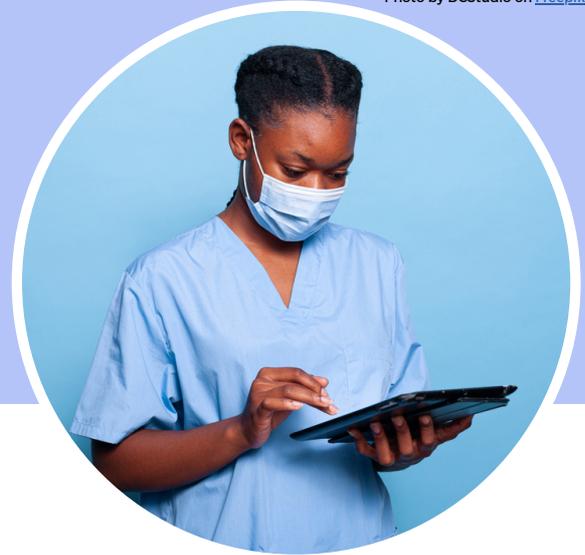




HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS

Photo by DCStudio on Freepik

How to report on the key structures that make up a health system and link them to your communities and their needs.



At face value, a story about your local health system at either a country or community level may seem mundane. However, if you've ever investigated a failing hospital or a clinic that can't provide even the most basic care, you've de facto reported on health systems.

A health systems story looks at the structures behind successes and failures in healthcare. It also connects the dots from the hyper-local to the national, regional and even global levels.

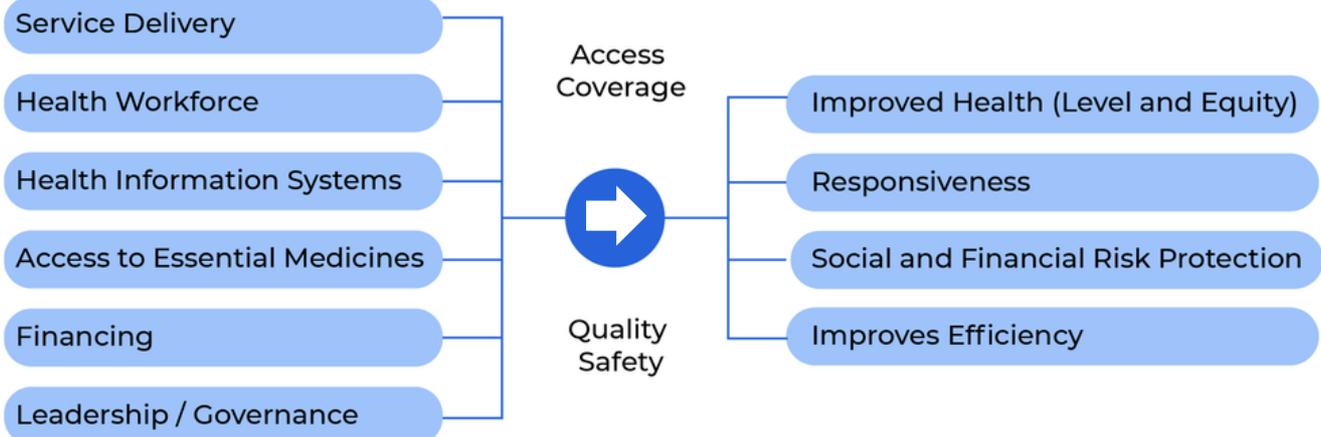
Maybe you live in a community without any ambulances or emergency care, why is this? Is it a lack of funding, trained personnel, or maybe the roads are impassable?

Maybe your local clinic can't provide essential childhood immunizations because they do not have appropriate refrigeration equipment to ensure cold chain of vaccines and electricity supply. Or, maybe, you've been approached by a local healthcare worker who claims that finances are being misused in their facility. All these issues represent potential stories and are an invitation for you to take a deeper look at the interrelated systems that are behind them.

Have we piqued your curiosity yet? Let's dive into this broad topic together!

Basic Pillars of a Health System

The WHO Health System Framework





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS

Photo by Mrsiraphol on Freepik



Health systems are the foundations to achieve and ensure health for all.

Health systems determine the ability of a society to respond to the healthcare needs of its population. From primary care visits and giving birth, to routine and complex surgeries, and even end-of-life care, there is a continuum of care that depends on a well-integrated system with adequate human and financial resources and a robust infrastructure to function effectively. A strong health system can, in theory, offer quality health care to all residents, regardless of their economic status. That said, it depends on how a health system is organized and funded. Understanding how much a government spends on health as a portion of its overall budget and what the role of the private health sector is, offers us a glimpse of financial responsibilities and potential out-of-pocket costs for ordinary people. If people forgo care because they cannot afford it, the health system is not treating everyone equally and people's quality of life will be reduced.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of a well-functioning health system when responding to a public health emergency. The ability to detect and contain the spread of a viral infection depends on many different factors, including having surveillance systems in place, lab facilities, trained technicians, and the availability of personal protective equipment. We have also learned that a strong health system alone is not enough to prevent the spread of disease. Political will is just as important. Lastly, coordination with the global health system is also critical for managing epidemics/pandemics.

Health systems are, by definition, complex ideas and explaining them to the public is far from easy. We hope this resource gets you thinking about the various aspects of a health system and elicits your curiosity in diving deeper into each core pillar.



Dr. Aday E. Adetosoye, Vice President of Global Health Programs at Management Sciences for Health (MSH), HJN Twitter Spaces event 8 June 2022.

Health System Strengthening is not a media friendly term and for that reason, it must be unpacked. It is a system that has the resources to provide high-quality services when responding to a disease outbreak and can quickly mitigate the spread of disease. It must be able to initiate a timely and coordinated response with a competent and well-trained workforce. It has a surveillance system that tracks and quickly communicates data from identification and diagnosis of the disease to the treatment and control of it. This includes data on deaths and mortality rates.





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS

Photo by benzoix on [Freepik](#)



Core Pillars of a Health System

A health system consists of all people, institutions, resources, and activities whose primary purpose is to promote, restore, and maintain health. There are many stand-alone pieces that make up this concept but, for a health system to be effective, these pieces must work together harmoniously. This section will take you through six core pillars that form a health system.

1

Service Delivery

Managing and delivering health care services

Health care delivery is what you see and experience when you seek medical attention. It has to do with patient flow, as well as the organization and delivery of all services dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of disease, or the promotion, maintenance, and restoration of health and wellbeing. It covers the main areas of service provision such as public health, primary care, specialized care, urgent and emergency care, pharmaceutical care, rehabilitation / intermediate care, long-term care, services for informal carers, palliative care, mental health care and even dental care.

Photo by Zhen Hu on [Unsplash](#)



Story ideas

- Delivering care in remote / hard to reach locations (Last mile care)
- Waiting times for routine and emergency surgeries
- Availability and access to preventive care services of mental health services
- Ability of health care workers to deliver essential services
- Diagnostic equipment: availability, maintenance, and upgrades
- Accessibility of health care services for various population segments
- Corruption in the delivery of healthcare services (surcharges, favouritism, unnecessary referrals, and procedures)

2

Leadership & Governance

Right to health, management, and accountability

Leadership and governance in building a health system involve ensuring that strategic policy frameworks exist and are combined with effective oversight, coalition-building, regulation, attention to system design and accountability. The importance of leadership and governance were critical—and far from perfect—in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, both at the national and global levels. Measuring progress in this pillar can be challenging. Transparency over health spending and accountability in the delivery of medicines and services are areas that need ongoing monitoring. During the first year of the pandemic, one [HJN member in Italy](#) investigated irregularities in the procurement process of PPEs and ventilators. Another HJN reporter investigated government leadership and [a vaccine rollout campaign in Uganda](#).

Photo by Werner Pfenning on [Canva](#)



Story ideas

- Legislation that supports access to affordable and quality health care
- Demonstration of leadership
- (or lack of it) in an emergency response
- Any health care reform story
- A political candidate or party health priorities and agenda
- Accountability / responsibility of health care providers
- Transparency in decision-making around health
- Citizen participation in defining health priorities





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS



3

Health Financing

Leveraging financial resources to meet individual and collective needs

Health financing is a core component of health systems that impacts the entire system's performance, including the delivery and accessibility of primary health care. All health financing strategies have some trade-offs. Financial resources for health are always limited, and a government's decisions about resource allocation impact how primary health care is prioritized, compared to other components of the health system. In health financing, reporters must consider general government expenditure on health as a percentage of the overall government budget. What citizens pay "out-of-pocket" for services and medicines is an indicator of affordability of care and can impact equity and access. Sometimes these costs are proportionate to an individual or a household income. A sliding scale fee for "out-of-pocket" costs, for instance, can increase access. The term Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM) is the process through which countries raise and spend funds to provide for their populations. DRM, which is a mechanism for health financing, is often explained in the context of increasing tax revenue, but financial resources for health can be mobilized from many other sources as well, including insurance premiums, user fees, the private sector, and by improving the cost-efficiency ratio.

Photo by Jason Leung on Unsplash



4

Health Workforce

Health care providers are the backbone of health systems

The ability of a country to meet its health goals depends largely on the knowledge, skills, motivation, and deployment of the people responsible for organizing and delivering health services. Health workers are the backbone of the healthcare system. Without nurses, doctors, lab technicians and administrative staff, the health system will not be able to deliver.

Photo by Rodnae Productions on Canva



Story ideas

- How does your government mobilize resources for health? What percentage of the national budget goes towards health? Which personal or corporate taxes go towards health? (Tobacco, alcohol, payroll levies, etc.)
- Health insurance and out-of-pocket costs for individuals and families
- Any story around affordability of health care
- National health insurance vs private health insurance
- Stories on international funding mechanisms for health (the Global Fund, the proposed Financial Intermediary Fund for pandemic preparedness, etc.)

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is an international financing mechanism and partnership established twenty years ago that seeks to attract, leverage, and invest resources to fight infectious diseases.

[Learn more.](#)



Story ideas

- Training of medical professionals (length, specialty, cost, incentives, etc.)
- The vital role of community health workers in the delivery of care
- Brain-drain of medical professionals (compensation, availability of work, incentives, etc.)
- A focus on specialized medical personnel, nurses, midwives, traditional healers, etc.
- Agenda of unions or associations that represent health care workers
- Impact of health emergencies on health care workers / frontline providers





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS



Photo by Michał Parzuchowski on Unsplash

Access to Essential Medicines

Essential medicines meet the priority health needs of populations

The World Health Organization has created a list of essential medicines recommended for adults and children that is updated regularly. These are medicines that meet the priority health needs of populations. They include anaesthetics, pain relievers, antiepileptic, antibiotics, vaccines, and medicines that can also be sold without a prescription. Countries adapt these lists according to their own priority health needs.



Story ideas

- Vaccine equity across population segments
- Affordability and efficacy of essential medicines
- Drug patents: manufacturing, generics, international agreements, etc.
- Research, trials, and roll-out protocols
- Supply chain, distribution barriers, and black markets
- Regulations, prescriptions, legislation, etc.

Have you heard about Internews' free online e-learning course, **Let's Talk Vaccines?** It's available in English, French and Arabic!



[Check it out here.](#)



Photo by Rawpixel on Freepik

Health Information Systems

Accurate health data informs decision-making

Sound and reliable information is the foundation of decision-making across all health system's building blocks. It is essential for health system policy development and implementation, governance and regulation, health research, human resources development, health education and training, service delivery and financing. How health data is collected, stored, and shared has implications for decision-making across the health system and during an emergency response.



Story ideas

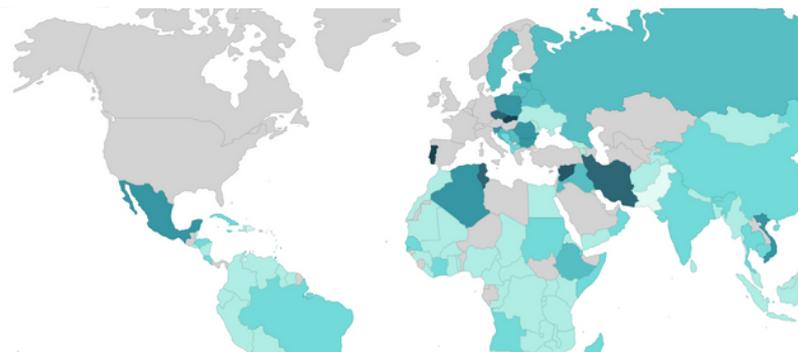
- Digital health innovation in health care (apps, telemedicine, diagnostics, etc.)
- Monitoring disease prevalence / surveillance through data collection systems
- Anything related to the management of medical records (including privacy)
- Ethics and health information systems
- Data exchange & coordination among providers of care and public institutions
- Vital records, reliability of data, security breaches and protection



Go to the

[World Health Organization essential medicine list](#)

to find out what is the list of essential medicines in your country.





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS

Photo by AbsolutVision on Canva



Bitesize Hacks for Journalists



Don't bite off more than you can chew

Reporting on health systems can be tricky, so make sure that you take it one step at a time and focus on one issue at a time. If you're working on a story about a lack of vaccine fridges in a local clinic, focus on this specific issue and keep your sources focused on those that directly impact this issue. Health systems stories often bring light to many complex issues, so tackle one a time. This is also a great way to build a story series.



Connect your story to the big picture

Your story is a puzzle piece of a larger "systems" story. Help the audience connect the dots and understand why your story matters in the national public health context. Use a few sentences, soundbites, or visuals to connect your story with the bigger picture focus. Keep it simple. Keep it real.



Accountability and balance

Health systems stories tend to be filled with complaints from sources, which doesn't always have to be the case. It's easy to report on something negative, like a hospital without enough beds. Make sure that you're finding balance in your stories in two ways: firstly, have a variety of sources (remember right of reply!) including those in positions of management or power, secondly, don't always tell the bad news, try a solutions-journalism approach and report on something that works.



Make sure you have a human angle

Some health systems stories can be top-heavy, meaning they deal with policies, budgets and finances, and cross-sectoral agreements. Even if your story is focused on these aspects of health systems, make sure you bring in a human angle to make your story relevant and relatable to your audiences. It's important for stories to have an impact on policymakers, yes, but it's just as important to tell stories that resonate with communities on the ground.



Check your facts!

It's as simple as this: check your facts! Health systems reporting means numbers, reports, and chasing down usually hard-to-reach people. Before you submit anything to your editor, make sure you've checked your facts at least three times!





HEALTH SYSTEMS OVERVIEW - A TREASURE CHEST OF STORY IDEAS



Case Study

How HIV and Avian and Swine Flu Strengthened Nigeria's Health System

Experience gives us the tools to better address future problems. This also applies to public health emergencies. Nigeria, the 7th most populated country in the world, has had its share of public health crisis caused by infectious disease outbreaks. In the 90s, HIV became a major epidemic in Nigeria. It went from a 1.8 % prevalence rate in 1991 to a 5.8% prevalence in 2001. [\[HIV Epidemiology in Nigeria, ScienceDirect May 2018\]](#)

Over the years, Nigeria has also experienced repeated outbreaks of different strains of avian influenza virus or H5N1 and is recognized as a hot spot in the region for the introduction of emerging strains by migratory wild birds. These repeated emergencies prompted the national government to invest in pandemic preparedness.

With support from the [Global Program for Avian Influenza Control and Human Pandemic Preparedness and Response](#) (GPAI), a World Bank funded global effort in 60 countries that lasted from 2006 to 2013, Nigeria was able to strengthen its early warning and disease surveillance capacity. The program, which was implemented through various ministries, supported the renovation of diagnostic laboratories, encouraged the establishment of a National Animal Disease Information and Surveillance Network, and the creation of a National Action Plan for Avian flu and a communication strategy for public health emergencies.

Photo by Morgana Wingard for USAID



In 2009, when the H1N1 flu —commonly known as swine flu— emerged, Nigeria was once again put on high alert. By then, the pandemic preparedness groundwork had been laid.

In 2014, Nigeria was able to successfully mitigate the spread of Ebola within its borders despite having an alarming number of high-risk exposures that came from neighboring countries. [The World Health Organization attributed this success](#) to strong leadership and a coordinated response that leveraged a first-rate virology lab in Lagos, immediate contact-tracing, isolation wards, and a hyperlocal communication campaign that eased fears. Nigeria showed the world that diseases can be stopped if a country has invested in preparedness and is adequately prepared from the onset.

References



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- WHO [Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025](#)
- Transparency International [Delivery of Services](#)