



World Health Organization

A five minute summary

The Mexico Panel on maximizing

# positive synergies



between health systems and Global Health Initiatives

A WHO Satellite Meeting at the XVII International AIDS Conference, Mexico City, 4 August, 2008

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A global debate has begun involving the interplay of disease-specific health initiatives and health systems. Critics claim that disease-specific initiatives stress already weak health systems, while others assert that weak health systems are holding back progress in disease-specific initiatives. As part of WHO's effort to gather evidence and provide technical guidance in this area, the Mexico panel highlighted the essential features of this discussion and attempted to sift fact from rhetoric.

## The members of the Mexico Panel

*Chairs:*

**Dr Carissa Etienne**

Assistant Director-General, Health Systems and Services, WHO

**Dr Julio Frenk**

Senior Health Fellow, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

**Hon Oumar Ibrahima Touré**

Minister of Health, Mali

*Speakers:*

**Professor Michel Kazatchkine**

Executive Director, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

**Dr Mark Dybul**

US Global AIDS Coordinator

**Dr Peter Piot**

Executive Director, UNAIDS

**Dr Debrework Zewdie**

Director for the Global HIV/AIDS Programme, The World Bank

**Professor Rifat Atun**

Director, Strategy, Policy and Performance Cluster, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

**Professor Suwit Wibulpolprasert**

Vice President, Medical Council of Thailand

**Hon Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**

Minister of Health, Ethiopia

**Dr Jim Kim**

Head of Francois Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard School of Public Health

**Ms Asia Russell**

Director of International Policy, Health Gap, USA

**Dr Timothy Evans**

Assistant Director-General, Information, Evidence, and Research, WHO

## The work on maximizing positive synergies between health systems and Global Health Initiatives

In the fight against AIDS, disease-specific initiatives have been at the forefront of the global response. AIDS-focused Global Health Initiatives, such as the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the World Bank Multi-Country HIV/AIDS Programme (MAP), and the AIDS programme of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria have been effective in leveraging both political commitment and new resources. Indeed, between 1996 and 2005, the total annual resources available for HIV rose from US\$292 million to US\$8.3 billion.

In this context, there has been some concern that a disproportionate rise in AIDS-related funding may have produced distortions in the broader public health agenda and eroded the capacity of health systems to respond to other priorities. On the other hand, it has equally been argued that the AIDS response has galvanized the international community to address many aspects of the long-neglected global health crisis and has produced improvements in health outcomes beyond HIV and AIDS.

The extent to which these various claims are valid cannot be confirmed beyond a case by case basis because the evidence that exists to inform the discussion remains disparate. But the debate has begun. Moreover, it is a debate that extends beyond the AIDS agenda to encompass the wide range of Global Health Initiatives that favour a selective approach – whether tackling a specific disease, increasing access to a specific health product or promoting a specific health intervention.

In collaboration with partners from the academic community, civil society, countries, implementers and the Global Health Initiatives, WHO is undertaking an effort to help resolve this important discussion. In line with the core functions of the organization, WHO is stimulating the generation of valuable knowledge on the interface between health systems and Global Health Initiatives and working to build consensus around evidence-based guidance that can ease any existing differences.

The objective is to identify and strengthen the positive synergies between health systems and Global Health Initiatives and thus to ensure that all investments can achieve their full potential to deliver comprehensive and lasting results.

*“WHO is calling for the public health community to engage in a constructive dialogue.”*

Dr Carissa Etienne, WHO

## The Mexico Panel – a growing consensus

On the occasion of the XVII International AIDS Conference, WHO convened a high level panel to further the discussion around health systems and disease-specific health initiatives. The panel included some of the most knowledgeable and senior figures in the field of health systems and AIDS-focused Global Health Initiatives.

The full Mexico Panel session can be viewed online at <http://www.who.int/healthsystems/GHIsynergies/>

The list below provides a short summary of the key points of consensus:

### ***Health systems in crisis***

The need to strengthen health systems is no longer a matter for debate. Without properly functioning health systems, neither disease-specific initiatives, nor comprehensive health services can achieve satisfactory and sustainable outcomes. The consensus around the need for a greater emphasis on health systems strengthening was clearly reflected throughout discussions at the XVII International AIDS Conference.

### ***Appreciation of the disease-specific initiatives***

Disease-specific initiatives have made a defining impact on the global response to AIDS and helped save many lives. Among others, the efforts of the Global Fund, PEPFAR and the World Bank Multi-Country HIV/AIDS Programme are widely recognized and appreciated. In the discussions around the interface between health systems and disease-specific initiatives, care should be taken not to jeopardize these much needed investments.

### ***Disease-specific initiatives can be an entry point***

The AIDS response has shown that it can be part of the solution to strengthening health systems and advancing the broader public health agenda. In particular, funding for HIV has been shown, in some cases, to impact positively on other key development indicators such as overall life expectancy and non-HIV-related infant mortality.

### ***Health systems can provide a platform***

In some countries, robust health systems have shown that they can launch an effective disease-specific response and have scaled up HIV services as part of comprehensive health care provision. In other countries, health systems have demonstrated their capacity to adapt and accommodate the efforts of the global disease-specific initiatives in ways that allow them to capitalize on the potential benefits for overall systems strengthening.

### ***Synergies must be deliberately planned***

Disease-specific work and health systems strengthening can, and should, be mutually reinforcing. However, this cannot be left to chance. If disease-specific work is to prove effective in building systems while achieving disease-specific results, these dual outcomes must be deliberately planned. More can be done on both sides to achieve greater synergy and better health outcomes.

***“I am very excited  
about this work as it  
will help us to do an  
even better job.”***

Dr Mark Dybul, Office of the  
US Global AIDS Coordinator

*“We must achieve unity in our thinking and in our actions.”*

Dr Julio Frenk, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

### ***Health systems are complex***

Detailed operational understanding about the complex functions of health systems remains relatively limited. Some commentators even describe health systems as a “black box”. The term encapsulates the enduring lack of clarity about what functioning systems actually entail, as well as a perception among donors that investments in health systems may become lost in a “black hole”. Efforts to shed light on systems issues are urgent and important.

### ***Not enough data***

Information on the impact of selective programmes on health systems and of synergies between health systems and the various types of Global Health Initiatives does exist but is disparate. There is an urgent need to gather and analyze this information to produce robust evidence that can better inform policy discussions, planning and decision making. There is also a need to fill the gaps in the existing evidence with original research that can generate new data.

### ***Aiming for a conceptual framework***

The ambition of the WHO work in this area is to produce sufficient data to support the development of a conceptual framework for understanding how positive synergies can be achieved. This theoretical work can facilitate the replication, amplification and adaptation of current examples of good practice and thereby support the practical application of more generalized synergies between Global Health Initiatives and health systems.

### ***Call for more funding***

The international community must redouble efforts to fill the remaining funding gaps across the public health agenda. Development assistance for health in low- and middle-income countries has increased significantly during the past few years but the resources available still fall short of what is needed to repair years of underinvestment in low- and middle-income countries, especially in Africa.

### ***Reallocation of resources is not on the agenda***

The call to maximize positive synergies is not masking a hidden agenda to reallocate resources from one area of need to another. Stakeholders can be assured that the objective is to make better use of all the available resources, and to leverage new and additional resources for public health.

### ***An inclusive process***

The meaningful inclusion of all stakeholders or their representatives will advance the aim of promoting positive synergies. Civil society, including workforce representatives and service users, must be properly represented in the discussions and should be integrated at all levels of decision making. Where innovative models for inclusive governance exist, these should be used to inform the work.

***“We must be deliberate in finding and exploiting synergies that can enable implementers to scale up disease-specific investments while also strengthening health systems.”***

**Ms Asia Russell,  
Health Gap, USA**

### ***Tackling macro-economic factors***

The work to promote positive synergies should include efforts to address some of the overarching issues that pertain to the public health agenda, such as fiscal constraints on health care spending. Civil society representatives are particularly forceful in calling for genuine partnerships and practical action to help overcome such constraints where they exist or are perceived to exist.

### ***Building on success***

The global AIDS response has been characterized by increased investment but also by speed, a focus on results, a multi-sectoral approach and a strong emphasis on social justice and community participation. These strengths should inform the current efforts to maximize positive synergies and to accelerate progress across the broader public health agenda.

### ***Laying differences to rest***

Arguments that promulgate the view that disease-specific initiatives and health systems strengthening exist in opposition, rather than in harmony, risk becoming counter-productive. If the Millennium Development Goals are to be reached, all those committed to global health must work together to produce the best possible health outcomes. All parties agree that any emerging divide must be urgently and satisfactorily resolved.

### ***Commitment to unity of purpose and action***

Health systems and disease-specific initiatives are prepared to make a shared commitment to finding common ground and to unity of thinking and action. The disease-specific initiatives and health systems commit to working as strong and fair partners in this effort both to strengthen health systems, and to deliver on disease-specific goals, through maximizing positive synergies. Civil society representatives also pledge to work as partners in the effort.

### ***A timely response***

Those represented on the Mexico Panel welcome the ongoing WHO effort to engage partners in constructive dialogue. Shared knowledge on the impact of disease-specific efforts on health systems is still limited and the WHO work represents a welcome learning opportunity. This is the right time to develop consensus around evidence-based guidance on maximizing positive synergies between health systems and all Global Health Initiatives.

### ***Accepting the challenge – grasping the opportunity***

The challenge is to generate mutual added value for both health systems and disease-specific work by ensuring the greatest possible synergy between the different investments. The work must progress with the utmost urgency. The impact of this process will be crucial to improving the effectiveness of international development assistance for health.

### **More details available**

The full Mexico Panel session can be viewed online at

<http://www.who.int/healthsystems/GHlsynergies/>

More information about WHO's work on maximizing positive synergies between health systems and Global Health Initiatives, including power point presentations that were given by the Mexico Panel, can be found at: [www.who.int/healthsystems](http://www.who.int/healthsystems)

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