



***Improving Health Outcomes through Professionalizing
the Management of Public Health Supply Chains***
White Paper #1
Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition

The Challenge Facing Public Health Supply Chain Managers

Efficient public health supply chain¹ performance is essential for assuring access to health supplies, and thus for positive health outcomes. The public health supply chain manager² therefore has an essential role in the realization of global public health goals, including the Millennium Development Goals for improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Rapidly increasing health assistance from multilateral and bilateral donors has significantly benefited health programs, but has also resulted in huge increases in the quantity and value of commodities flowing through public health supply chains – a trend that will continue as newly developed products (many with demanding supply chain requirements) continue to be introduced into developing country health systems. The public health supply chains of middle- and low- income countries, however, are typically unable to respond reliably even to existing demands, putting both health commodities and health outcomes at risk. Limitations on supply chain performance stem, in part, from lack of professionalization of supply chain management and the resulting insufficient capacities of supply chain managers.³

The lack of professionalization of supply chain management within low- and middle-income country environments is characterized by lack of recognition that technical skills are necessary for good supply chain management, limited formal educational qualifications or certifications appropriate for supply chain managers, limited technical expertise, and general disempowerment of supply chain managers. The status of low- and middle-income country supply chain managers stands in marked contrast to their status in developed countries, where supply chain managers must have advanced technical skills and qualifications, and are recognized as instrumental to institutional decision-making and success.

¹ For the purposes of this white paper, the public health supply chain refers to in-country functions for ensuring availability of health supplies at service facilities, including procurement, customs clearance, quality assurance, warehousing, distribution, logistics information management, and logistics monitoring and evaluation.

² For this white paper, a public health supply chain manager is defined as a person who has the responsibility to oversee specific supply chain activities as described in footnote 1. Supply chain managers may work at any level of the health system and may serve other functions as well, i.e., they may not be dedicated solely to supply chain management. They could be working in the public or private sector, though the public sector is prioritized by this workstream due to the particular challenges in terms of available training, incentives and resources.

³ Lack of professionalization is only one factor limiting public health supply chains; other limiting factors include insufficient investment, poor information systems, poor infrastructure, and weak governance. Moreover, positive health outcomes will not be assured by improved supply chain performance alone, as health systems face many challenges (e.g., deficiencies in financial resources, human resources, technical capacity, management capacity). This white paper only addresses the challenge of professionalizing public health supply chain management. Other health system challenges are the focus of distinct efforts led by the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition, its members, and other international and national actors.

This white paper proposes goals, an approach, activities, and a call to action that aim to engage key stakeholders in a harmonized effort to professionalize public health supply chain management, by emphasizing a cultural shift in international notions of public health supply chains, institutional shifts in prioritization of and requirements for supply chain manager positions, and individual opportunities for professional education and networking.

The Role of the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition

The Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (hereafter, the Coalition, www.rhsupplies.org) is a global partnership of public, private, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to ensuring that all people in low- and middle-income countries can access and use affordable, high-quality supplies to ensure better reproductive health. The Coalition brings together diverse agencies and groups with critical roles in providing reproductive health supplies, including multilateral and bilateral organizations, private foundations, governments, civil society, and private-sector representatives.

The Coalition recognizes the importance of an effective and efficient supply chain for assuring the availability of reproductive and other health supplies, and thus for positive health outcomes. The Coalition has launched a new workstream⁴ to respond to the limitations on public health supply chain performance that are attributable to the lack of professionalization in supply chain management.

As the challenges of limited professionalization affect all health programs, the Coalition will proactively engage with donors, technical agencies, regional and national institutions, and other stakeholders throughout the health sector to harmonize and implement approaches for professionalizing supply chain management for all health commodities.

The Goal of Professionalizing the Management of Public Health Supply Chains

The overarching goal of professionalizing the management of public health supply chains is to improve public health outcomes through strengthened supply chain performance. Professionalization of supply chain management will require shifts in the *cultural*, *institutional*, and *individual* aspects of supply chain management.

- The required *cultural* shift will require that international organizations and countries recognize, first, the necessity of strong supply chain performance for positive health outcomes; second, that supply chains are complex systems whose management requires significant technical and managerial capacity; and third, that supply chains must be developed and operated within a culture that values and uses information for decision-making, performance monitoring, and accountability. This cultural shift should result in international support for pre-service training and professional certification, elaboration of required supply

⁴ Organizational members of the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition who have participated in the workstream include: Crown Agents, John Snow, Inc., Marie Stopes International, the United Nations Population Fund, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the USAID | DELIVER Project.

chain competencies for individuals fulfilling distinct roles at different levels of the supply chain, international recognition of superior performance in managing public health supply chains, and focused interventions to enable access to and use of the information required for successful supply chain management.

- The described cultural shift will support a corresponding shift in *institutional* aspects of public health supply chains. Institutions, including governments, who manage public health supply chains will recognize the importance and complexity of supply chain management and the fundamental need for information as the basis for supplies-related planning and decision-making. They will accept supply chain management as a profession which includes senior level, middle level, and operational level staff. They will recruit, train, support, and supervise those staff properly, define their roles, and clarify performance expectations. They will include supply chain managers in the decision and policy-making apparatus of health systems.
- With cultural and institutional support for professionalization, the *individuals* who make the supply chain work will have the impetus and opportunity to access needed training, knowledge, tools, people, and information, and the incentives to work with enthusiasm, leadership and ownership for their programs. The supportive environment and available opportunities will result in cadres of qualified supply chain managers working at international and national levels.

These goals are supported by the approach and activities described below.

A Collaborative and Holistic Approach

The Coalition's holistic approach to professionalization is built around two necessary components for success: one, the early and active involvement of a broad array of key stakeholders from global, regional and national organizations, both inside and outside of the Coalition, as well as individual supply chain managers; and two, engaging in activities to promote professionalization that acknowledge and accommodate the diversity and various depths of professional supply chain management knowledge and skills required.

Some supply chain managers must possess a wide and general understanding of how a supply chain works in order to guide system functions and improvements effectively; others work in specific technical areas (e.g., procurement or distribution) or specific settings (e.g., particular country context, stable or emergency environments) requiring specific and in-depth knowledge. Professionalism applies to both types of supply chain manager, and yet their differences must be accommodated in our approach to harmonization. By engaging a wide array of key stakeholders in the professionalization process, the breadth and depth of the competencies and needs required of all types of supply chain managers can be explored and areas requiring specialized skills identified.

To lend credibility and meaning to the title "Professional Supply Chain Manager," definitions of professional competencies and needs will need to be aligned and harmonized among those involved. Already, different global, regional and national agencies and associations have taken important steps to promote professionalization of supply chain management. To foster collective action, the perspectives and needs of all

stakeholders will be reflected in the definitions and competencies that ultimately emerge. Weaknesses not addressed by existing efforts will be addressed collectively; collective efforts will be particularly critical to success in creating the cultural and institutional shifts in the concept of supply chain management, as described above. This collective approach and the resultant shifts in cultural and institutional notions of supply chain management promise to systematically advance this initiative and generate wide adoption of professional standards, status, and incentives for supply chain managers.

Expected Activities for Professionalizing the Management of Public Health Supply Chains

To achieve the goals set out above, the Coalition has identified a number of activities that may be undertaken to professionalize the management of public health supply chains. The Coalition would implement these activities jointly with key stakeholders to improve commodity availability and to strengthen commodity systems across health programs.

The Coalition is developing materials that will serve as a starting point for harmonization among partners on professionalizing the management of public health supply chains:

- *Draft white paper on professionalizing the management of public health supply chains:* The Coalition has developed this white paper to demonstrate the need for professionalization, to promote alignment with stakeholders within and outside the Coalition, and to propose draft goals, approach, and activities. The white paper will be routinely updated to reflect agreed-upon principles.
- *Develop draft key competencies for supply chain managers:* USAID, to support this workstream of the Coalition, has funded the development of draft key competencies for public health supply chain managers, which will serve as a basis for discussion and harmonization with other stakeholders.
- *Analyze current supply chain training opportunities and gaps:* The Coalition has funded an activity to identify existing training opportunities for supply chain management, remaining gaps, and recommendations to improve access to and availability of relevant training.

The Coalition will work with partners to create broad, international support for professionalization of supply chain management, creating a *cultural* shift within key international organizations and the international public health community:

- *Initiate discussions across programs on need for professionalization and the desired goals, approach, and activities.* The Coalition and its members will engage key stakeholders from outside of the Coalition in discussions on the need for professionalization of supply chain management and to review and revise the desired goals, approach, and activities.⁵

⁵ The Coalition has invited some external organizations working towards the professionalization of supply chain management to participate in the workstream and the development of this white paper. Participating external organizations include the World Health Organization's Department of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals, the OPTIMIZE Project, the Fritz Institute, Bioforce, and the International Association of Public Health Logisticians. See footnote 5 for Coalition members who participate in this workstream.

- *Support alignment among stakeholders on required definitions, competencies and incentives for supply chain managers:* The Coalition will work with stakeholders to develop consensus definitions of who health supply chain managers are, what functions are included in public health supply chain management, what competencies are required for those functions, and what professional support and incentives supply chain managers require.
- *Advocate with key international organizations to incorporate agreed points into their institutional strategies and frameworks.* International organizations will be encouraged to incorporate the agreed-upon goals, requirements, and competencies within institutional strategies and frameworks, as a necessary step for fostering their adoption at the national levels. Normative support for these will be sought through the World Health Organization.

The Coalition will work with partners to promote professionalization of supply chain management within national *institutions*; such institutions would demand technically qualified staff for positions with supply chain management responsibilities and would provide appropriate support and incentives for those staff:

- *Develop tools that support advocacy with national institutions on supporting professionalized supply chain management:* The Coalition and partners will develop tools and materials that will support advocacy with governments and national institutions for professionalizing supply chain management.
- *Advocate with governments and institutions to integrate the accepted competencies and certifications within their programs:* Participating stakeholders would actively encourage governments and national institutions to incorporate the agreed-upon competencies into their supply chain manager position descriptions, to require appropriate qualifications among their supply chain management staff (by hiring certified staff or supporting certification trainings), to adopt an information culture as the necessary environment for successful supply chain performance, to provide appropriate professional incentives, and to include supply chain managers in institutional decisions which impact supply chains.

The Coalition will support opportunities for individual supply chain managers that further the goal of professionalization:

- *Support benchmarked trainings, pre-service degrees, and certifications for supply chain management:* Following agreement on the required competencies for supply chain management, stakeholders would benchmark supply chain training and professional development opportunities against these criteria, develop jointly recognized certification schemes for supply chain management, and encourage pre-service training programs that meets the required competencies.
- *Create a clearinghouse for information on supply chain training:* The Coalition will update, maintain and disseminate a database of existing supply chain training opportunities.
- *Develop incentives for public health supply chain managers:* Incentives for low- and middle-income country public health supply chain managers will be supported; these may include honors and recognition for exceptional performance as well as strengthened professional networks that encourage supply chain managers to engage with, learn from, and recognize peers.

- *Provide necessary tools and resources for supply chain management:* The Coalition and its members will continue to create, enhance, and provide ongoing support for tools and resources that enable health supply chain managers to maintain and improve their skills, access and utilize information, adapt to changing environments, and connect with their peers.

Call to Action for Countries, Donors, and Technical Agencies and Partners

The Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition recognizes that public health supply chains in low- and middle-income countries are currently unable to efficiently and reliably ensure supply of the required drugs, vaccines and other health commodities, which negatively impacts public health outcomes. The Coalition stresses that professional supply chain managers – with the necessary training, skills, resources, information, motivation and empowerment, at all levels of the health system – will be absolutely vital for meeting current and future challenges in public health.

The Coalition therefore urges donors, technical agencies and partners that support public health programs in low- and middle-income countries to:

1. **Commit** to support the professionalization of public health supply chain management and to address supply chain needs at all levels of the health system;
2. **Engage with the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition** to support professionalization of public health supply chain management through harmonized and collaborative efforts, including through reviewing and providing comments on this white paper to the Coalition (communications@rhsupplies.org);
3. **Work closely with the Coalition, with each other, and with countries** to initiate and implement necessary advocacy actions to foster cultural and institutional recognition of supply chain management as a highly complex function, indispensable for public health programs and for meeting the Millennium Development Goals, which requires professionally qualified, motivated, and empowered managers;
4. **Assist countries** in developing cadres of professional supply chain managers through: agreeing on required competencies for managing health supply chain functions at various levels of health system, encouraging commitments to hire technically qualified staff to manage those functions, promoting information-driven supply chain management, and supporting empowerment of supply chain managers through professional incentives and recognition; and
5. **Advocate** with governments to recognize that strengthening and professionalization of supply chain management for public health is a national priority, a global concern, and a shared responsibility.