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**THIRD SESSION OF THE AFRICAN UNION CONFERENCE
OF MINISTERS OF HEALTH
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JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA**

CAMH/MIN/4(III)

Theme: “*Strengthening of Health Systems for Equity and
Development in Africa*”

**OVERVIEW ON THE THEME:
“HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING FOR EQUITY AND
DEVELOPMENT”**

**Overview on the theme:
“Health Systems Strengthening for Equity and Development”**

Introduction

1. During the Second Session of the AU Conference of Ministers of Health which took place in Gaborone, Botswana in 2005 it was decided that the Third Session should be convened under the theme “**Health Systems Strengthening for Equity and Development**”. Three key issues are raised in this theme namely: health systems strengthening, equity and development.

2. Development is probably the most widely debate subject of our time. But what is it. Broadly defined it is the general improvement in the well being of the population. Human welfare is the essence of development. According to the Human Development Report 1990 (UNDP 1990), human development is a process of enlarging people’s choices. A health nation is an asset for development while poor health is a major hindrance to socio-economic development. It is therefore important to address these two issues together.

3. The theme also raises the issue of Equity which simply put means equal treatment for equal needs and is the ethical basis for all efforts within the health sector.

4. The health system includes all actors, institutions and resources that undertake health actions – where a health action is one where the primary intent is to improve health. Although the defining goal of a health system is to improve population health, other intrinsic goals are to be responsive to the population they serve, determined by the way and the environment in which people are treated, and to ensure that the financial burden of paying for health is fairly distributed across households. Four key functions of the health system (also known as vital systems of the health system) determine the way inputs are transformed into outcomes that people value. These key functions include:

- Service provision;
- Resource generation;
- Financing; and
- Stewardship.

5. **Service Provision** encompasses both formal and informal service providers, whether public or private, and also service organizations both at the level of service delivery and higher up the chain of management while **resource generation** encompasses key inputs such as human resources, physical capital, drugs and medical supplies. **Financing** function of the health system is concerned with the volume and sources of financial resources available for the

health system, together with the mechanism for pooling resources and transferring them to service providers. The function of **stewardship** refers to the role of oversight of the health system which falls to the government, and encompasses defining the vision and direction of the health policy, exerting influence through regulation, and collecting and using key data.

6. A review of the available data on the health status in Africa highlights high maternal and infant morbidity and mortality, high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis, other related infectious diseases and malnutrition as major health problems. Research has shown that high maternal and infant mortality rates reflect general health system inadequacies as well as lack of knowledge regarding health matters within the household.

7. Health promotion and preventive measures that strengthen the capacity of the household to provide for the health of its members, together with nutritional support, maternal health and child health programs will do much to improve the situation. However, for these programs to be sustainable it is important to strengthen the primary health care system in Africa. Preliminary evaluation of health care systems in Africa has revealed a severe deterioration in system organization, financial planning, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation of health system performance. There is need to strengthen the basic health system and ensure sustainable financing for maternal and child health programs.

8. These factors affect health systems development and strengthening. Without functioning health systems Africa will not enjoy good health and the development process on the continent will be adversely affected.

9. To improve the health on the continent, inequalities to health service access between and within countries needs to be addressed within the health system. This entails the need to confront health crises and the construction of sustainable and equitable health systems.

Health Systems Strengthening

10. Health systems strengthening is a continuous process of implementing changes in policies and management arrangements within the health sector. This process, whether guided by individual governments, nongovernmental organizations or donor agencies is underway in many countries in Africa.

11. The approaches to health systems strengthening are numerous, such as reducing bureaucracy by streamlined management, increasing cost-effectiveness, improving efficiency through reorganized services, decentralized health systems, and allocating resources to better address the needs of the population. African governments should concentrate on five areas in pursuing Health Systems Development:

- Governance
- Financial and Human Resources
- Ensuring availability and appropriate use of commodities
- Community empowerment
- Health information systems and use there of

12. **National Health systems** strengthening programs in Africa should strive to ensure that country health systems are effective, efficient, and equitable. Successful Health system strengthening requires the combined effort of the Ministry of Health, local health officials at regional and district level as well as the other providers of care.

13. Strong health systems must have District health systems and community health services that are functional and effective. This requires considerable improvements in some aspects of health systems management paying particular attention to some important issues that include: long-term perspective planning (strategic management principles), efficiency in resource allocation, effective management of human resources, Private sector participation, intersectoral coordination, and community involvement.

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