



Considerations when applying EQUIST

(Adapted from Every Newborn Action Plan Country Planning and Costing Toolkit and User Guide)

When planning and prioritizing child health activities, countries face the challenge of how best to address disparities in health as a part of this process. EQUIST helps to develop plans based on equity principles. It brings together into one platform all possible interventions, and considering the available fiscal space can project scenarios to advance child health agendas while reducing inequities in health. Health disparities may occur based on geography, socio-economic status, gender, or other factors. They may not be visible when progress towards health targets is based on national averages, however in the context of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), the global health community is increasingly aware of the need to measure and address persisting inequalities.

The EQUIST tool was developed to reduce disparities between the most marginalized mothers and children under five, and the better-off. It supports equity-based analyses, highlighting for example low performing areas based on a defined population, and selected child health indicators. Countries can apply EQUIST to build scenarios for costing and lives saved, which can be presented to relevant ministries for consideration and to focus resources based on the evidence.

EQUIST invites users to adopt a stepwise approach¹, based on a sound theory of change, and entails: defining and understanding priority populations, as well as priority health issues among these groups; selecting priority interventions while considering the bottlenecks affecting their delivery; developing strategies to address the causes of the bottlenecks, and estimating the costs and impacts of these strategies. The tool can therefore effectively support decision-making processes and planning for scale-up of child health interventions.

EQUIST is unique in that it helps to define strategies and plans that are truly equity focused. Beyond identifying health disparities, it enables comparison of different intervention scenarios by estimating the impact and cost-effectiveness of selected high-impact interventions. It calculates impact as reductions in morbidity and mortality among the most vulnerable women and children under five, or reductions in health disparities. This is achieved when the gap between the most deprived and the better-off in a particular region or country is narrowed. The tool incorporated the Lives Saved Tool (LiST), which quantifies the number of lives saved and the associated cost based on implementation of different strategies.

¹ EQUIST offers a stepwise logical approach:

1. Define priority populations
 2. Prioritize health issues among targeted population
 3. Prioritize interventions to address those issues, and that currently have low effective coverage
 4. Identify challenges or bottlenecks that disrupt service delivery for the most deprived, and that cause the low coverage
 5. Understand the root causes of bottlenecks within a population
 6. Select strategies to address the causes of the bottlenecks
 7. Assess expected impacts and cost-effectiveness of the strategies
- EQUIST: Equitable Strategies to Save Lives- Technical Notes http://equist.info/files/general_files/Technical_Notes.pdf



In practical terms, EQUIST can be used to:

- provide a logical structure to address disparities in health
- build an evidence base on maternal, newborn and child mortality and the underlying causes
- conduct a bottleneck analysis and distinguish program-level issues (e.g. lack of capacity to conduct an intervention) from system-level issues (e.g. a lack of providers)
- understand the expected impact of interventions (e.g. number of deaths averted), which can help to communicate highly technical information to a broader audience, e.g. policy settings
- compare different scenarios as part of an iterative policy making process; the tool allows to compare outcomes of different investment models, and costed activities

Depending on countries' requirements EQUIST can be used for different purposes: to conduct a situation analysis, to prioritize bottlenecks, to analyse and compare scenarios and make decisions during action plan development.

Key links:

- EQUIST site: <http://equist.info>
- User Guide: https://equist.info/equist2_service/files/general_files/User_Guide.pdf
- Technical Notes: https://equist.info/equist2_service/files/general_files/Technical_Notes.pdf
- Country dashboard: <https://equist.info/#/dashboard/profile>
- Additional resources: <https://equist.info/#/resources>

Challenges:

- Data requirements for the tool has been flagged by countries as a challenging area (e.g. for interventions coverage). Acknowledgement of data gaps is an important outcome of applying EQUIST and can initiate processes to make that data accessible over time. In many countries a large portion of the data is not disaggregated (e.g. by rural /urban settings, wealth quintiles) or is not available at the subnational level. When all available data sources have been exhausted and gaps remain, country teams have reported relying on the opinions of experts to complete the planning exercise, based on a consensus process.
- Some countries have stressed the role of experts with experience in programming and planning at the country level to successfully apply the tool. Without such contextual in-depth knowledge, the resulting scenarios and country profiles may not reflect the situation on the ground, especially when data gaps require several assumptions to be made to conduct the exercise. A key lesson learned is that completing EQUIST is a group effort and should involve staff who know the country well.
- Another challenge raised by countries relates to the scarcity of experts who can apply EQUIST independently. One country reported having local staff trained to use the tool, but at the time of application for planning purposes they requested a staff member from an international NGO to lead the process. A possible solution in this scenario is to pair the person in charge of applying the tool with



an EQUIST expert who could support, and guide as required or setting up online training to this end.

Recommendations for applying EQUIST

- Engaging with different thematic groups is helpful when implementing EQUIST, specifically, to discuss both program-specific and system-specific issues. Inclusion of experts on the health systems building blocks is recommended.
- EQUIST is populated with preloaded information, however users are strongly encouraged to validate the existing data. As much as possible, all available information should be reviewed and analysed prior to the policy discussions.
- Set up a strong team who can support the process with relevant expertise. The tool is an instrument and does not in itself provide solutions. Instead, it offers models and scenarios that users should carefully reflect on. Local experts should therefore be involved who bring knowledge of country issues, so that the analysis is based on contextual insights. Regional experts may also provide complementary information.
- Ensure representation of the perspectives of target populations and communities, for example by collecting qualitative data through interviews, focus groups, etc. This information can provide a rich context for understanding the quantitative data and ensure meaningful analysis.
- At the district level, EQUIST can also be used as a management tool to regularly appraise bottlenecks and ways to address them, and to develop equity-focused plans.
- Following application of the tool, the team should ensure that the resulting strategy or plan is implemented, and that interventions are monitored and assessed over time. Country teams can use the evidence-base and scenarios in EQUIST to create momentum and attract resources for this work.
- In addition to relying on funds from international donors, it is important to foster national ownership and leadership to leverage internal funds. Actively involving government stakeholders from the beginning is essential to this end.

In terms of **timelines for applying EQUIST**, countries can expect to invest (as a minimum, also subject to anticipated scope of work):

- 1-2 weeks to collect and review available data
- 1 week (approximately) for policy discussions. This includes an initial stakeholder orientation to the tools, and time dedicated to prioritizing bottlenecks and strategies to address them. This should be an iterative process with several rounds of consultations, given that perspectives may change based on available evidence
- 2-3 weeks to refine the intervention strategies, again based on further policy discussions; it may involve a wider stakeholder base, and can lead to the initial drafting of an action plan
- this will be followed by a longer process to gain further support for the plan, and to put into place the organizational requirements and political support for its endorsement and implementation