improving the link between the global and country requires a reframing of the reason for collaboration from knowledge-sharing and networking to increasing the synergy and impact at the country level.