

Supplementary leaflet to the set of core leaflets on linking

Background:

Health is at the core of the international development agenda. Less developed countries around the world are trying to improve their health systems and the skills and number of their health professionals. Health links aim to support and invest in those healthcare systems. Health linking focuses on capacity building, in particular the education and training of health care staff or the development of health systems and processes. Links are long term multidisciplinary partnerships which sometimes involve the collaboration of associated health training institutions, professional associations and diverse interest groups for greater effectiveness and sustainability.

There are many important health issues across the globe, not least the exodus of healthcare workers. A critical response to the problem is to address the issues within these countries and to support and invest in those healthcare systems, a process of which linking partnerships is part. Links address need through targeted reciprocal training visits or by developing health projects - all of which should be aimed at strengthening local health strategies with the help and cooperation of the local or national government. Such links allow staff to contribute to the improvement of healthcare worldwide, whilst continuing to serve their own communities and develop their own professional skills.

Opportunities: Linking can help your to:

- share ideas, experiences and skills
- enlarge experience, sharpen skills and thus improving morale
- motivate staff and reduce turnover and reverse the 'brain drain'
- open a window of sensitisation through
- comparison and provision of essential support
- improve patient care, benefiting both patient and health worker
- through the long-term commitment of both partners, evolve with changing needs and bring about the greatest possible improvements
- take staff beyond their usual sphere of experience through opportunities to work in multi-disciplinary teams and contribute to their professional development
- facilitate valuable experience in devising and delivering teaching programmes
- develop managerial and leadership abilities enhance resourcefulness, clinical skills, experience and knowledge

Checklist: questions to ask

- What is the purpose of the proposed link?
- What do you aim to achieve with this partnership?
- Do you have the resources or potential resources to pursue this link?
- By what criteria will you or have you chosen a partnership organisation?
- Is learning from each other implicit in your objectives?
- Are you working towards a shared joint agenda?
- Do you have a partnership agreement?
- Are your objectives realistic and achievable?
- Do you know the social, political and economic context within which your link community is operating?
- Have you established effective means of communication?
- How often will you review progress and by what procedures?
- Do you have a Link co-ordinator and group in each organisation involved in the Health Link?
- Have you assessed your local health needs?
- Have you assessed how you can contribute to your partner's local health needs?
- How will you measure the impact of the link?

Below is a list of things you will need to be able to maintain a link:

- institutional ownership in both communities to ensure sustainability
- organisational commitment by the Boards and Chief Executives of both partners
- a committed group of staff with the time and energy to fundraise and administer the link
- a match of needs with resources by both partners
- the ability to set realistic objectives for your link and critically review the objectives of the link and adjust the focus year by year

If you find that you can't tick all of these boxes then you should think again about linking.

Challenges: to maintaining a truly mutually beneficial and equal partnership

- capacity building takes time, linking cannot be a short-term partnership. Think in terms of years and plan succession and sustainability in both partners.
- start small. This will help you identify and address appropriately the challenges that your partnership might find and will enable a solid foundation for your link.
- think beyond your daily routine; think strategically about your link objectives for relevant and greater impact.
- remember both partners will want to concentrate on patient care; their normal day jobs. Partnership activities should focus on their goals and have the least burdensome bureaucracy as possible.
- for both partners to be prepared to learn from each other and to consolidate the learning in the context of their own health system.

Resource rich communities: specific issues

- Many solutions may not be appropriate due to cultural differences, physical infrastructure, and financial and human resource availability.
- Two-way learning; believing that one partner knows best or has a monopoly on solutions is neither true nor acceptable.
- except in emergencies or for teaching purposes it is unlikely that the following will be appropriate solutions:
 - supplying equipment - which will require the resources to maintain.
 - supplying drugs - which may not be sustained.
 - providing finances - which can only offer short term relief.
 - providing service delivery - which does not build local capacity.
- where training is offered this should take place in the partner community to ensure the most appropriate learning environment due to the inevitable differences in clinical conditions or health care resources.

Resource poor communities: specific issues

- two-way learning; believing that one partner knows best or has a monopoly on solutions is neither true nor acceptable.
- where training is offered this should take place in the partner community to ensure the most appropriate learning environment due to the inevitable differences in clinical conditions or health care resources.

The Toolkit can be obtained from UKOWLA
(United Kingdom One World Linking Association www.ukowla.org.uk) and
BUILD (Building Understanding through International Links for Development www.build-online.org.uk)

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