

# Health systems strengthening: a context-specific approach



- ▶ National governments should articulate a clear vision for their health system, which can then be costed into a strategic plan.
- ▶ Governments should commit adequate, sustainable financing for health, and ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable are protected from impoverishing healthcare costs.
- ▶ Development partners should use their expertise and resources to support national governments to achieve their health system vision.
- ▶ Malaria Consortium's approach is to help governments to diagnose the health system, identify gaps and fill them with context-specific, sustainable interventions.

▶ Staff at a health facility in Niger State, Nigeria see mothers and their children at a routine immunisation clinic

## What is health systems strengthening?

The concept of 'health systems strengthening' has existed in development for some time, but it can often be used as an all-encompassing term that covers any activity that involves healthcare. At its simplest, health systems strengthening is a conscientious way of working in health development; it is not any particular activity, but rather a set of principles and behaviours that inform our approach to improving health in an informed, effective and careful way.

Health systems strengthening is not an easy or quick task, and there is no 'perfect' healthcare system. Each must be unique, fitting the social and economic context of a country and responding to the particular health needs of its population. This necessitates an approach that is evidence-based, context-specific and responsive to the needs of individual communities.

Most health systems evolve over time rather than being designed from the outset. As a result, inefficiencies and systemic flaws can develop that may be much harder to remedy. Although a great deal of health systems strengthening is identifying and fixing gaps and problems, it is best to mitigate future issues through an adequate analysis of the health system and the instigation of an effective plan as early as possible.

## Malaria Consortium's view of health systems strengthening

Malaria Consortium believes that the key to successful health systems strengthening is deciding what a country's health system should look like, identifying what needs to be done to achieve it, and matching the resources required to make it a reality.

A country's government, accountable to its people, must be the lead actor with support from development partners. A strategic plan for the health system should be developed, based on an analysis of the health needs of all communities and population groups, an appreciation for the effectiveness of the current health system, and a realistic understanding of what is possible in the medium-term. It is important that this plan outlines a clear vision for what the health system will look like and is costed so that the resources needed for success are clear.

Governments must give careful consideration to which services are included in their planned health system and which are not. The successful achievement of universal health coverage, one of the key themes driving global health in the Sustainable Development Goals era, requires a basic package of health services to be extended to all. Governments must be realistic in deciding what services to include – if 40 percent of public health expenditure is currently spent on preventing and treating malaria, as is the case in several high-burden countries, then it is impractical to plan for expensive, advanced services that cannot be afforded. In such cases it is prudent to focus on de-burdening the health system of the impact of these diseases and illnesses first, so that it can function more effectively. It is better to succeed in extending a basic level of quality healthcare to all and build confidence in the system, before increasing the number and complexity of services on offer.

Once completed, a plan for the health system will provide a blueprint to guide decision making, and act as a benchmark against which success can be measured. The government should then commit adequate, sustained public resources, preferably in line with existing international commitments, such as the Abuja Declaration (to commit 15 percent of GDP to health). Throughout, it is important to engage the private sector and development partners, who can help meet gaps in service and financing.

## Malaria Consortium's approach to health systems strengthening

Malaria Consortium's approach to health systems strengthening is to support governments to diagnose the state of the existing health system, identify gaps and problems, and then work with those in the health system to implement bespoke, sustainable solutions.

To achieve this, Malaria Consortium uses the patient journey perspective, which is the most suitable approach for assessing the strengths of a health system as it focuses on the experience of those using its services. The patient journey can be considered in terms of both the patient's movements through pathways of care, as well as the administrative and logistics systems that facilitate these movements. Though the patient directly experiences only a part of the entire health system, areas such as governance and surveillance still impact upon their journey.

Importantly, Malaria Consortium views health systems strengthening and disease-specific interventions as interdependent, and not mutually exclusive. Much of our health systems strengthening work happens through a disease-based entry point, that prioritises having a sustainable and positive impact on the health system. In many cases, it is necessary to de-burden the health system from the strain caused by high disease endemicity, to free up resources for other health services, in order for it to function effectively.

*"I have witnessed a transformation of the entire health system. It has become more vibrant than ever before. The linkages between the community and the health centres have improved, especially due to the transport system, [and] the health facilities are also handling cases more effectively - Agnes Masagwai, Senior Nursing Officer and member of the District Health Team in Mbale.*

## Health systems strengthening and the Sustainable Development Goals

Effective health systems strengthening will help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strong and resilient health systems are critical to efforts to reduce mortality rates, tackle disease burdens and confront the rise of non-communicable illnesses. In particular, target 3.8 to achieve universal health coverage (UHC), is intrinsically linked to health systems strengthening. This requires that any approach to UHC fits with an approach to health systems strengthening, just as the careful selection of an achievable set of health services when strengthening a health system will be essential for achieving UHC.

Due to the connection between health and wider development, such as the positive impact that improving health has upon educational opportunity, economic development, poverty alleviation and equality, successful health systems strengthening will also contribute to efforts to realise many of the other SDGs.

There is a growing understanding of the importance of global health security for the realisation of the SDGs concerned with health and peace, justice and strong institutions (Goals 3 and 16). The recent Ebola and Zika outbreaks have given new impetus to improving the international community's ability to detect and respond to health emergencies.

Effective surveillance systems are essential for providing adequate early warning systems and guide appropriate strategies for responding to disease outbreaks, and it is, therefore, important that surveillance is strengthened at the national level as part of a health systems strengthening approach. They are also a necessary aspect of efforts to eliminate diseases, such as malaria, in low transmission settings where it is important to identify and treat every case, and support the collation and analysis of health data to inform healthcare planning.

### Mbale Malaria Control project

The Mbale Malaria Control project in Uganda demonstrates Malaria Consortium's approach to health systems strengthening. Malaria is the most common cause of illness and death in Mbale district, partly because people do not seek care either quickly or through the formal healthcare system. Malaria Consortium identified the lack of linkages between the community and the formal health facility level as a significant gap. By using malaria as an entry point, the project has helped to strengthen the health system the health system in Mbale in a number of ways:

- ▶ 2,748 village health team members (VHTs) were selected by the community and trained to sensitise people about a range of health issues and identify severely ill children for referral
- ▶ 184 health workers were trained at the health facility level in malaria case management
- ▶ A triage system was introduced to identify and prioritise severe cases
- ▶ Laboratory services were strengthened through the training of 70 laboratory technicians in malaria diagnosis
- ▶ Buffer stocks of drugs and other health supplies were introduced to reduce stock outs
- ▶ At the regional referral hospital level, we introduced solar panel-powered light for the paediatric emergency room, oxygen concentrators and laboratory operations

To bridge the gap between community and health facility, more than 400 motorcycle taxi (*boda-boda*) drivers were trained to transport sick children and pregnant women to the nearest health facility. Boda-boda drivers receive vouchers from the VHTs, which indicate the amount they would get paid when they deliver the patient to the health facility. This transport system has reduced the time in which patients reach a health facility, thus helping to reduce deaths from severe malaria.



► A *boda-boda* driver in Mbale transports a mother and her unwell baby to the nearest health centre.

## Financing

An effective health system requires sufficient and sustained financing. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with national governments, however, overseas development assistance from donors can play an important role in strengthening a health system, improving its effectiveness and identifying the most effective use of limited resources. Donors also have a role to play in using overseas development assistance to leverage further investment from a range of domestic sources – public and private, national and global – and in terms of capital and capacity.

However the health system is financed, whether from general revenue, insurance or any other model, it is important that the burden of paying for health does not fall upon the poorest and most vulnerable; healthcare costs push 100 million people into poverty every year. Governments should aim to reduce financial barriers to access and limit out-of-pocket payments for the poorest.

# Malaria Consortium's principles for health systems strengthening

These principles provide useful competencies against which to measure the effectiveness of a health system, helping actors to identify gaps and areas for strengthening:

- ▶ **Dynamic:** Malaria Consortium supports the six building blocks of the World Health Organization's health systems strengthening model<sup>1</sup>. We recognise that health systems are dynamic, and require an understanding of the interactions between the building blocks and factors outside of the system, such as the broader policy context, the community, disease prevention, donors, and public and private actors.
- ▶ **Person-centred:** Malaria Consortium believes that the best way to determine the strength of a health system is to explore it through the eyes of the people who need it. We trace the journey that people take through all levels of health provision in order to identify points that need strengthening.
- ▶ **Needs driven:** We work to identify and address needs and gaps in the current system. This could be disease-focused, such as an unmet need for malaria treatment or prevention, or systems-focused, such as a lack of access to treatment and diagnostic facilities. Where we choose to enter the system is based on careful analysis and the most recent evidence.
- ▶ **Non-disruptive:** Because health systems are inherently complex and already contain existing features, it is just as important that we are not disrupting the system in negative ways as it is to ensure that we are facilitating positive change. We avoid creating parallel systems, unless there is very strong justification, and we aim for new projects to be integrated within the existing public and private aspects of the health system when possible.
- ▶ **Participatory:** Malaria Consortium believes in involving community members in the health system to expand its scope beyond simply introducing new technologies or interventions.
- ▶ **Pragmatic and sustainable:** Malaria Consortium works with countries to find pragmatic solutions that build on the strengths of the existing health system, and translate their health system goals into practical and attainable steps that will result in better health systems and outcomes. We consider the long-term implications of decisions that aim to improve the health system.
- ▶ **Innovative:** We innovate because people and places are inherently unique. We are always searching for better and more efficient ways to deliver improved health outcomes, including interventions that have not been attempted before. Our innovative approach also explores opportunities to use technology to improve effectiveness and efficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> These are: (1) service delivery; (2) health workforce; (3) health information systems; (4) access to essential medicines; (5) financing; and (6) leadership/governance



► Patients waiting outside the health centre in Inhassoro, Mozambique

- **Effective and efficient:** Malaria Consortium considers an effective health system to be one that achieves improved health outcomes at both the individual and population levels, and delivers UHC to its population in the most resource-efficient way, informed by the latest scientific evidence.
- **Aligned with UHC:** Malaria Consortium believes that UHC is intrinsically related to health systems strengthening, and encompasses access, affordability, efficiency and quality as well as financial protection. We believe in reducing the barriers to care and eliminating impoverishing health expenditures that push people into poverty.
- **Vision driven:** Malaria Consortium supports a cohesive health system strategy that works towards a vision of the health system that has been defined in partnership with the country in which we are working. We implement pragmatic solutions that will help realise the overarching goal of a strong health system.

# Key messages

**National governments** in developing countries should play the leading role in strengthening their health systems, by:

- ▶ Deciding what health services should be included in the strengthened health system and which should not, based upon the latest evidence and the needs of specific populations – such as urban and rural – which will vary.
- ▶ Having a strong vision of what the successfully-strengthened health system will look like – this makes the ambition credible.
- ▶ Developing a costed plan, based upon evidence, of how to achieve the health system vision – this provides something to measure success against and will guide decision making.
- ▶ Committing adequate public resources to the health system, ideally in line with international commitments, such as the 2001 Abuja Declaration to spend 15 percent of GDP on public health.
- ▶ Investing in a sufficient health workforce that is trained, supported and motivated.
- ▶ Committing to achieving UHC, including protecting the poorest from impoverishing health expenditure and ensuring equitable access to quality health services and medicines.
- ▶ Strengthening surveillance systems for the early detection of disease outbreaks, identification and tracking of disease transmission in near-elimination settings, and the collation and analysis of data to support healthcare planning.

**Development partners** are essential in providing support and resources to effectively strengthen health systems. These partners should support national governments by:

- ▶ Working with national governments in long-term partnerships to support their efforts to achieve their health system vision, and ensuring all health interventions enhance the existing health system rather than disrupt it.
- ▶ Helping developing country governments to diagnose the health system and identify what needs strengthening.
- ▶ Supporting governments to take control of designing, strengthening and running their health system, using expertise and knowledge gained from the building of successful health systems.
- ▶ Providing financial support to meet funding gaps and supporting efforts to de-burden the system so that it can function effectively.
- ▶ Focusing research and innovation on the patient receiving better diagnosis and care.

## **Malaria Consortium**

Malaria Consortium is one of the world's leading specialist non-profit organisations focused on health. Our mission is to improve lives in Africa and Asia through sustainable, evidence-based programmes that combat targeted diseases and promote child and maternal health. Our uniqueness is in our ability to consistently design and apply tailored, technically excellent, evidence-based solutions, fit for effective implementation, with impact on the wider health system and economy.

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