



Health Systems Create Healthy Futures

It takes lots of things for a baby to be born healthy and thrive. It takes affordable health care and effective financing; nutrition food and vitamins; vaccines and medicines; trained and motivated health workers; equipped and accessible health facilities; clean water, electricity, and roads; education and knowledge; country leadership and good governance. It takes all of these things, working together in a system – a **health system**.

What is a Health System?

We live daily with many systems that support us in amazing ways. Whether it's the energy generation and transmission system that heats and illuminates our homes; or the financial system to which we trust our savings and pensions; or the international commerce system that enables us to buy a book online from abroad; or the transportation system that delivers it the next week—systems are essential to daily life. Systems work through a complex interaction of people, technologies, governance, regulations, and resources that we barely notice when they perform but, when they break down or don't exist, we suffer the consequences. Systems take care of the million little details between points A and B so people can focus on what matters most to them: their families, communities, and the future.

Few systems have more impact on peoples' lives than a health system. It is the network of people, information, resources and policies that give people access to health care. A health system has many components: It's the policy that funds the health clinic, the training that educates the health worker, the financing that allows a patient to secure treatment, and the accountability mechanisms that ensure quality care.

Strong health systems can make the difference between a woman who dies in childbirth at home and one who delivers safely in a clinic, a polio vaccine sitting in a vial and one protecting a child, or a family that falls into poverty due to catastrophic illness and one that has coverage to afford the care they need.

The World Bank and Health Systems: Healthy Development

Strengthening health systems is at the center of the World Bank's global strategy for health, nutrition, and population. The Bank doesn't focus on only one disease or condition, we look at health as a whole – what is preventing people from being healthy, how we can change this, and what impact it will have on development.

The Bank provides financing, state-of-the-art analysis, and policy advice to help developing countries expand equitable access to quality, affordable health care; protect people from falling into poverty or worsening poverty due to illness; and achieve universal access to health care in a fiscally sustainable way. The Bank finances investments in all of the sectors that



impact health – including education, infrastructure, water and sanitation, and transportation, to name just a few.

The World Bank’s global team of health and development experts in 99 countries is passionate about strengthening health systems to save lives and eradicate poverty. Since 2000, the Bank has provided \$24 billion for health – across all 19 development sectors in which we work-- to reach the Millennium Development Goals and help people in developing countries live healthy, productive lives.

The Opportunity

Countries need effective health systems to in place to deliver lifesaving health technologies and resources to the people who need them the most. Weak health systems have become a major bottleneck to harvesting the benefits of new, cost-effective technologies and increased international development assistance for health. In many developing countries, too many people are unable to benefit from quality health services because no system is in place to ensure availability or access.

Take vaccines, for example. Enormous resources have been committed to the development of new or enhanced vaccines, but these technologies will not be effective if they sit in central warehouses because the country’s health system does not have the adequate logistical and transport arrangements in place. Vaccines will fail if good logistics takes them to rural clinics but there is no trained health worker to administer them to children, or if they are voided by lack of cold-chain storage. Vaccines cannot save children if parents are not educated about the importance of vaccination or if they cannot pay, or if they mistrust the health system.

And while making lifesaving health technologies and services available, building the clinics, and training the workers are all essential components of a strong health system, these inputs are still not enough. Countries must also establish the right policies and incentives to deliver and sustain quality health services that are accessible and affordable for everyone. They must put financial mechanisms and incentives in place to stimulate and manage demand for health care, such as health insurance and conditional cash transfers. They also must make the necessary investments in other sectors beyond health care – such as in education, roads and transport, energy, logistics, and regulation – that also impact people’s health.

Investing in health systems is the key to saving lives, breaking the cycle of poverty, and creating healthy futures for all.