Responding to Public Health Emergencies in Mozambique During the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond

Due to the effects of climate change, Mozambique is becoming more vulnerable to natural disasters like tropical cyclones that can destroy local health facilities, disrupting how health services are accessed and medical supplies delivered. This is especially apparent in communities at the last mile that may have infrastructure challenges, making them even harder to reach. In the event they are cut off from provincial health facilities making routine deliveries after the storm, these remote communities are at a substantial risk for outbreaks of diseases like cholera. Recent natural disasters like the Idai and Kenneth Cyclones put the country’s public health system under growing pressure to offer.

Since 2020, VillageReach and Dalberg have been providing technical assistance by:

1. Strengthening MISAU’s capacity for public health emergency management.
2. Developing and implementing an operationalization plan for the national PHEOC.

VillageReach’s two decades of experience in health care delivery and deep relationships in Mozambique aptly positioned the organization to assist MISAU in its goal of becoming more prepared for public health emergencies.
Strengthening MISAU’s capacity for public health emergency management

During the second wave of COVID-19 in fall 2020, MISAU redirected response efforts to address the immediate needs of the pandemic and requested technical assistance in the coordination of the emergency response plan and information management. During this planning support stage, VillageReach and Dalberg conducted an intra-action review of the 2020 COVID-19 response plan. This review highlighted that the PHEOC was not in a position to fulfill its intended role of centralizing coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic; instead, it functioned primarily as a data center within the Department of Health Surveillance. The review provided recommendations to update and streamline the 2021 response plan. To improve coordination at the national, provincial and district level, VillageReach provided technical assistance in the development and use of tools to monitor the 2021 response plan (activity tracker, dashboard, response bulletins and meeting note templates) to Technical Working Groups (TWGs), the PHEOC secretariat and other stakeholders. All the tools were transferred to MISAU and are being used to monitor work plans.

In collaboration with N’weti, a local NGO, VillageReach is also documenting the best practices during the COVID-19 response which will provide information to decision makers at MISAU and PHEOC in order to increase their efficiency and efficacy in future public health emergency responses.

Developing and implementing an operationalization plan

One of the recommendations of the intra-action review included activating and operationalizing the PHEOC so that it could support the COVID-19 response in a meaningful way.

Since October 2021, VillageReach, with the support from Dalberg, began aiding the MISAU in the implementation of the PHEOC operationalization plan. During this phase, we conducted interviews with key informants (MISAU Directors, heads of the TWGs, partners and donors) using the WHO-recommended approach to understand the PHEOC landscape in Mozambique. We hosted workshops with TWGs and National Directors to discuss the PHEOC anchoring within MISAU, mission and vision. We conducted a literature review to evaluate the current PHEOC focusing on its legal framework, internal structure, strategy, procedure, plans and revised case studies from African countries, including Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali and Ethiopia.

Competing priorities and staff capacity remain consistent challenges affecting the PHEOC operationalization process. However, all activities are being led by MISAU, with VillageReach and Dalberg providing the technical assistance, demonstrating the country’s ownership and buy-in of the operationalization process to build a resilient health system that is able to effectively respond to future health emergencies.

PHEOC’s Vision

“To act as a single, agile institution that successfully mitigates and minimizes the impacts of public health emergencies through integrated and coordinated mechanisms.”

To achieve this vision, PHEOC focuses on eight critical areas:

1. Ensure strategic monitoring of all public health incidents.
2. Conduct investigations for all public health incidents.
3. Prepare operational modalities for response, including at the region and district levels.
4. Command and coordinate public health emergency response activities and the different actors involved.
5. Provide reliable information and analysis in real-time to inform decision making.
6. Coordinate and ensure more active surveillance for early detection.
7. Strengthen multi-sectoral coordination and strategies for mitigation, preparedness and response.
8. Analyze emergency responses retrospectively to identify and implement key opportunities for continuous improvement.