

Turning health rights into reality: why it is crucial to strengthen health systems

4.5 billion people have no access to essential health services (WHO, 2023). As global shocks intensify, strengthening health systems is critical to avoid escalating human suffering and systemic collapse.

The COVID-19 pandemic sharply illustrated that robust health systems are essential for public well-being, societal stability, and economic resilience (Legido-Quigley, 2020). Resilient health systems can prevent, prepare for, detect, adapt to and respond to, and recover from public and personal health threats, while ensuring essential, high-quality services for all, even in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Strengthening resilience requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach. Using the computer metaphor: Health systems are the 'operating system' of society creating an ecosystem in which all health programmes (user programmes) can thrive. The health systems workforce, financing, medical supplies, information, governance, and service delivery infrastructure deliver sustainable results in health, education, economic performance and human rights.

This is why organisations like the World Health Organisation, the African Union, the European Union, and Belgian international cooperation focus on strengthening health systems. It is the key to achieving universal health coverage and health security.

Strong national health systems rely on robust partnerships between local communities and supportive public, private and civil society actors. These actors need to lead, take responsibility, and work together for their system to succeed and support sustainable development.

"From an ethical perspective, one cannot change the system unless from within." (quoted by Cilliers, 2003).

Positioning

Enabel aims to act as a broker, an enabler of resilient health systems. It provides technical as well as strategic support and seed funding.

The Belgian agency for international cooperation delivers long-term institutional support, aligning with national priorities and building local capacity. It helps build resilient, nationally owned health systems by engaging actors from community to national or even regional levels using a mix of expertise and flexible implementation modalities. It works through government institutions and systems and collaborates with civil society organisations and private partners, ensuring all actions enhance the national health system.

Enabel reinforces country-led processes which ensure well-being and positive health outcomes for all citizens throughout their lives, by combining legal frameworks for equity, health in all policies, resource allocation for universal health coverage, public-private-civil society collaboration, and innovation and learning. This allows governments (regions) to absorb, manage, and scale health investments.

One focus: strong health systems

Health system strengthening is Enabel's overarching focus in health because first, strong health systems are necessary to achieve sustainable outcomes and second, it allows flexibility for Enabel to remain relevant in the context of multiple external shocks and evolving needs of its partners.

Approach: health system strengthening as a condition for sustainable outcomes

Health systems are complex systems. They become stronger when relationships between actors are sustainable. Enabel promotes systems-thinking as 'development system-software' focusing on changing behaviours of people, institutions and their relationships (Booth, 2015). This requires a long-term investment, but evidence shows that this leads to better long-term results (Norberg, 2025). Robust, equitable health outcomes result from an aligned approach, institutional learning and a comprehensive mindset.



Aligned approach

Enabel respects its partners. It therefore aligns with and supports the development, implementation and local adaptation of national and regional policies, strategies, service packages and budgets. Enabel, for example, supported the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government in aligning development partners in the public drug value chain for procuring, regulating and distributing quality medicines.

Institutional learning

Sustainable impact requires flexible projects implementation rooted in continuous learning (Bossyns, 2016): testing national strategies in practice, documenting lessons, and bringing them back to decision-makers. This goes through locally defined action-research initiatives (Harvard, 2014) engaging partners from various disciplines and levels within the health system. In Senegal, Enabel provided seed-money for designing and testing a public health insurance in two regions between 2012-2017. The Senegalese government and international partners scaled up this innovative design resulting in a national health insurance system. Enabel follows a double anchorage approach, linking field-based experience with national level strategies.

Comprehensive mindset

Responding to people's needs and rights including those of health workers and managers and tackling complex problems require a multi-actor, multidisciplinary, people-centred and integrated approach as illustrated by the Sexual Violence project in Kisangani (DRC). It started with understanding the mechanisms behind 300 stories of sexual violence. That led to a cocreated strategy to improve the care pathway of victims and collaboration between health and social workers, police and local authorities. This was complemented by capacity-strengthening for psychological support of victims and their families. From 2016 to 2024, this comprehensive care response was provided to 5 700 victims in the Al Waleed One-stop-centre in Kisangani. Policy support at national level strengthened alignment of development partners with the new insights.

Pursuing a life-course approach is part of the same comprehensive mindset. This applies to all age groups, like with Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, where needs of menopausal women and older men should be included.

Scope: health system strengthening as a flexible and responsive instrument to changing needs and external shocks

Enabel works with partners to strengthen health systems by focusing on three main entry points at the same time: (1) improving health governance, (2) enhancing specific pillars of the health system, and (3) addressing specific health priorities. The right mix between these three areas is identified jointly with the partner countries.

Comprehensive support to health system governance

At central and intermediate levels, Enabel supports health reforms and good governance. In DRC, the managerial capacities of the Ministry of Health Study & Planning Directorate and three provincial health divisions were strengthened to ensure the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the "Plan National de Développement Sanitaire". In Benin, new thematic working groups enhancing partner coordination were introduced. In Rwanda, result-based sector budget support combined with strategic dialogue strengthened national processes.

At decentralised level, reinforcing participative leadership fosters dialogue with local communities and enhances public-private and multidisciplinary collaboration to achieve broad health outcomes. Local health systems are the cornerstone of health systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Benin, Enabel accompanied the transformation of rural health districts to changing needs and context based on the recommendations of the Dakar Declaration for better performing Local Health Systems (CoP Health Service Delivery, 2013). A major achievement was the creation of health user platforms (PNUSS/Enabel, 2024). In the urban districts of Kigali (Rwanda), Enabel helped link health with environment, infrastructure and security.

Learning cycles within societies from a development perspective - a double anchorage approach



Targeted support to specific health system pillars

Governments and regional institutions often request Enabel to support models, strategies and processes related to key building blocks such as service delivery, health workforce, social health protection, health financing, health information systems, maintenance & asset management, or medical supplies. Comprehensive support to a particular chain shows lasting effects on equitable access to essential health services of good quality. Some examples:

- **Service delivery:** in Burundi, Tanzania, DRC, Niger, Benin, Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea, Enabel supports national quality improvement of health services by combining accreditation, performance-based financing, quality insurance and strengthening health service norms.
- **Health insurance:** Enabel piloted a public health insurance scheme in two Senegalese regions from 2012 to 2017, currently benefitting 500,000 people. The scheme is being scaled up and overseen by the national agency managing universal health insurance. The model inspires similar approaches in the region (Niger, Mauritania, Guinea and Benin).
- **Human Resources-systems:** Enabel strengthens HR-management in Uganda using the formula 'One full-time equivalent = availability x motivation x competence'. Performance-Based Financing increased institutional deliveries by 25% between 2017-2019 (Thinkwell Uganda Report, 2020) while institutional support was provided to three paramedical training schools.
- **Data systems:** in Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Niger, Benin, Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea, Enabel facilitates decision-making by supporting locally adapted digitalised data management solutions for quality data and builds local capacities to maintain and manage data systems. Open-source hospital management information systems were installed in 50 hospitals in Burundi, generating 6 million electronic patient files.
- **Local medicine and vaccine manufacturing:** the African Union aims at producing 60% of Africa's vaccine needs by 2040 through public-private partnerships. Medicine regulatory systems in Senegal and Rwanda reached maturity level 3 of the World Health Organisation with Enabel's support, in collaboration with other Belgian and EU partners. Enabel is involved in the creation of the African Medicine Agency to assure equitable access to quality medicines throughout Africa.
- **Cost-effective comprehensive asset management:** a decentralised maintenance model in low-resource settings was tested in 6 districts in Burundi (Beniacoub, 2023) and later scaled up to 8 other districts. The functionality and availability of medical equipment increased by 25% between 2020-2022.

Support to specific health priorities

Enabel health projects apply a systemic lens to advance health. Addressing health challenges requires a well-performing health system, as purely disease-specific approaches have been shown to be significantly less effective. A Swiss International Health Centre study (2012) found that such approaches reduce negative impacts fourfold.

Enabel's experience in this include:

- The Gates Foundation, Enabel, Bluesquare and the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp strengthen **malaria programmes** in Niger and Burundi through improved data, surveillance and research, and integration in the local health system.
- The 15-year support of **mental health in Rwanda**, from community-level up to central level fully sustained afterwards by the Rwanda national budget is a success story.
- Designing **person-centred care pathways** for specific health needs such as the rehabilitation of war victims in Ukraine or the 'three-delays model for maternal care' in Uganda (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994), are entry points to strengthen health systems.
- Every crisis such as COVID-19 or conflicts is an opportunity to reinforce the local health system, for example through strengthening health coordination mechanisms between stakeholders and working with local health services instead of bypassing them as often observed in short-term humanitarian aid. **Systemic Health crisis management** has longer-term health benefits (Pavignani, 2018).
- Where health rights are at stake, for example universal access to **Sexual and Reproductive Health** services, strengthening the citizens' voice to improve overall health service quality can be effective as shown by the creation of health user platforms (PNUSS, 2024) in Benin.
- Timely tackling system-shocks like the exponential increase in **Non-Communicable Diseases** (NCD) such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, diabetes and cancer reduces costs and pressure on health systems in the long run. In Benin, Enabel supports NCD prevalence-mapping and costing-studies; invests in pregnancy-related hypertension, diabetes, cervix and breast cancer prevention and control.
- **Climate change** increasingly stresses societal systems. Enabel is an implementing agency of the Green Climate Fund. In health system strengthening, Enabel alleviates the consequences of climate change.

Recommendations

- 1. Systematically co-create projects with local partners who take the lead** in coordinating project implementation, thus respecting national sovereignty, ownership and partnership following the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness (OECD, 2005).
- 2. Adopt a long-term perspective** ideally covering at least three consecutive project cycles.
- 3. Focus on public goals** corresponding to the roles of the state whilst valorising comparative advantages between public, private and civil society actors to jointly realise these goals. This requires national leadership able to steer pluralistic health systems and strengthen partnerships.
- 4. Adopt a person-centred, life-course perspective** reinforcing informed decision-making by people of all ages regarding their health, amplifying their voices and reducing health inequities.
- 5. Make health system strengthening the goal of every health project by investing in action-research** (Harvard, 2014) to jointly learn and document new experiences for local decision-makers. Use seed funding to spark innovation and enable national authorities and major donors to scale up what works.
- 6. Prioritise sustainable system investments** over short-term project funding and avoid parallel processes, even in humanitarian crises.
- 7. Promote the Dakar Declaration on Local Health Systems**, preparing health districts for 21st-century challenges and effective decentralisation.
- 8. Keep a broad view on health and its determinants** by promoting Health in all national policies and development programmes and fostering multisectoral collaboration whilst remaining systemic and coherent.
- 9. Facilitate mobility of health expertise** to enhance cross-country learning and connect the dots between local, national, regional and global levels.
- 10. Stay responsive to different contexts and needs** by keeping health system strengthening as a broad focus and offering various modalities and expertise.

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