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Eight Nations Picked as Health-Aid Labs

By [BETSY MCKAY](#)

The Obama administration has selected eight countries to serve as learning labs for a new global health strategy aimed in part at reducing maternal and child deaths and combatting preventable diseases.

The move is among the first steps in the administration's overhaul of global health efforts, which calls for slowing increases in funding for HIV/AIDS programs, currently the cornerstone of U.S. health policy.

The new strategy would also devote more dollars and attention to attacking neglected tropical diseases and implementing other initiatives

But it comes amid mounting concerns about how much support President Barack Obama will win from Congress for a proposed 9% increase in global health spending for fiscal 2011.

The countries tapped to receive technical assistance and other resources are Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Mali, Malawi, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Guatemala, according to administration officials familiar with the plan.

The officials hope the countries will help them learn how to streamline and integrate disease programs managed by disparate U.S. agencies and to work more closely with foreign governments to combat killer diseases. They also hope to help countries build stronger, more sustainable health systems. The lessons will then be used to work with the 80 countries that receive U.S. global-health assistance, officials said.

"We want to make sure we know and have facts behind what works, what doesn't work, and why," a senior administration official said.

The countries were chosen based on the strength of their health infrastructures, international partners working within their borders and other factors, the official said.

Potential projects include working with the countries to expand their cadres of community-health workers and helping them improve supply chains to keep clinics stocked with medicines and vaccines, officials said.

It was unclear how much money these countries would receive for the programs. Mr. Obama's fiscal-year 2011 budget calls for a \$200 million strategic-reserve fund to support the learning-lab effort. Yet U.S. deficit concerns and competing priorities in Congress have fueled uncertainty about whether increases in global-health spending would be approved this year.

"We're seeing a slowdown in review of spending bills," said Smita Baruah, director of government relations for the Global Health Council, a nonprofit that represents health organizations and health-care workers. "Congress has been the one to always bump up funding for global health, but this year is a tough year."

Mr. Obama requested \$9.6 billion in global health funding for fiscal 2011, up from \$8.8 billion for fiscal 2010. About \$7 billion is for the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, up from \$6.8 billion in fiscal 2010 and \$2.3 billion in 2004. PEPFAR was launched by President George W. Bush.

Expanded spending is also sought in other areas where large gains can be made inexpensively, such as fighting neglected tropical diseases and improving access to proper nutrition and safe water.

The selection of the eight countries comes as the administration faces criticism from health-advocacy groups and experts for slowing spending increases for PEPFAR.

The administration's new direction "is setting back and derailing a very effective HIV/AIDS response," said Paul Zeitz, executive director of the Global AIDS Alliance.

Administration officials played down the importance of additional funding for the eight countries, arguing that technical assistance and looking for ways to find efficiencies were more important. "The added benefit is more around the management and technical support rather than the funds," a senior administration official said.