




## Challenges of Memorandum of Understanding as a tool for strengthening intersectoral collaboration in health system

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### Abstract

**Background:** For sustainable development and resolve complex public health problems, intersectoral collaboration is a necessity. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is one of the tools used to develop intersectoral interactions. In this study, the challenges in the development and implementation of MOUs and propose strategies to overcome these challenges were studied by collecting the views of some stakeholders from other organizations.

**Methods:** For identifying challenges and solutions to improve the situation, group discussions were conducted with the presence of representatives from four ministries of Agriculture, Roads and Urban Development, Sports and Youth, and Education and the representatives of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, who were responsible for preparing MOUs. All sessions were transcript and analyzed by using content analysis method.

**Results:** Some challenges were defined according to the development and implementation of MOUs. For better implementation, suggested strategies were: Strengthening the stewardship of intersectoral collaboration, effective and powerful management in monitoring the implementation of MOUs, Determining the appropriate financing path, strengthening individual and organizational capabilities in developing and implementing of MOUs, improving the terms and conditions of the implementing the MOUs.

**Conclusion:** Collaboration with other sectors has now become one of the main issues in health systems. For better achievement, strengthening the stewardship of intersectoral collaboration to effective coordination for drafting MOU, and facilitates and monitors the effective implementation of MOUs by identifying key people in each organization and empowering them is necessary.

**Keywords:** Intersectoral Collaboration; Public Health; Sustainable Development

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### Introduction

Intersectoral collaboration is a clear relationship between the health sector with other sectors to share information, resources, and authorities. It is necessary to

develop joint policies for preventing and solving complex public health problems so that the result is more effective and sustainable than the sole functioning of the health sector (1-4).

Because the root causes of problems and inequalities in health are mostly in non-health sectors; governments will achieve their goals of promoting community health when all sectors consider health and well-being as the key elements in developing their policies. The health sector, on behalf of the government, has the task of providing a favorable environment for inter-sectoral collaboration by developing appropriate structures and processes. Also, while highlighting the importance of health and community health considerations for other sectors; health sector should identify the important issues and produce evidence for them, seek support from other sectors for the solutions of the health issues, conclude an MOU with them, follow up the results of the implementation of sound policies through mediation and negotiation and monitor and evaluate the results (5).

The health sector has the duty to pay attention to the impact of policies and programs of other sectors to the health of communities; and to protect the communities from the adverse health effect of policies and regulations of other sectors, through advocacy and conclusion of an MOU with effective regulation (5). An MOU is, therefore, one of the tools used to develop intersectoral interactions.

An MOU is a non-binding agreement between two or more parties for drawing up existing terms and conditions, in which the obligations and responsibilities of each party are determined. The fundamental similarity between all MOUs is that they are not legally compulsory and do not involve the exchange of money (6).

Signing an MOU is often the first stage in the establishment of a formal contract; and contrary to the formal contract, which is a private law between the two parties and is binding and enforceable in judicial constituencies, the MOU can be less cited from the judiciary and due to its simplicity and flexibility, it is more welcomed.

While an MOU is not legally binding, it can help the two sides move in the right

direction towards a more sustainable agreement and commitment. Although the MOU is not executed as an official document, it plays a decisive role in the formulation of formal documents by specifying the subject of contracts or official documents, the method of providing resources and managing projects (1, 7).

The benefit of an MOU is in the continuation of intersectoral collaboration, even when there are individuals post-shift. The MOU can strengthen this incentive in directors of different sectors to think differently about available resources (8).

In the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME), like many other organizations, several MOUs are signed with other organizations, and several meetings are held to draft an MOU, but the follow-up and execution of MOUs are unclear, and in many cases, MOU come to an end without the least impact in the advancement of the joint programs.

In this study, it was attempted to identify the challenges in the development and execution of MOUs and propose strategies to overcome these challenges through collecting the views of some stakeholders from other organizations that have signed MOUs with the MoHME.

## Methods

To assess the current status of the implementation of MOUs and the challenges of the optimal use of the MOU tool, and identify solutions to improve the situation, group discussions were conducted with the presence of representatives from four ministries of Agriculture, Roads and Urban Development, Sports and Youth, and Education and the representatives of the MOHME, who were responsible for preparing MOUs from the Deputy for Curative Affairs, deputy of Health, and deputy of Food and Drug.

At each group discussion, one person was appointed as the meeting facilitators, and one was responsible for taking notes. All sessions were transcript and analyzed by using content analysis method. Based on the results of these analyses, three general themes of challenges of drafting MOUs, challenges of implementation of MOUs and proposed strategies for improving the implementation of MOUs, and sub-theme for each theme were identified.

### Results

In the analysis of group discussions, the identified challenges of drafting and implementing the MOUs were as follows:

#### Challenges of drafting the MoUs

- The contradiction of the text of MOUs in legal terms with the laws and regulations of the involved parties
- Using MOUs as a manipulating tool to waste time and conceal the hidden disparity between the involved organizations
- Unprofessional development of the content of MOUs (broad definition of obligations of the parties, lack of transparency of tasks and referring to the organizations' inherent duties as a task in MOUs)
- Lack of uniform format for drafting MOUs
- Poor diplomatic and skills of individuals involved in developing the MOUs to achieve a win-win situation
- Lack of considering the perceptions of staff in the development of the MOUs

#### Challenges of implementing the MOUs

- Lack of experience in joint planning
- Conflict of organizational interests
- The existing organization's bureaucracy is a barrier towards the expedited implementation of the MOUs

- Low priority of tasks related to intersectoral collaboration in organizations
- Poor political support of senior managers for the implementation of the MOUs especially in cases that they have not signed the MoU themselves
- Lack of allocation of budget for MOUs, while the implementation requires the budget
- Lack of common understanding of the content and even the reason behind formation principals of the MOUs
- Failure to define the appropriate structural framework for execution of MOUs in organizations such as secretariat, human structure, and budget
- Lack of a legal guarantee for the implementation of MOUs

#### Suggested solutions to improve the implementation of the MOUs

##### 1-Strengthening the stewardship of intersectoral collaboration:

- Advocacy for political support of the senior managers of the entire body of the organizations
- Enhancing collaboration within the organizations
- Considering an appropriate structure for following up of MOUs in the spectator organization like the Secretariat of Health
- Establishment of the Commission of Health Secretaries under the Supreme Council for Health and Food Security to strengthen multi-sectoral cooperation, the establishment of a collaborative network and inter-institutional cooperative actions
- Orienting all the organizations of all sectors under the Supreme Council for Health and Food Security towards a specific goal

**2-Effective and powerful management in monitoring the implementation of MOUs:**

- Defining and deploying an appropriate process to monitor joint programs in the MOUs content
- Annual and periodic evaluation of the implementation of the MOUs and their effectiveness
- Evaluation of the implementation of MOUs based on valid evidence
- Consistency between the content and implementation plans of the MoU with the supreme documents

**3-Determining the appropriate financing path:**

- Participation of the Plan and Budget Organization in developing the MOUs and determining the appropriate ways for financing the joint programs
- Considering a defined position for inter-sectoral collaboration in the macrostructure of the Plan and Budget Organization

**4-Strengthening individual and organizational capabilities in developing and implementing of MOUs**

- Identifying the resources and capacities of the involved parties and the presence of experts and experienced individuals in the MOU negotiation sessions
- Appropriate needs assessment, targeting goals and defining feasible and achievable outputs in the formulation of MOUs
- Maintaining and promoting motivation of active partners in implementing the MOUs
- Promoting teamwork skills and organizational culture
  - Training and empowering involved

organizations concerning the subject, and facilitation to achieve the common goals

**5-Improving the terms and conditions of implementing the MOUs**

- Do not including the current tasks of organizations in the term of agreement of MOUs
- Drafting MOUs in the form of consortia, and in the format of national plans
- Including community participation in drafting MOUs
- Using legal terminology in drafting MOUs

**Discussion**

A MOUs is a partnership agreement (9), and it can provide a good platform for cooperation by creating a better understanding of the organizational structure and processes and is a good tool for starting partnerships (10). In some cases, even the process of drafting MOUs leads to the establishment of the intersectoral relationship and facilitates cooperation (6).

The MOUs can facilitate communication with the right persons in other organizations and strengthen the interaction between organizations, however, its implementation requires strong determination; and generally serious issues cannot be solved by signing an MOU (10).

Preparing an MOU is a relatively long process, and usually and usually it takes 15 months for an MOU to be developed. The length of this process can be due to the duration required for creating mutual understanding, the bureaucracy in the organizations, the weak commitment of the involved individuals and legal issues (8, 9). Therefore, organizations should sign MOU, if they are certain that it contributes to the advancement of programs or provides certain credits to the organization (7).

In this qualitative research study, after the analysis of the comments, some challenges were identified in the formulation and implementation of the memorandum. Part of the challenge was related directly or indirectly to the manpower, whether it is at a high level of policy and decision making that the signing and implementation of the MOU are subject to their commitment and support, or the manpower as experts that their expertise is necessary for negotiating, and then follow up and evaluation of the implementation of MOU. In a qualitative study conducted in the United States, California, participants considered the support of senior officials, experience in collaboration with other organizations, and key individuals' skills in the process of compilation MOU, as the contributing factors in concluding an MOU. Also, in this study, respondents considered the role of commitment and support of senior officials in drafting and signing an MOU much more than technical skills in drafting an MOU (10).

Zahner et al. have considered the formal obligation as a facilitator for concluding an MOU, while, Khosla et al. considered the actual willingness of the organizations to exchange information and cooperate bilaterally, as a much more effective factor than the formal obligation for signing an MOU (8, 10). In other words, what prompts the organizations for signing and implementation of an MOU is the understanding of the benefits of this cooperation. However, although coercion from outside may be effective in concluding an MOU, this coercion is less effective in its implementation and continuity of it (8).

Establishment of a strategic committee with the participation of all stakeholders, including the senior officials of the organizations (whose commitment and support is necessary for the implementation of MOU), as well as managers and executive experts (which must use the capacity of the MOU to expand the inter-sectoral collaboration) is useful in

developing an MOU (6). Since one of the problems in the implementation of the MOU is lack of knowledge of the administrators of the reason for creating an MOU, key persons must be properly identified from the very beginning, and appropriate communication become established; and in this case, subsequent negotiations and attempts to implement MOUs are less necessary (7, 8). Although developing an MOU helps initiate cooperation and create a suitable atmosphere, continuing cooperation between the two organizations requires strong leadership, precise planning, presence of key persons, and security of resources (10).

Developing the content was one of the identified challenges in drafting and implementing MOU in this study. Developing the content of MOU requires professional considerations. According to Johnson et al., MOU is not an appropriate means of conferring authority, purchasing services, and monetary transactions, and contract should be used in these cases (7). Also, according to the interviewees, lack of attention to priorities, high-level documents, and lack of transparency are the contextual weaknesses of MOUs. In another study, interviewees also stated that referring to high-level documents and related laws, and defining keywords would help clarity of the content of MOU (7).

Another important point is the use of simple and understandable language in developing the content of MOU so that even those who did not participate in the drafting process have a correct understanding of its content (7).

In this study, one of the most emphasized was on appropriate stewardship and specific structures for managing the process of drafting and implementing an MOU in both beneficiary organizations. The important tasks of stewardship of intersectoral collaboration are intra-organizational coordination and a proper understanding of organizational objectives and structure of the other party,

that is one of the important steps in the process of developing a MOUs (6). The issue of funding for the implementation of the suggested programs is also important and should be considered at the time of drafting the MOU, and the financial resources that should be provided by other parties must be specified in the content of MOU (7).

In general, the MOU should be based on the partnership model and criteria for communicating with other organizations. The effectiveness of MOU will reduce if the terms of the MOU are very different from the principles and rules of intersectoral collaboration (8).

Collaboration with other sectors has now become one of the main issues in health systems. The complicated needs and demands of service recipients, insufficiency of resources, and increased efficiency and effectiveness are among the most important reasons for increased willingness to cooperate (11-14). One of the tools used to provide inter-sectoral collaboration is MOU. Signing MOU solely, cannot be considered as the ultimate goal; in the process of drafting and implementing MOU, common goals and collaboration opportunities could be identified, and provide a good platform for interaction. This requires strengthening the stewardship of intersectoral collaboration to effectively plans the intra and inter-sectoral coordination for drafting MOU, and facilitates and monitors the effective implementation of MOUs by identifying key people in each organization and empowering them.

#### *Conflict of interest*

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

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