

Overall status and sociopolitical Environment

The case for health systems research has been made eloquently and with good reason over the last quarter century. Despite repeated clongs on the clarion and a variety of initiatives, the signal-to-noise ratio for health systems research has remained appallingly feeble. Further elegant analyses about why HSR has failed to register would undoubtedly be insightful and should not be discounted. However, we simply do not have the luxury of such navel gazing at this juncture of global health.

With just over 10 years remaining to achieve the MDGs, we find ourselves in the health field with an impressive armamentarium of interventions to improve the life chances of mothers and children. We also find ourselves with unprecedented global support with the advent of billion dollar funds. And in this context we are rediscovering once again that health systems—the backbone processes that organize the workforce, the financing, the drugs and diagnostics and information critical to all interventions—are the primary constraints to progress. The diagnosis, although valid, lacks a clear prescription: how do we fortify health systems whose primary foundations are so fragile? How do we mobilize a workforce that is competent and committed to serving the neediest populations in an environment of accentuated brain drain and miserable working conditions? How do we design health systems so that millions are not impoverished through the process of seeking care? How do we expand coverage of interventions that we know are lifesaving more quickly? These questions are among the many that will remain unanswered without a very significant global commitment to generating knowledge about how health systems can better serve their constituents. The Mexico Summit should not miss the opportunity of putting this orphaned area of research squarely on the agenda—the lives of mothers and children are dependent on it!

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