Health Systems Strengthening

The Canadian Society for International Health (CSIH) recognizes that the viability of health systems around the world have been challenged by imposed economic reforms, poor investment into the sector, and the limited attention paid to the social determinants of health. The economic reforms that were prerequisites for the large international loans made to low- and middle-income countries in the 1980s and 1990s further challenged health systems through the requisite decentralization of the social sectors, including health. While historically there had been great momentum for primary health care strengthening, which called for strong community-based continuity of care that emphasized prevention and promotion, reality has fallen far short of the aspirations of Alma Ata and the call for Health For All.

The Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations are able to engage and promote the rights of vulnerable and/or marginalised populations. They can interact with the health system, and build accountability and transparency around the public and private actors responsible for health, and have potential to influence the development of equity-oriented planning and resource allocation decision-making. The level of investment into health, social, and economic issues relevant to a nation's burden of disease is a critical predictor of health outcomes. Health systems research can provide decision-makers, policy advocates, and health services managers with the information and evidence base they need to address these issues accordingly. Yet the state of health systems research in low- and middle-income countries is often ignored or diminished.

Finding Sustainable Solutions

CSIH's overall framework for health systems strengthening is driven by values and vision of equity and accountability, supported by the two pillars of a social determinants framework and a "health in all policies" approach. CSIH works with partners in government, civil society, community, and academia to build and sustain the necessary leadership and long-term stewardship required for a sustainable health system. The conditions in which people live and work have dramatic consequences on their overall health and well-being. Therefore, the ability of a ministry of health to work intersectorally with other departments, such as education or labour, is critical. "Health in all policies," brings attention to policies and programmes outside of the health sector to address social determinants of health that lead to poor health, inequalities and inequities.

Core Elements of a Health System

CSIH has identified and supported several key elements of a health system for which technical assistance will have the greatest impact on improving health outcomes.

Human Health Resources
In the health system, human resources are critical as they represent a significant proportion of the health budget and directly affect the effective and efficient delivery and quality of services. Issues include policy support, appropriate training and allocation, sufficient remuneration, and community-based outreach.

Community Interventions & Health Promotion
It is important that population-based approaches to health promotion be aligned with person-based care delivered through the health system. CSIH recognizes the importance of integrating all levels of care within the health system and the critical role primary care has in substantially improving health.

Service Delivery
This element of the health system includes delivery models, infrastructure, management, safety and quality, and demand for care—from personal care to public health services. CSIH supports capacity building to improve and enhance the delivery of services.

Health Financing & Resource Allocation
National health financing policies are required to support a sustainable health system. CSIH supports the development of institutional and individual capacity and political will with local government units to institutionalize concepts of equity in planning within the fiscal realities of national governments.

Health Information Systems
Accurate and up-to-date information and evidence plays a critical role in appropriate policy development and clinical decision-making within the health system. CSIH has significant experience building local capacity to utilize reliable, valid data for decision-making and improved service delivery.

CSIH Approach to Health Systems Strengthening

Values and Vision: Equity and Accountability

Social Determinants — "Health in all policies"

Stewardship and Leadership

Health Human Resources | Health Financing and Resource Allocation

Research for Development Evidence-Based planning and policy-making

Health Information Systems Data for Decision-making

Evidence-Based Decision-Making (Clinical and Community-based)

Service delivery - treatments and programs | Community interventions and health promotion

Strong and vibrant Civil Society

Transparent and Accountable Public/Private Sector