Health Systems Strengthening

Summary

The purpose of health systems strengthening (HSS) is to improve health and save lives.

A health system consists of all the institutions, resources and people whose primary purpose is to improve health. This includes all components of the health system: hospitals, clinics, doctors, community health workers, drug stores, financing and pharmaceuticals.

HSS refers to an array of activities, initiatives and strategies that lead to better health outcomes of a country’s population regardless of ethnicity, gender or religion.

Overview

For over 50 years, the U.S. government has made contributions to global health around the world; however, progress has been disjointed or slow in many countries due to weak or nonexistent health systems. In many developing countries a weak health system makes it difficult for individuals to receive proper care, especially among those who need it the most.

President Obama has said “We will not be successful in our efforts to end deaths from AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis unless we do more to improve health systems around the world.”

Functioning health systems are essential to the success of disease-specific health initiatives and to meeting the U.S. global health goals of ending preventable child deaths and achieving an AIDS-free generation. Strengthening health systems helps to ensure that U.S. investments in global health are sustainable.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines the health system with six core components or “Building Blocks:”

- **Service Delivery.** Good health services deliver effective, safe, quality care that is delivered at scale to reach populations when and where they are needed.

- **Human Resources.** Countries need enough skilled health workers, who are equitably distributed and composed of the right mix of providers (e.g., doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, surgeons, etc.), managers and support staff. Health workers need access to current information, and a safe and supportive work environment that promotes high performance.

- **Health Information Systems.** Accurate, timely health information is essential for monitoring health trends, identifying unmet needs, investing in performance improvements and measuring which approaches have the greatest health impact so they can be expanded.

- **Access to Essential Products.** Medicines, vaccines and other health products are crucial for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of health problems. A functioning health system ensures equitable access to these and other safe, quality products.

- **Financing.** A good health financing system raises sufficient funds and uses them efficiently to provide needed services. Good financing also protects people from financial ruin or impoverishment due to burdensome out-of-pocket expenses.

- **Leadership and Governance.** Competent leadership and effective management systems are critical for health systems facing pressure to produce sustainable results. Effective leadership and governance includes a strategic policy framework, oversight, regulation and accountability.
Making Progress

- Impressive gains in global health have been achieved by combining progress in biomedical technologies with strengthening the systems that deliver vaccines, drugs and other essential commodities.

- **In countries where public and private investments to strengthen frontline health workers have been made, deaths due to preventable causes have decreased and populations are healthier and more stable.**

- Information technologies are increasingly used to support better policies, planning and services.

- Investments in pharmaceutical supply chains have helped ensure reliable access to medicines.

- Better information about health financing and increased use of market incentives are improving the use of resources.

- Leadership training and attention to governance in the health sector are yielding better policy decisions and increased accountability.

U.S. Response and Strategy

Ultimately, health systems strengthening is about helping countries improve the health and save the lives of their citizens. HSS is key as the U.S. government continues to promote country ownership and sustainability. USAID has demonstrated its commitment to HSS and sees it as a central goal of all U.S. global health programming. In 2009, the U.S. government included HSS as a core principle of the Global Health Initiative, a six-year, $63 billion initiative that continues previous health investments and commits the U.S. to improving health through country-led platforms. In 2012, USAID established the Office of Health Systems to lead the agency’s work on health systems strengthening.

While significant efforts have been made to improve health systems, developing countries and the U.S. government should continue to address the obstacles that hinder further progress. Worldwide, there are 57 countries with critical health workforce shortages. In others, there are serious inequities in access to healthcare. In addition to having too few health workers, many countries suffer from weak information systems, irregular supply chains, inefficient use of resources and weak governance. These issues need sustained attention.

HSS is even more important in the current U.S. fiscal climate; every dollar invested in global health must add value and demonstrate progress toward achieving priority health outcomes. Strong health systems are imperative for maximizing the impact of global health investments.
Recommendations

Despite the acknowledged importance of HSS, the U.S. government is still in the process of developing a comprehensive, integrated approach to HSS. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Congress should ensure funds are allocated to health system strengthening** in all future health related legislation to ensure that capacity is built within a country’s system.

- **Congress should encourage USAID to:**
  - **Develop a comprehensive HSS strategy that identifies and advances measurable objectives for all six WHO Building Blocks.** The U.S. government has invested resources into doing HSS work in its partner countries, yet it currently lacks a unified approach. USAID should develop an over-arching strategy that clearly articulates its HSS goals, objectives and desired outcomes. The strategy should include a coordinated and comprehensive health workforce strengthening strategy with specific targets for increasing equitable access to qualified health workers, particularly in underserved areas, with a strategic focus on frontline health workers.

  - **Develop and regularly update HSS technical guidance to help inform the work of country-based U.S. government teams.** USAID should provide substantive guidance to its field staff that includes practical advice on how to design, implement and assess HSS programs. USAID’s HSS Principle Paper offers a cursory look at many aspects of HSS, but is not detailed enough to guide field programming.

  - **Define and apply clear metrics to assess the impact of U.S. investments in HSS.** As of early 2013, USAID is in the process of determining indicators to measure the impact of its HSS efforts. Monitoring progress is essential for ensuring programs are achieving desired results.

- **The Administration should integrate clients and communities into the U.S. government approach to HSS.** Community involvement and participation are key ingredients to well-functioning health systems. The U.S. government should ensure local populations are actively included in deciding the direction of its health-improving activities and the delivery of health care.

- **The Administration should work with NGOs and others who implement HSS assistance programs to find the most effective means for optimizing their partnership.** The U.S. government should take advantage of the HSS knowledge that already exists in the NGO and donor community and incorporate that expertise into its HSS programming.
**Contributors**

**Management Sciences for Health**  
Filmona Hailemichael  
fhaillemichael@msh.org  
Megan Rauscher  
mrauscher@msh.org

**IntraHealth**  
Mandy Folse  
mfolse@intrahealth.org

**International HIV/AIDS Alliance**  
Marielle Hart  
mhart@stopaidsalliance.org

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1 “Statement by the President on Global Health Initiative,” The White House Press Office.  

http://www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/en/.