Moving towards universal health coverage: The need for a strengthened planning process

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As countries embrace the ambitious universal health coverage (UHC) agenda whose major tenents include reaching everyone with the needed good quality services, strengthening the planning process to work towards a common objective is paramount. Drawing from country experiences—Swaziland and Zanzibar, we reviewed strategic planning processes to assess the extent to which they impact on realising alignment towards a collective health sector objective. Employing qualitative approaches, we reviewed strategic plans under implementation in the health sector and using an interview guide consisting of open‐ended questions, interviewed key informants at the national and district level. Results showed that strategic plans are too many with majority of program strategies not well aligned to the health sector strategic plan, are not costed, and there overlaps in objectives among the several strategies addressing the same program. Weaknesses in the development process, perceived poor quality of the strategies, limited capacity, high staff turnover, and inadequate funding were the identified challenges that abate the utility of the strategic plans. Moving towards UHC starts with a robust planning process that rallies all actors and all available resources around a common objective. The planning process should be strengthened through ensuring participatory processes, evidence informed prioritisation, MoH institutional capacity to lead the process, and consideration for implementation feasibility. Flexibility to take into consideration emerging evidence and new developments in global health needs consideration.