

ENHANCING MOTIVATION AND RETENTION OF RURAL HEALTH EXTENSION WORKERS IN ETHIOPIA

Summary

Retaining Health Extension Workers (HEWs) and making them motivated front-line care providers are the current challenges of primary health care in rural Ethiopia. Policies and strategies that govern rural health extension program should consider meaningful benefit packages for HEWs, mechanism to ensure their rights and reliable feedback mechanisms from the workforce to monitor their physical, psychological, and financial wellbeing. This policy brief intended to inform Federal Ministry of Health, Regional Health Bureaus and other stakeholders key areas of intervention to have healthy and motivated HEWs at the rural health post.

Introduction

The attainment of the universal health coverage is hinged on the availability of adequate, qualified and happy human resource for health (HRH) in the developing countries including Ethiopia. Health extension workers have been vital in Ethiopia's rural communities. Despite this, Ethiopia has placed little focus on monitoring and responding to the needs of workers who make up this health workforce. Many want to leave their positions because there is little chance for promotion on the ladder or transfer to other work places. Health Extension Workers' turnover intentions in Ethiopia aggravates human resources crisis in rural parts of Ethiopia to meet health-related sustainable development goals and the national strategic plan. In most cases, turnover results from turnover intentions, in which intention is immediate cause of attrition. There are pushing and pulling factors for attrition of HEWs. Unless Ethiopia provides these health workers with better opportunities for education, training, promotion and the right to transfer, it stands to lose many of them or continue with unsatisfied and unproductive work force. Net harm might be higher than net benefit from having significant number of demotivated health service providing work force.



Methods

We used data from two components of comprehensive Ethiopian Health Extension Program assessment conducted over one-year period from October 2018 to September 2019. We used a retrospective cohort study design to investigate attrition and the reasons behind attrition by reviewing the records of HEWs (2004-2019) in nine agrarian and pastoralist regions. We also used a cross-sectional multi-stage survey and recruited 584 HEWs working in 343 health posts (HPs) to estimate the level of intention to leave and to understand possible pushing factors for their intentions.

Key findings

According to the findings of the National Assessment of the HEP (2019):

- Significance number of HEWs (21.3%) have intention to leave their job in the coming two years, 17.1% were looking for alternative job during data collection time and more than one fifth of HEWs have left their job in the past 15 years.
- Human right issues that include denial of annuals leaves, not being allowed to transfer to other places for work, engagement in non-health related activities, excessive workload without compensation, and not having known structure for training and salary improvement are among many complaints reported by HEWs who have left the job
- Significant proportion of HEWs perceived that they do not get enough support from Woreda Health office, catchment health center and kebele administration although support from the latter is relatively better
- Although 84% of the HEWs were recently appraised about their overall performance, only 44.8% received written feedback
- Although 86% of Health Posts (HP) meet the minimum standard of two HEWs per HP, absenteeism from work place is high: 48% of HPs had at least one HEW absent and 21% of HPs had no HEW at the day of the data collection.
- More than half of HEWs were dissatisfied/demotivated with their work.
- 40.2% of HEWs have sign of burnout, and 4.8% have sever risk of burnout and 16.6% of HEWs have symptoms of probable depression.

Reason for intention to leave

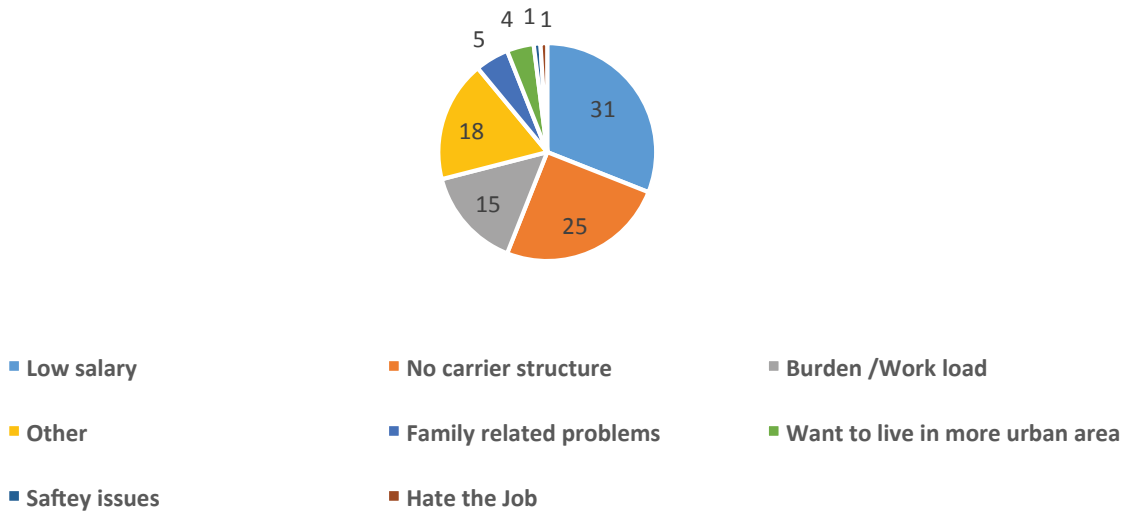
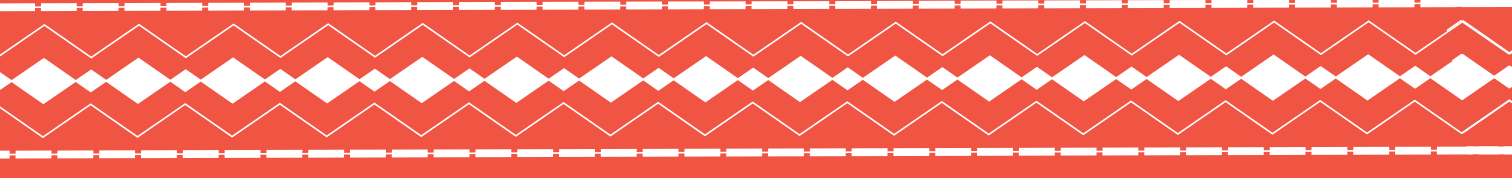


Figure 1. Reasons for intending to leave one's job among HEWs affirming that they had a plan to change their jobs

Policy Recommendations

In order to motivate health extension workers and improve the service delivery and health outcomes, it is important to implement the following recommendations:

- Initiate merit-based comprehensive incentive/motivation packages for health extension workers
- Respect the right of HEWs as other civil servants and create a positive and supportive work climate for them
- Provide mentorship, timely feedback, and regular supportive supervision
- Limit their duties as per their job description and decide on the number of HEWs per health post based on work load that take account of the population size, topography and geographical area of each kebele
- Opportunities for advancement that create customized career tracks that give them some control over their advancement as well as feedback on their progress.
- Design mechanisms on how to minimize the incidence of burnout and depression among HEWs, and design culturally appropriate modalities to monitor and support psychological wellbeing of this work force



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