Data, information, and evidence-based decision making

Vaccinating a child or helping a pregnant woman safely deliver a healthy baby may seem to be just a simple transaction between a health care provider and a patient. In reality, as crises abate, the withdrawal of humanitarian agencies leaves dangerous service gaps, but also creates opportunities to rebuild with new technologies, best practices in leadership and governance, and evidence-based solutions. Through decades of effective work in Haiti, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan, MSH has become a recognized expert in supporting and strengthening health systems in fragile settings. We help countries transition from humanitarian crisis to post-crisis recovery, and finally to stability, sustainable development, and UHC. Our approaches and tools are specially adapted and enhanced for relevance, feasibility, and effectiveness in strengthening health systems in these especially challenging contexts.

Supporting Recovery in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In the DRC, years of civil conflict have left the health system profoundly weakened. As leader of the Integrated Health Project (IHP and IHPplus), USAID’s flagship program to strengthen the health system, MSH has:

- Supported rational, evidence-based planning — 78 percent of supported health zones had validated action plans in year 6, compared with only 6 percent in year 1
- Strengthened leadership and governance — of 254 teams participating in the LDP+ program, 84 percent achieved at least four-fifths of their leadership project targets
- Improved service delivery — 57 percent of facilities met their defined service criteria, compared with zero in year 1
- Aided integration — every site providing HIV services offered integrated family planning

Through proven, low-cost, high-impact interventions, over its first six years IHP contributed to saving the lives of more than 178,000 children and 14,000 newborns, preventing the loss of 54,000 maternal disability-adjusted life years, and averting 276,000 unintended pregnancies.

Rebuilding health systems in fragile settings

Without timely, accurate, and relevant information, health leaders can’t effectively set priorities, respond to changing conditions and disease outbreaks, allocate staff and resources, and meet the needs of people seeking care. MSH helps countries harness the possibilities of digital health technology by building user-friendly data systems, with configurable dashboards for health managers and mobile apps for community health workers; supporting national health information and electronic records systems that capture accurate, timely, and reliable data; and strengthening skills for analyzing, understanding, and acting on that information. Building on evidence, we facilitate better surveillance and control of infectious disease, rational planning and efficient implementation of programs, accurate reporting of results, and data-driven allocation of resources.

IN 2016, MSH WORKED IN 72 COUNTRIES.

#4 Capturing Data to Better Manage Medicines

Across PHLs, warehouses, health facilities, and community-based providers faced frequent stock-outs of lifesaving medicines. Managers lacked the regular, reliable information they needed to manage inventories. The USAID-funded Systems for Improved Access to Pharmaceuticals and Services (SIAPS) program, implemented by MSH, helped the Ministry of Health design and roll out an early warning system: a web-based dashboard that captures, aggregates, tracks, and reports real-time information on essential maternal and child health family planning, malaria, HIV, and nutrition commodities, and on the patients who need them. After three years, 98 percent of facilities and warehouses were regularly reporting data, and stock-outs in 32 warehouses were cut by more than half. The dashboard, now also introduced in Guinea and South Sudan, improves forecasting and planning, prevents stock-outs, and ensures that commodities are used before they expire.

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Leadership, management, governance

Many national health systems don’t work well enough for countries to achieve universal health coverage (UHC)—effective, equitable, affordable access to high-quality essential health services by everyone who needs them.

When even one aspect of the health system breaks down:
- People don’t go to health facilities, because overburdened, poorly managed health workers may not treat patients effectively and with the respect they deserve.
- Families can’t afford to use essential health services.
- Health workers can’t get medicines to treat their patients.
- Health system leaders don’t have the data they need to target services and allocate resources.

Health systems matter

Rational systems and processes must support effective, transparent work planning and resource allocation. Managers at every level need leadership and management skills to motivate staff, improve service quality, and correctly implement interventions that are proven to work. And communities must be empowered to hold the health system accountable for its performance. Building on many years of experience in dozens of countries, MSH is a leader in strengthening leadership, management, and governance so that health systems can better provide high-quality, people-centered care.

Four Pillars of Strong Health Systems

At the foundation of our work—at every level of the health system from national to district, facility, and community—are four key pillars that are essential to progress in developing integrated, equitable, people-centered health systems that work:

#1 Leadership, management, & governance

Better health system performance begins with inspired and inspiring leadership; sound management; and consistent, transparent governance. Rational systems and processes must support effective, transparent work planning and resource allocation. Managers at every level need leadership and management skills to motivate staff, improve service quality, and correctly implement interventions that are proven to work. And communities must be empowered to hold the health system accountable for its performance.

Leadership Development Program Plus (LDP+)

Our Leadership Development Program Plus (LDP+) has strengthened the leadership skills of health providers and managers in more than 40 countries. LDP+ fosters an empowering work environment, motivating teams to address pressing challenges and improve service quality. At Kagando Hospital in western Uganda, LDP+ helped 35 staff members transform obstetric services by identifying obstacles to progress in community outreach, health education, and prevention of supply stock-outs. In just one year after initiation of LDP+, contraceptive use nearly doubled, antenatal care attendance increased by 27 percent, and 11 percent more women delivered at the hospital instead of at home.

In 2016, MSH strengthened the skills and capacities of more than 59,000 men and women.

#2 Health financing

In a well-financed health system, health leaders allocate funds based on actual needs, understand complicated budgets, and know what services actually cost. Funds reach local health facilities, so health workers get paid and medicines can be purchased. User fees are eliminated or cut to affordable levels, and insurance or other prepayment plans prevent out-of-pocket costs from devastating families. Health workers are incentivized to deliver higher-quality care and meet performance goals. MSH helps countries mobilize resources for health, and spend them more efficiently; make health budgets more transparent; and develop innovative results-based financing and health insurance programs to motivate health workers and make high-quality services accessible to the poorest and most vulnerable.

Improving Performance with Results-based Financing

MSH is a key partner in health-sector reforms that have helped Rwanda—where maternal and child mortality fell by more than 70 percent between 2000 and 2013—become a global model for advancing universal health coverage. In pioneering results-based financing programs, community health workers receive financial incentives for referring pregnant women for skilled delivery care and accompanying them to health facilities, while national community-based health insurance expanded coverage from 7 percent to 74 percent in ten years, so fewer families face financial catastrophe due to health care costs.

#3 Access to medicines and pharmaceutical supplies

Everyone who needs medicine—to avoid unintended pregnancy, prevent infection, or treat disease—must receive the right drug, in the right dose, at the right time, at an affordable cost. MSH supports countries in improving policies and regulations, enforcing compliance, and developing robust systems to procure medicines and supplies, assure their quality, store them securely, and transport them where they are needed. We develop state-of-the-art training programs and tools to assist providers in managing medicines and commodities at all levels of the health system.

Bringing Quality Medicines to Underserved Communities

Private neighborhood drug shops—with no regulatory oversight, untrained owners and workers, and stocks of unreliable quality—are the first point of care for millions of people. MSH has worked with drug shop operators and national authorities in Tanzania, Uganda, Liberia, Nigeria, Zambia, and most recently Bangladesh (which alone has over 200,000 drug shops) to launch and scale up programs for accreditation, regulation, and training of these drug dispensing outlets. This has dramatically improved access to affordable, quality medicines and services—including malaria prevention and treatment, TB case finding, and family planning—and strengthened the livelihoods of the people (many of them women) who run these local businesses.

Four Pillars of Strong Health Systems

At the foundation of our work—at every level of the health system from national to district, facility, and community—are four key pillars that are essential to progress in developing integrated, equitable, people-centered health systems that work:

Stronger health systems, healthier families and communities

For more information on MSH’s work to sustainably strengthen health systems, please contact: communications@msh.org.