

# IHRIS RETAIN: A TOOL TO COST RETENTION STRATEGIES

## BACKGROUND

Skilled and motivated health workers in sufficient numbers in the right place and at the right time are critical to deliver effective health services and improve health outcomes. However, although almost one half of the global population lives in rural areas, they are served by only 38% of the total nursing workforce and by less than a quarter of the total physician workforce. As these statistics illustrate, retention of health workers in remote and rural areas is a serious impediment to achieving access to quality health services. The World Health Organization's policy guidelines on rural retention recommend that to motivate health workers to serve in hard-to-reach areas, health service organizations must implement a package of well-selected retention interventions.

## THE CHALLENGE: DETERMINING THE AFFORDABILITY OF RETENTION STRATEGIES

While country stakeholders recognize the need to address health worker retention, health sector budgets in developing countries are limited. The questions that need to be answered are which retention strategies should be pursued and, somewhat more importantly from the feasibility standpoint, how much they will cost. Faced with multiple priorities within the health sector and limited means, policy-makers want to know up-front what a recommendation will cost in order to gauge the results, affordability, and sustainability of its implementation.

Historically, most costing exercises have required a high level of expertise and have often relied on external technical assistance from international health economists, which can be expensive.

## A SOLUTION: THE IHRIS RETAIN TOOL

In collaboration with the World Health Organization, CapacityPlus developed an open source software tool to cost retention strategies at the district, regional, or national level. The resulting cost figures can be shared with relevant stakeholders to determine the feasibility of the retention interventions within the available fiscal space and to budget for actual implementation.

iHRIS Retain (<http://retain.ihris.org/retain/>) is designed so that human resources managers can take advantage of the tool—perhaps with some limited assistance from a local financial expert—and understand and use the results.

The newest addition to the iHRIS suite of health workforce planning tools, iHRIS Retain is structured around the WHO policy recommendations to increase access to health workers in rural and remote areas through improved retention. The software guides the user through the costing process step by step to capture all relevant financial, operational, and health worker

cadre data. Based on the inputs entered, the costing tool works out the total costs and generates reports for each retention intervention and targeted cadres, as well as the aggregated cost of the retention strategy, and compares it to available health sector funds. Many different scenarios and combinations can be costed to find the most feasible options. These results can then be presented to stakeholders for discussion and evidence-based decisions regarding retention strategies based on economic feasibility.

## **BENEFITS**

iHRIS Retain is intended to help remove some of the mystery of health economics by putting a powerful tool in the hands of HR managers. It is likely to yield results close to a traditional costing exercise at less cost, without the need for extensive assistance from international health economists. The software provides the flexibility of inputting different options for retention interventions and targeted cadres to obtain the most accurate financial scenarios for decision-making.

With its focus on self-reliance, the retention costing tool promotes country ownership, increases self-sufficiency of host country counterparts in making and acting on health workforce decisions, reduces reliance on international technical assistance, and empowers stakeholders to implement economically affordable retention strategies.

## **COMBINING TOOLS FOR MAXIMUM POTENTIAL**

iHRIS Retain can be combined with another CapacityPlus tool, the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit: Designing Evidence-Based Incentives for Health Workers (<http://www.capacityplus.org/rapid-retention-survey-toolkit>), based on the discrete choice experiment methodology (DCE). DCE is a powerful, quantitative method to determine the importance health workers place on different employment options and to predict health workers' decision-making. CapacityPlus has operationalized the DCE methodology through a step-by-step retention survey tool that quickly allows HR managers to determine health workers' motivational preferences to take up posts and remain in rural and remote facilities. While many viable retention packages are revealed through using the Rapid Retention Survey Toolkit, iHRIS Retain allows for the comparison of various scenarios to determine the most financially feasible options. When used together, the result is an affordable, cost-effective retention strategy designed for specific country contexts.