

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING OF AFENET: SUMMARY OF HEALTH SYSTEMS 20/20 ASSISTANCE YEAR I



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Mission

The Health Systems 20/20 cooperative agreement, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for the period 2006-2011, helps USAID-supported countries address health system barriers to the use of life-saving priority health services. Health Systems 20/20 works to strengthen health systems through integrated approaches to improving financing, governance, and operations, and building sustainable capacity of local institutions.

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DISCLAIMER

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the United States Government.

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ACRONYMS

AFENET	African Field Epidemiology Network
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
FETP	Field Epidemiology Training Program
FELTP	Field Epidemiology Laboratory Training Program
IT	Information Technology
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VPN	Virtual Private Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the first year of an activity to strengthen the African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET). Established in 2005, AFENET's objectives are to strengthen capacity in field epidemiology and laboratory training and practice, promote and support research activities, engage in advocacy, mobilize resources, and link public health professionals to organizations that address health problems that require expertise in field epidemiology. AFENET's founding members are four schools of public health in Africa. These members have since been joined by other organizations in sub-Saharan Africa with field epidemiology training programs (FETP), and ministries of health that are in the process of developing their own FETP or Field Epidemiology Laboratory Training Programs (FELTP).

Based in Kampala, Uganda, AFENET is a non-profit organization and is run by a six-person Secretariat consisting of the executive director, programme manager, two programme officers, administrative officer, and information technology (IT) officer. AFENET's new governance structure calls for a seven-person Board of Directors consisting of representatives from members, the World Health Organization/Africa Regional Office, and the private sector.

As a newly established organization, AFENET had a number of institutional needs to address to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability over the long term and to broaden its activities. To assist in addressing these needs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) asked Health Systems 20/20 in February 2007 to provide institutional strengthening assistance to AFENET. Health Systems 20/20 carried out a rapid organizational assessment and, based on the findings, developed an intervention plan for a one-year program of assistance.

Health Systems 20/20 assistance focused on four main areas:

- Developed an Accounting and Administrative Procedures Manual that includes chapters on roles and responsibilities, accounting policies and procedures, operational or administrative procedures, procurement, asset management, and human resource management (i.e., personnel policies).
- Revised AFENET's constitution to clarify membership, organizational structure, composition of the Board of Directors, and the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the executive director and Secretariat.
- Upgraded the communication infrastructure (and more broadly the IT infrastructure) of the Secretariat. This included installing a new server, establishing a local area network and a virtual private network (VPN), installing Skype and video conferencing, and converting the database of network resources to an accessible format and making it available to AFENET's members via the VPN.
- Developed a resource mobilization plan consisting of two documents: Part I, Strategic Direction, and Part II, Priority-Based Resource Mobilization Action Plan.

The report also includes observations about the technical assistance process that was used. The approach called for all the work to be done by local consultants who, although formally contracted by Health Systems 20/20, worked under the direct guidance and supervision of AFENET's executive director. In addition, the report provides seven recommendations for ongoing assistance, which USAID has agreed to support in 2008-2009.

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 BACKGROUND

The African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) was established in 2005. Its objectives are to strengthen capacity in field epidemiology and laboratory training and practice, promote and support research activities, engage in advocacy, mobilize resources, and link public health professionals to organizations that address health problems that require expertise in field epidemiology.

AFENET's founding members were four institutions of higher education that house Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established FETPs in Ghana, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in 1992 and a fourth one in Kenya in 2004. These members operated under the umbrella of the Training Programs in Epidemiology and Public Health Interventions Network (TEPHINET) from 1997 to 2005, when the founding programs decided to form their own network for Africa.

AFENET's membership consists of the following:

- Four founding members: Ghana School of Public Health, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (Institute of Tropical Medicine and Infectious Diseases), Makerere University in Uganda (School of Public Health), and University of Zimbabwe (Department of Community Medicine)
- Ordinary members: other organizations in sub-Saharan Africa with FEPTs
- Member countries: ministries of health in sub-Saharan Africa that are in the process of developing their own FETP or Field Epidemiology Laboratory Training Programs (FELTPs)
- Associate members: other programs involved in epidemiology training and organizations in sub-Saharan Africa involved in field epidemiology or laboratory capacity development

Based in Kampala, Uganda, AFENET is a non-profit organization run by a six-person Secretariat consisting of the executive director, programme manager, two programme officers, administrative officer, and information technology (IT) officer. AFENET's new governance structure calls for a seven-person Board of Directors consisting of representatives from members, the World Health Organization/Africa Regional Office, and the private sector.

As a newly established organization, AFENET had a number of institutional needs to address in order to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability over the long term and to broaden its activities. To assist in addressing these needs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) asked Health Systems 20/20 in February 2007 to provide institutional strengthening assistance to AFENET. Health Systems 20/20 is a global USAID-funded health systems strengthening project based in the Washington DC area that provides assistance to developing countries in health financing, health system operations, health governance, and institutional capacity building.

I.2 SCOPE OF WORK

The scope of work for Health Systems 20/20 assistance to AFENET can be summarized as follows:

- *Planning:* Rapid assessment of the institutional needs and the development of an intervention plan. The assessment consisted of 1) a Web-based survey sent out to 32 people – Secretariat staff, board members, country-based members, and donors (USAID and CDC), 2) face-to-face interviews with Secretariat staff and Uganda-based members on March 19-20, 2007, and 3) and discussions with the executive director. A draft intervention plan was developed and shared with the Board of Directors in their annual meeting on March 29-30, 2007, and subsequently approved.
- *Implementation:* Implementation of the intervention plan over approximately a one-year timeframe, from May 2007 to June 2008.
- *Assessment of results:* Assessment of the impact of the institutional capacity-building effort and the development of a medium- and long-term plan for continued improvement. The assessment included onsite interviews with Secretariat staff, Health Systems 20/20 local consultants, and board members as well as review of final products. See Annexes A and B for a list of persons interviewed and the interview questions.

I.3 INTERVENTION PLAN

The strategy for the assistance to AFENET was based on the following core elements:

- Selection of activities that will lay the foundation for AFENET's long-term success
- Selection of activities that are practical and will have a tangible and immediate benefit for AFENET and network members
- Maximize the use of African consultants and use international consultants only when necessary and in as cost effective a manner as possible
- Monitor the impact of the interventions continually and make adjustments when necessary
- Form a close working relationship between the Health Systems 20/20 team leader and AFENET executive director, with frequent communication and close collaboration
- Ensure that the local consultants hired see the AFENET executive director as the primary client and not Health Systems 20/20

Chapter 2 describes the four main activities in the intervention plan.

2. OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

2.1 IMPROVING THE SECRETARIAT'S FINANCING AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

The focus of this activity was to improve the basic business and administrative systems of the AFENET Secretariat itself and to train the staff in their use. Business systems and procedures included such things as personnel policies, leave and vacation, a system to track assignments, monitoring systems, reporting requirements, and filing systems. This activity was carried out by a two-person team consisting of a chartered accountant for the financial systems and an administrative specialist to develop the administrative procedures. The activity consisted of the following tasks:

- Assess the current business systems and procedures and identify the ones that need to be strengthened or developed
- Determine the basic reporting and other requirements of the U.S. Government and other donors
- Develop the business systems and procedures
- Train staff in their use
- Develop a procedures manual that documents the systems

2.2 IMPROVING THE COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

This activity consisted of two separate sub-activities – improving the communication infrastructure and establishing a database of network resources. Both sub-activities were carried out by the same IT consultant.

Communication infrastructure: One of the primary themes of the assessment was the need to develop better communication infrastructure. This is especially critical since information-sharing and access to resources are two of the primary services that members want. In addition, because AFENET is a network, electronic communication is the primary means for conducting network business. Specific tasks in this activity included:

- Survey members to determine what the primary communication needs are and what their current communication capacity is
- Assess and recommend the purchase of hardware and software programs that can be efficiently used by AFENET, are cost effective, and are not too expensive to use on an ongoing basis
- Work with AFENET to implement the recommendations
- Train Secretariat staff and members in the use of these programs

Database of network resources: Developing an inventory of network resources and then making them available via the Web site was a practical and high-priority activity. The process of developing a database

had already begun and some information was already available on AFENET's Web site. The primary task in this activity was to provide information and communication technology (ICT) support to convert the information to an accessible format and make the information available to members via either the Web site or an intranet. The consultant carried out the following tasks:

- Convert the information to an accessible format
- Ensure that the information is accessible via AFENET's Web site or intranet
- Develop a plan for keeping the database up to date

2.3 REVISION OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

At the beginning of Health Systems 20/20 assistance in 2007, AFENET had been in existence for almost one year and had enough experience to assess how the governance and management structure of the network was functioning. Governance issues that needed to be clarified included the following:

- Clarity of the division of roles and responsibilities between the Board of Directors and the executive director
- Whether the executive director has the necessary authorities to make decisions
- Whether the board should be limited in size, and if the size is limited, how members would be selected
- Whether membership should sit with the FELTP or the academic institution that hosts the training program or with the ministry of health.
- Whether the board is functioning effectively

A local lawyer with governance expertise was hired to address these issues and revise AFENET's Constitution. The consultant surveyed members on these issues, worked closely with the membership committee to develop options, and produced a revised Constitution.

2.4 RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

AFENET is in the enviable position of having funding in place from USAID and CDC to support the Secretariat for the initial phase of its development. The challenge will be to use this initial period to secure resources that will enable AFENET to be financially sustainable over the next five to ten years and beyond. Health Systems 20/20 engaged the services of a two-person consultant team to develop a resource mobilization plan and strengthen the skills of AFENET to implement the plan. This assistance consisted of the following:

- Development of a resource mobilization plan that includes the business/financial objectives, market analysis, competitiveness analysis, business strategy, and action plan
- Development of guidelines for developing winning proposals including roles and responsibilities in the proposal process
- Advice on how to access funds that do not require competitive proposals such as foundations and corporations

- Development of AFENET capacity to implement the business plan

In addition to the above four activities, Health Systems 20/20 also provided ongoing support and advice to the executive director.

3. RESULTS

3.1 FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

Status: AFENET's Accounting and Administrative Procedures Manual has been developed. The manual includes chapters on roles and responsibilities, accounting policies and procedures, operational or administrative procedures, procurement, asset management, and human resource management (i.e., personnel policies). The systems described in these chapters have been established and are in use. AFENET staff report that these procedures have standardized the way work is done and has helped Secretariat staff understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from AFENET. Similarly, the manual has helped member countries understand their accounting and reporting requirements.

Sustaining the benefits: Secretariat staff report that, based on the experience of using the manual since August 2007, some elements need to be added and some of the forms should be modified so they are more useable. Specific changes suggested include the following:

- Remove the human resources policies and create a separate document. Some also suggested that the human resources policies on compensation and benefits might need to be reviewed to ensure equitable treatment of all staff.
- Review the manual to ensure consistency with applicable laws in member countries.
- Create checklists or similar tools that make accessing often used information easier (like travel procedures and requests for reimbursement).
- Continue the practice of using the manual to orient Secretariat staff. In addition, use the manual to orient the administrative persons and AFENET technical staff in each member country.
- Periodically review and revise the manual to ensure that procedures remain effective as AFENET grows and expands and that the systems remain as flexible and responsive as possible.

3.2 IT (DATABASE AND COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE)

Status: The communication infrastructure (and more broadly the IT infrastructure) of the Secretariat has been upgraded.

- A new server was installed, as was a backup system.
- A local area network was set up so users can log on and share folders. The users and shared folders have been configured on the server.
- A virtual private network (VPN) was established.

- The database of network resources was converted to an accessible format and can now be accessed by AFENET's members via the VPN wide area network. The database can be updated online.
- Skype and video conferencing have been installed.
- AFENET's IT administrator has been trained to maintain the VPN and use Skype and video conferencing. A manual was developed to instruct users how to use the different technologies.

Sustaining the benefits: The IT consultant and AFENET staff suggested the following to maximize the benefits of an improved IT infrastructure.

- In order to take full advantage of the improved infrastructure, the infrastructure in member institutions might need upgrading. For example, improving bandwidth in member countries would be an important step. However, AFENET realizes that improving the IT infrastructure capacity of member institutions goes beyond the direct responsibility of AFENET.
- AFENET needs to continue to build demand for the new technologies – VPN, database, and Skype – by helping members understand how they can be helpful in their work. The availability of the technologies should be publicized and opportunities sought out to demonstrate their utility whenever possible.
- In order to increase the use of the upgraded IT capacity, AFENET may need to improve its own IT capacity. This may mean hiring a full-time network administrator and doing additional training for Secretariat staff.
- Member country staff may need additional training in order to use the new technologies that are now available. This may mean hands-on training as well as making sure that members have the necessary software and hardware and that it is correctly installed.
- In addition, AFENET might develop some one-page tip sheets or easy-to-use instructions for how to use the hardware and software.
- The database may need additional work to ensure that it includes what is most needed. AFENET should also communicate the availability of the database and how the information might be used by external audiences such as ministries of health.

3.3 GOVERNANCE

Status: A revised Constitution and related documents were presented to the Board of Directors for consideration and approval in June 2008. The revised constitution clarifies membership, organizational structure, composition of the board, and the roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the executive director and Secretariat.

Sustaining the benefits: The governance consultant and executive director suggested the following next steps:

- Seek formal ratification by the AFENET Board of Directors
- Select representatives for the newly constituted board
- Sign and register documents so that the changes are officially recognized
- Develop implementing regulations or procedures that set forth specifics about how the provisions

of the documents will be carried out

- Revise the Accounting and Administrative Procedures Manual to make sure it is aligned with the revised documents
- Sensitize all parties to their roles and the roles of others including the board, General Assembly, Secretariat, and country coordinating offices and develop norms or operating agreements for how they will work together and what they each need from the other in order to carry out their respective roles

3.4 RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Status: The consultant team produced two documents – Part I, Strategic Direction, and Part II, Priority-Based Resource Mobilization Action Plan. Part I assisted AFENET in clarifying its vision and mission because that is the starting point for developing a resource mobilization plan. This also served to strengthen the Secretariat’s understanding and ability to articulate what AFENET does. Part II is the more detailed resource mobilization plan and includes a summary of current resources, targets, and possible approaches to mobilize resources. The plan also has a donor-prospecting component.

Sustaining the benefits:

- Ensure that the board understands the plan, develops a sense of ownership for the plan, and recognizes their collective responsibilities for resource mobilization.
- Reach agreement among board, Secretariat, and member countries on what kinds of opportunities are appropriate for AFENET and its members to pursue in order to minimize competition and facilitate mutual support.
- Orient staff to the resource mobilization plan including donor prospecting.
- Develop skills throughout the network in all aspects of resource mobilization including proposal writing. This includes working with member countries to strengthen their capacity to write successful proposals and developing a team approach to proposal writing.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 OBSERVATIONS ABOUT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROCESS

One of the areas of inquiry for this assessment was whether the technical assistance process was effective. Health Systems 20/20's role was in drafting the scopes of work, reviewing deliverables, monitoring the overall process, and contracting with the consultants. AFENET's role was as the primary client for the consultants including approval of deliverables. Health Systems 20/20 was particularly interested in finding out whether this approach was effective, especially because all the consultants were hired locally.

- All consultants indicated that their scopes of work were clear and complete. However, in the cases of both governance and resource mobilization, adjustments were necessary to accommodate the situation on the ground. In the case of governance, changes related to changing client requirements were required as the implications of the choice of the organizational type (nongovernmental organization vs. company limited by guarantee) became clear. In the case of resource mobilization, changes came as a consequence of consultants realizing that more ground work was necessary with the Secretariat in order to ensure their understanding of resource mobilization in general and the relationship of a resource mobilization plan to organizational mission and objectives.
- All consultants and the executive director found Health Systems 20/20 easy to work with and reported that the tripartite relationship – AFENET, consultants, Health Systems 20/20 – was clear. AFENET's executive director expressed appreciation of the separation of the technical from the formal contracting relationship with the consultants. The consultants were clear that the executive director was the client, but were also clear that Health Systems 20/20 needed to agree to any scope changes.
- The executive director was very pleased with the work done and the ease of the process. He indicated that, in addition to learning more about the technical content of each intervention area, he learned about the management of consultants, lessons he believes will serve him well in future.

Secretariat staff reported that they learned not only about the technical area, but also about management and institutional functioning in general. One staff person indicated that the Secretariat staff had gone from feeling their way and being heavily dependent on the executive director to being able to function more autonomously. They attributed this to understanding more about principles and practices of effective management and administration and also having a manual to guide them.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

The overarching theme that frames the recommendations below is managing growth. Over the past two years, AFENET has become better known in the U.S. development community and in Africa. The

organization has grown and is attracting increasing interest from potential funding organizations. AFENET's organizational structure and systems were established in 2006 based on its historical role in supporting FETPs and FELTPs. As AFENET expands into other areas of work and grows, this will inevitably require changes to the organization's systems, staffing, and ways of operating. The recommended activities below are the high-priority activities that will enable AFENET to move to the next level of its development.

- Develop a 3-5 year strategic plan. AFENET does not currently have a strategic plan. The development of the resource mobilization plan required that AFENET identify in a preliminary way its strategic objectives. These can serve as a starting point for the development of a more comprehensive plan. This plan should also have an IT component that outlines future investments in technology.
- Develop a human resources plan that addresses the numbers, profiles, and skills needed to carry out the strategic plan. This will include an assessment of the skills of AFENET in light of expected growth and provide for continued professional development and the development of consistent human resources policies.
- Build a cohesive AFENET team to manage the expected growth in funding and staffing by conducting team-building for Secretariat staff and developing standard approaches to orientation and support of new and existing country programs.
- Develop and implement a communications/marketing plan for AFENET that defines the target groups, key messages, and communication channels. This communication plan is part of the overall resource mobilization strategy.
- Provide assistance in implementation of the resource mobilization plan developed in Year I. This might include further training in how to write successful proposals and other aspects of resource mobilization. It might also include supporting one donor roundtable meeting.
- Conduct a board retreat to broaden awareness of the challenges facing AFENET in managing growth and to continue to redefine the roles and responsibilities of the board and Secretariat in light of that growth.
- Assist AFENET in developing the systems and procedures needed to receive USAID funding directly.

ANNEX A. PERSONS INTERVIEWED

Persons Interviewed	Affiliation
David Mukanga	Executive Director, AFENET
Olivia Namusisi	Programme Manager, AFENET
Sarah Nakendo	Administrative Officer, AFENET
Monica Musenero	Programme Officer, AFENET
Nicholas Ayebazibwe	Programme Officer, AFENET
Anthony Kimuli	ICT Officer, AFENET
Patrick Kaganzi	Consultants (Finance and Administration)
Jimmy Sevume	Consultant (ICT)
Elizabeth Nakkungu	Consultant (Governance)
Vicky Luyiima	Consultant (Resource Mobilization)
Greg Naulikha	Consultant (Resource Mobilization)
Prof. Fredrick Wurapa	Chair, AFENET Board
Eric Muchiri	Member, AFENET Board
Prof David Serwada	Member, AFENET Board

ANNEX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Secretariat staff

- What was the assignment?
- Was it completed?
- How are they using the products developed?
- What could be done to strengthen usage?
- What should be done to sustain benefits of the work?
- What future activities to further strengthen AFENET?

Consultants

- Was the scope clear?
- If need arose to modify SOW [scope of work], was there flexibility to do so?
- Who was the client?
- How well did the consultant/AFENET/Health Systems2020 arrangement work?
- How was the experience of working on this activity with AFENET?
- What needs to be done to enhance implementation, assure sustainability?
- What future activities might be undertaken to further strengthen AFENET?

Board

- Overall sense of how Health Systems2020 assistance helped AFENET?
- Were they sufficiently informed as to what was going on?
- Were they sufficiently involved in what was going on?
- How were specific interventions helpful?
- What should be done to enhance implementation, sustain benefits?
- Future activities to further strengthen AFENET