

**Conference urges: ACT NOW TO ENSURE ZIMBABWE'S HEALTH**

A gathering of government, UN agencies, donors, civil society and the private sector today called on all stakeholders with an interest in Zimbabwe to act immediately to ensure that Zimbabwe's health systems are adequate to deal with imminent threats and longer term health challenges.

Since 1990, over the period of the Millennium Development Goals, most health indicators in Zimbabwe, including maternal and child mortality, have got worse rather than better. The health system has been under considerable pressure over the past 10 years, with massive shortages of qualified human resource, a lack of essential medicines, and a basic crisis in cashflow: at the end of 2008 it was classified by most assessments as having collapsed. Specific health priorities included HIV and AIDS related to a worsening TB epidemic and other opportunistic infections; the increasing frequency of other epidemics (e.g. cholera and malaria) which contribute to a high burden of disease; decreased food security and increased malnutrition; high infant and maternal mortality rates; increasing levels of non-communicable diseases; and increasing gaps between rural and urban areas in terms of health access. With the new political dispensation, however, there is a renewed effort to rebuild the system.

The conference *Zimbabwe's Health Sector – The Way Forward* convened more than 50 national and international experts to consider the future of health in Zimbabwe. In his opening speech, the Minister of Health and Child Welfare, the Hon Dr. Henry Madzorera, stated:

*"I am delighted that the symposium has convened the full range of key stakeholders in the health sector....at this stage in the revitalization of Zimbabwe's health delivery system, my Ministry understands the value in developing a common understanding of the main issues that are pivotal to its development."*

Conference participants highlighted three action points to advance health system strengthening in Zimbabwe:

- Bring together government, donors and civil society to develop realistic medium-term policies and plans, including budgets, and to monitor progress toward national health objectives taking into consideration the recent "100 day plan" and Short-Term Economic Recovery Programme (STERP);
- Define a pooled funding mechanism to ensure that financial resources reach the district and community levels: such a mechanism would recognize current political challenges and be initially managed on behalf of the government and designed for transition as quickly as possible to the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare; and,

- Renew the popular engagement and accountability necessary to ensure public participation in health service planning and overview.

The conference also reflected on the efforts underway to facilitate the transition from short-term, reactive humanitarian relief to long-term, proactive development assistance in Zimbabwe. Participants were candid about the political and economic challenges, but also unanimous in their resolve to succeed. Representatives of the donor community announced their intention to align their activities and funding behind national policies and priorities. They also pledged to work toward normalization of relations and adopting the principles of the Paris Declaration and the Accra Action Agenda on donor harmonization in Zimbabwe.

Jeffrey Mecaskey, Managing Director of Health Partners International who facilitated the symposium, said:

*“This conference today is a good step towards ensuring all stakeholders are pointing in the same direction. A number of participants told me that this was the most candid and constructive exchange they had witnessed among development partners in recent years. The key message is that there needs to be strong and transparent coordination to ensure Zimbabwe’s health.”*

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#### **Notes to Editors:**

Key stakeholders in Zimbabwe’s health sector met in Harare on 12 November 2009 to discuss the future direction of health systems’ coordination and financing. The conference ***Zimbabwe’s Health Sector – The Way Forward*** gathered representatives from the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, multilateral and bilateral organisations, non-governmental and faith-based organisations as well as the private sector. The meeting was facilitated by Health Partners International.

After having been under considerable pressure for years, Zimbabwe’s health sector now stands at a critical junction. A recovering local economy and the new political dispensation are opening the door to renewed efforts to strengthen systems. Significant work, under the leadership of the Government of Zimbabwe, is already underway – including assessments of the burden of disease, costed plans to guide efforts, and work to establish mechanisms for relevant institutions and agencies to realize national policy aims in health services. The objective of the conference was to build on these efforts already on track and reflect on priorities for health systems strengthening and to develop a shared understanding of transitional sector coordination and financing.

This press release is issued by Health Partners International, a health services partnership of skilled professionals, providing high quality technical services. HPI are specialists in health systems and management. We collaborate with local partners and stakeholders to find practical solutions to the challenges of health systems, often in difficult environments. We work to ensure sustainable health care is available for all, especially the poor.

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