### **Review Article**

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# Health systems in the SDG era: consolidating and building on the gains

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Global health today stands at cross-roads, with unanticipated problems challenging the unprecedented progress achieved over the last two decades. To achieve the targets established for the sustainable development goal 3 of "ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages", significant resources and comprehensive health systems must play a critical and integral role. World Health Organization's (WHO) framework for action on "Strengthening Health Systems to Improve Health Outcomes" has well identified the challenges of global health. The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health 2015-2030 states that for women's and children's health investments in high-impact health interventions for RMNCH at a cost of US\$5 per person per year up to 2035 in 74 high-burden countries, could yield up to nine times that value in economic and social benefits. As global health marches towards achieving universal health coverage (UHC), innovative health financing schemes and health system design will be the major determinants of equity and efficiency in resource allocation and health care delivery. Because we are now in a critical phase, it is imperative that the initial years of the SDGs receive utmost thrust from all relevant stakeholders across countries to initiate and maintain a sustained momentum for achieving the targets. The primary priority for the health-related targets' therefore' necessitates the need for formulation of robust, responsive and resilient health systems strategies by all the major policy makers and concerned stakeholders.

Keywords: Global health, Health systems, Sustainable development goals

#### INTRODUCTION

Global health today stands at cross-roads, with unanticipated problems challenging the unprecedented progress achieved over the last two decades. The dimensions and magnitude of progress in the last 25 years have been extra-ordinary: from 1990 to 2015, the annual number of under-5 deaths worldwide fell from 12 million to 5.9 million while the annual number of maternal deaths worldwide decreased from 5,32,000 to 3,03,000 between 1990 and 2015. Life expectancy in the second half of

the 20th century increased rapidly in most countries, dramatically in some such as China and Mexico. However, in spite of this, challenges remain. In the report on global health 2035: a world converging within a generation, The Lancet identifies (a) tackling the health problems of vulnerable groups in low and middle income countries (LMICs), (b) dealing with the demographic transition and a shift in the disease burden towards non communicable diseases (NCDs) in LMICs and (c) the effect of medical expenditures on households as a result of inadequate financial arrangements as the major issues

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confronting global health in the next 20 years.<sup>4</sup> Considering the impact of globalization on health progress of brain drain (migration), global spread of NCD risk factors and climate change, significant resources and comprehensive health systems must play a critical and integral role to achieve the targets established for the sustainable development Goal 3 of "ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages."

# CHALLENGES PLAGUING THE HEALTH SYSTEMS

The challenges faced by health systems across the globe have been well identified in the World Health Organization's (WHO) framework for action on "strengthening health systems to improve health outcomes". The report states that large health inequalities persist not only in underdeveloped countries but also within rich ones, such as the United States of America (USA) and Australia, where life expectancy still varies among population sub-groups by over 20 years. This fact is well illustrated by the increasing rate of Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in USA, which more than doubled between 1990 and 2013. The main reasons for this increase being lack of standard approaches to managing obstetric emergencies; poor coordination between antenatal and primary care, leading to delayed identification and management of pre-pregnancy complications; and a general lack of good data- and related analysis— on maternal health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> The reasons definitely point towards weak and ineffective systems and the need for a sustained and comprehensive approach to strengthen health systems.

The importance of having responsive and resilient health systems in a changing world is perhaps best brought forward by the recent Ebola virus outbreak in 2014-15 and the Zika virus epidemic. The magnitude of impact of the Ebola Virus outbreak is well documented: the weak health systems in the countries affected by the outbreak augmented the direct damage caused due to the disease. The countries most affected by Ebola rank among the lowest in global development due to inadequate health systems and lack of essential public health infrastructure, the most basic aspect of which is an adequate health workforce. WHO estimates a shortage of 7.2 million doctors, nurses, and midwives globally, with the countries most affected by Ebola among those with the worst shortages. The Ebola outbreak in the most-affected countries disrupted essential health programs and systems with widespread consequences, including an evident loss of trust in the health system; reduced utilization of services; a negative impact on the health workforce, health system leadership and governance; and high avoidable all-cause mortality.8

Irrespective of the pressing situations, multiple scenarios across countries have illustrated the gains achieved by adapting the health systems to priority needs and available resources. A prime example is the reduction of

health inequalities in Thailand through improved insurance coverage, equitable distribution of primary health care infrastructure and intervention coverage. The Ethiopia health workers program, cadre of lady health workers (LHW) in Pakistan and the accredited social health activist (ASHA) program of India have clearly demonstrated the impact of sound human resource policies in creating systems to bridge the last mile.<sup>5, 9, 10</sup> Improved financing schemes in Colombia and augmenting the institutional capacity for policy analysis in Kyrgyzstan are other success stories demonstrating the positive impact of augmenting health systems.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most recent and comprehensive approach is outlined within the reproductive maternal new born child and adolescent health (RMNCH+A) strategy in India, which involves health system strengthening (HSS) efforts for improved outcomes across the 184 poorly performing high priority districts (HPDs) of the country.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

To learn from past successes and failures, it is imperative to prioritize the need for responsive and resilient health systems to address the growing needs of a dynamic and fast-paced world. It is imperative that the WHO health system framework (Figure 1) is implemented in totality by ensuring sound interrelationships between the six system building blocks for achieving the overall goals and outcomes. In addition the framework should be well complemented by a comprehensive approach to engage and promote community participation and involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) towards developing sound and effective health systems.

Out of 144 study participants, 111 (77%) were aware that the global priorities have been set right by aligning the building blocks within the targets envisaged for the SDG 3. This, however, needs to be complemented by welldesigned implementation practices, including sound financing structures. The global strategy for women's, children's and adolescents' health 2015-2030 corroborates this fact by stating that for women's and children's health, health system investments, alongside investments in high-impact health interventions for RMNCH at a cost of US\$5 per person per year up to 2035 in 74 highburden countries, could yield up to nine times that value in economic and social benefits. These include greater gross domestic product (GDP) growth through improved productivity, thereby preventing 32 million stillbirths and deaths of 147 million children and 5 million women by 2035, with gains being well substantiated by simultaneous implementation of WHO's global action plan for the prevention and control of NCDs (2013-2020). 12,13 An additional component needed to enable health systems to deliver responsive and high-quality services and improved outcomes is for governments, organizations, and leaders to address women's continued under-representation in health leadership, management, and governance and enable health system-wide approach that builds women's leadership capacity, highlighting

their importance in health governance, and mainstreaming gender at all levels of the health system.<sup>14</sup>

The need of the hour involves fast-tracking the global health security agenda (GHSA), which advocates building resilient public health systems to stop infectious disease threats and provides a framework with clear targets to accelerate progress in strengthening public health systems needed to protect global health security.<sup>15</sup>

This also necessitates improving responses to human and health-related emergencies to mitigate the direct impact in affected geographies and the damage to other countries, by institutionalizing a dedicated international health systems fund at WHO and strong global partnerships to encompass both emergency response capabilities and enduring health-system development with the returns of longer, healthier lives and economic development far exceeding the costs.<sup>7</sup>

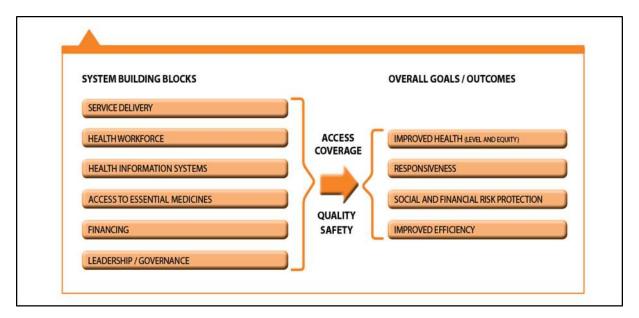


Figure 1: The WHO health systems framework.

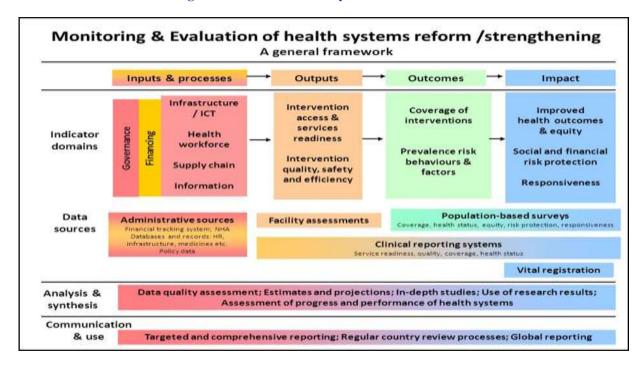


Figure 2: WHO M&E framework for health systems reform/strengthening.

The spectrum of disruptive technologies/disruptive innovations is ever expanding, so it is imperative that holistic health systems research identifies mechanisms

wherein these are adapted to LMICs with international trade agreements modelled to facilitate the shift in technology and learning. Specifically, inter-operability solutions for exchanging patient information across care settings is one technological development that can shape the future of healthcare organizations and transform health systems across the globe. <sup>16</sup>

The impact of the above mechanisms can only be sustained if the efforts for reshaping the health systems are backed by a strong and effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework, which makes implementation of the WHO health systems M&E framework absolutely essential (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, with the growing volume of data being generated, adapting big data analytics to health care systems would result in improved data management by discovering associations and understanding patterns and trends, with the potential to improve care, save lives and lower costs. <sup>18</sup>

As global health marches towards achieving universal health coverage (UHC), innovative health financing schemes and health system design (funding and delivery configuration) will be the major determinants of equity and efficiency in resource allocation and health care delivery. Tackling infections and RMNCH disorders, while also reducing NCDs and injuries, will best be achieved in most countries through a diagonal approach, with stronger health systems that are focused on achieving measurable health outcomes. Description of the contraction of the countries are focused on achieving measurable health outcomes.

#### WAY FORWARD

The millennium development goals (MDGs) provided an initial framework for measuring progress but were often challenged because of the fragmented approach which ignored the needs of adolescents, adult males, nonpregnant women and the elderly. They focused exclusively on mortality-related targets, ignoring the high burden of illness and disability that occurs even when diseases don't kill immediately. Further, the goals and targets were intended only for the LMIC, with no obligation for the high-income countries. The SDGs, on the other hand, are applicable to all countries, encompassing a life-course perspective to ensure that the health needs of every person are addressed at each stage of life. Moving on from an exclusive focus on averting deaths, the mission now also addresses the protection of health and promotion of well-being as important priorities. Major causes of death and disability, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases (grouped under NCDs), mental illness, traffic injuries, substance abuse and pollution, have been included, and the unfinished agenda of the MDGs - improvement of maternal and child health and control of infectious diseases continues with renewed commitment, in the health SDG.<sup>21</sup> It is quite clear that we have set ourselves a daunting task and need strong and equipped health systems to complete the same.

Furthermore the framework of the SDGs offers us a unique opportunity of bringing health systems and health to the forefront of the global agenda. An analysis of the 17 goals points towards close inter-relationship and interdependence between multiple sectors and the need to adopt a comprehensive and holistic system - based approach to fast-track the progress towards achieving the SDGs. The envisaged role of robust health systems in achieving the SDGs is extremely pertinent at this point and a concerted effort will be needed to highlight this to the global community.

Because we are now in a critical phase, it is imperative that the initial years of the SDGs receive utmost thrust from all relevant stakeholders across countries to initiate and maintain a sustained momentum for achieving the targets. The primary priority for the health-related targets' therefore' necessitates the need for formulation of robust, responsive and resilient health systems strategies by national governments that work towards integrating HSS efforts with evidence-based, high-impact technical interventions to improve not only the access and utilization of services but also provide quality care to accelerate the pace of progress of global health interventions and contribute effectively to the overall SDG agenda.

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