WHO has defined a health system as “all organizations, people and actions whose primary intent is to promote, restore or maintain health”. Good health services are further defined as those which “deliver effective, safe, quality personal and non-personal interventions to those who need them, when and where needed, with minimum waste of resources”. 19

Health systems are complex. It is useful to analyse health systems by looking at their component parts or functions. This helps identify bottlenecks to successful implementation and interventions that can lead to improvement. For the system to function optimally, all parts must be balanced and coordinated. The weakest part of the system may actually determine the outputs from that system.

WHO has specified a framework with six building blocks that can be used as a tool for analysis of a health system (see Figure 1). The six blocks are leadership, human resources, information, medical products and technology, financing, and service delivery. Intermediate outputs lead to the desired health outcomes. This is not a new concept and other schemata with different groupings can be used, although most are relatively similar.20,21,22

The point is not to concentrate only on the individual blocks or that there is one correct schema for a health system. An adequate analysis encompasses the entire health system to the extent possible. Actions to be taken must be evaluated for their potential effects on the functioning of the entire system and ultimately for their effect on health outcomes. All parts of a health system are interrelated, and dynamic interactions, both anticipated and unanticipated, are to be expected.

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THE SIX BUILDING BLOCKS OF A HEALTH SYSTEM:
AIMS AND DESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES

- Leadership and governance involve ensuring strategic policy frameworks exist and are combined with effective oversight, coalition-building, the provision of appropriate regulations and incentives, attention to system-design and accountability.

- A good health financing system raises adequate funds for health in ways that ensure people can use needed services and are protected from financial catastrophe or impoverishment associated with having to pay for them.

- A well-performing health workforce is one which works in ways that are responsive, fair and efficient to achieve the best health outcomes possible, given available resources and circumstances, i.e. there are sufficient numbers and mix of staff, fairly distributed; they are competent, responsive and productive.

- A well-functioning health system ensures equitable access to essential medical products, vaccines and technologies of assured quality, safety, efficacy and cost-effectiveness, and scientifically sound and cost-effective.

- A well-functioning health information system is one that ensures the production, analysis, dissemination and use of reliable and timely information on health determinants, health systems performance and health status.

- Good health services are those which deliver effective, safe, quality personal and non-personal health interventions to those who need them, when and where needed, with minimum waste of resources.
There is often strategic tension between different approaches within health systems. Examples of potential tensions are the relative emphasis on specialized services versus generalist services; the degree to which referrals are managed to encourage rational care versus freedom of choice of providers; the allocation of resources between public, preventive health care and personal, curative care; and the relative balance between disease-specific control programmes and more integrated services. Defining core values for a health system helps balance these tensions.

A well-functioning health system is able to support a continuum of care, both personal and non-personal, throughout the life cycle. Interventions are focused on how they contribute to improved health outcomes using the best and most feasible scientific methods available. Services must be designed, implemented and assessed from the perspective of the users of services. The health systems framework is meant to ensure that dynamic interactions are considered across the entire system and to minimize the risk of neglecting important parts of the system during any analysis or intervention.