



Systems Strengthening

Strengthening sectoral systems to achieve SBC objectives

What is Sectoral Systems Strengthening, and why is it important?

Imagine if Apple developed a new product without understanding the capacity of hardware manufacturers, the technological capabilities and limitations facing its target clientele, the needs of software developers, the necessary supply chains and logistics to ship the product efficiently, and the timing of their retail launch. Even if Apple were to develop a game-changing product, it would not be successful if the broader system did not support its delivery and uptake.

Similarly, we cannot achieve SBC objectives without equipping the health, education, and child protection systems. We must strengthen these systems to support achievable and sustainable Social and Behavioural Change.

Strong sectoral systems have appropriately selected, trained and engaged human resources, functioning financial systems, transparent and accountable information systems, supportive public policies, and empowered, sustainable community structures to work with. A strong sectoral system offers high-quality services, and strong leadership and governance. They enable programs to reach underserved and high-priority groups, working toward greater equity, dignity, participation and protection from stigma.

Using systems thinking to diagnose and design

Systems thinking is a framework for problem solving that views challenges as part of a wider, dynamic system. It emphasises understanding the interconnected ways in which stakeholders within a system create patterns of behaviour over time. Rather than isolating individual components, systems thinking focuses on the interrelationships and interactions among the various elements, promoting a holistic perspective. This involves exploring how different parts of the system influence and impact one another.

At its core, systems thinking is about seeing wholes. A system comprises multiple interacting parts or elements, where the actions of one part can impact the others. This interconnectedness means that multiple causal factors often contribute to a single outcome over time. Moreover, systems involve numerous stakeholders, with no single group or organisation holding full responsibility for the outcomes.

A key principle of systems thinking is to consider diverse viewpoints and engage multiple stakeholders to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the system. This involves bringing together stakeholders from across the system—including those operating at macro, meso, and micro levels—as equal and active partners. Together, these stakeholders can:

- Identify influences within the system: Pinpoint factors that shape system dynamics.
- Analyse patterns and trends over time: Understand underlying structures and causes driving outcomes.
- Explore relationships among influences: Examine how these factors interact, either positively (amplifying change) or negatively (stabilising the system). Identifying these feedback loops is essential for predicting system behaviour.

- Identify leverage points: Locate areas within the system where small changes can produce significant downstream impacts.
- Recognise tipping points: Determine critical thresholds where a small shift can cause substantial, and often irreversible, changes in system behaviour.

By adopting systems thinking, we can navigate complexity, identify opportunities for impactful change, and develop sustainable solutions that consider the interconnected nature of systems.

To learn more you can access the [UNICEF Systems Thinking Toolkit - A toolkit for Change Makers](#)

Sectoral Systems Strengthening 101

The table below outlines example actions you can take to strengthen for sectoral systems at the policy, service, and community levels.

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, people-centred service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social accountability mechanisms for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, <u>people-centred service delivery</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social <u>accountability mechanisms</u> for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, people-centred service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social accountability mechanisms for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, people-centred service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social accountability mechanisms for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, people-centred service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social accountability mechanisms for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

System component	Example actions		
	Policy	Service	Community
Build the capacity of human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, implement and maintain HR competency frameworks and capacity development mechanisms • Develop performance monitoring systems for core SBC skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update recruitment practices, such as job TORs, to include core SBC skills • Develop training plans, manuals and tools to build SBC capacity in HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a social service workforce and hire community workers who reflect community diversity and culture • Provide supervision and incentives to empower community workers, such as opportunities for recognition • Tailor capacity-building programmes for civil society partners
Ensure high-quality, <u>people-centred service delivery</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen or build partnerships that can mobilize a broad range of civil society stakeholders • Develop public policies that work to engage people and communities in service design, management and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback and social <u>accountability mechanisms</u> for sub-regional, district, community, and village services • Increase community participation in decision-making • Develop coordination mechanisms across and between sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the skills of frontline workers to support better supply of social services, increasing the demand for such services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower Individuals, families and communities to engage with service design and delivery mechanisms

View the [Sectoral Systems Strengthening tool](#) for an overview of how to apply a Systems Strengthening approach to the health sector.

Objectives

- Improving sectoral capacity to diagnose problems and make effective decisions: by strengthening information systems to collect, analyse and interpret social and behavioural data from community to central levels.
- Increasing uptake of protective/preventive services and practices: by implementing high-quality services that incentivizes good behavioural practices (such as healthy lifestyles, positive discipline, handwashing) and motivates people to visit and return (in schools and health clinics, for example).
- Strengthening accountability and governance: by encouraging transparent information systems and community feedback processes, and involving the media and influential networks or coalitions to hold decision-makers accountable.
- Focusing on equity: through pro-poor service provision, identifying underserved communities, and monitoring and evaluating programmes for equitable practices.
- Building resilient and sustainable communities: by strengthening traditional community systems to play crucial roles in the prevention and detection of threats, the design and implementation of effective response strategies and sustainable recovery.
- Strengthening the interactions between duty-bearers and rights-holders: by improving the quality at the point of service, the capacity of frontline workers and how we empower community committees to be effective partners. After all, the sector is only as strong as the link between the community and wider system. Learn more about Community Systems Strengthening below.

Community Systems Strengthening

Sectoral Systems Strengthening will always be critical to ensuring effective Social and Behaviour Change. This includes Community Systems Strengthening, which can either be part of the overall system or a separate system that interacts with and supports it. For example, increasing social accountability of sectoral systems can improve when community-based organizations and leaders are empowered to represent the most deprived. Community Systems can also be strengthened by facilitating community participation in policy formation, allocating budgets and implementing programmes. Strengthening community systems through investments in community resilience and preparedness, and the capacity of community health workers can greatly improve service quality and emergency response. When sectoral systems improve, so does the likelihood of Social and Behaviour Change.

Community systems are often wrongly excluded from Sectoral Systems Strengthening. Therefore, it's important that your approach facilitates change from within communities.

Case studies and examples

Just as Apple would be unable to develop a product without the support of the broader system, development and humanitarian programmes cannot achieve SBC objectives without bolstering human resources, people-centred services, technology infrastructure, governance, leadership and financial systems for change. Below are some examples of how this has been done around the world.

Building the capacity of human resources and institutions

- **INDIA** Health system strengthening interventions resulted in a [pool of 3,500 master trainers building the IPC capacity of 400,000 frontline workers](#) for the Measles Rubella (MR) campaign, including routine immunization and an \$18 million budget.
- **INDIA** Systems strengthening activities have built institutional capacity to support Social and Behaviour Change, [enabling the most deprived to access and use WASH services](#) in selected states
- **EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA:** UNICEF and partners developed a training package to [incorporate country-specific recommendations regarding social service workforce competencies](#)
- **UZBEKISTAN:** The USWEEP Project systematically explored the [strengths, challenges, and way forward for the social service workforce](#)
- **CANADA:** Implementing the [Tools of the Mind](#) curriculum, which emphasises play and hands-on learning improved both student executive function and reduced teacher burnout.

Community Systems Strengthening

- **SRI LANKA** The country's community health system, which uses public health midwives to bring health and health education to people's front doors, has [enabled 99.1% of children to receive their vaccinations](#) in a timely, people-centred manner, with high quality standards.
- **UGANDA** Strengthening vocational training programmes [increased empowerment of adolescent girls](#).
- Building/maintaining transparent information systems and technologies.
- **BANGLADESH** Strengthening the routine health information system has [connected central, divisional and district levels with sub-district health facilities with over 13,000 community clinics](#), enabling timely and responsive evidence-based decision-making.

Other practical examples

- **INDIA:** 21 out of 22 successful interventions on Antenatal Care and Institutional Delivery [included health systems strengthening components](#).
- **INDIA:** Political commitment, redesigned cash transfer programmes, access to education, and engagement with communities and adolescent girls and boys as change agents led to [momentum towards ending child marriage](#)
- **UZBEKISTAN:** UNICEF and Columbia School of Social Work's Social Intervention Group (CSSW) partnered to create the [Uzbekistan Social Work Education for Excellence Project \(USWEEP\)](#) to improve the well-being of vulnerable children and families served by trained social workers and social service professionals conducting social work functions.

Key principles

1. Sustainable Social and Behavioural Change is possible when we build the capacity of sectoral systems – such as education, health, child protection and emergency response – to support its achievement.
2. Prioritizing the needs of community members strengthens sectoral systems. A strong system either interacts with robust community structures and systems for engagement or is well integrated with these structures.
3. Beyond community structures, other key components to consider for Strengthening Sectoral Systems include financing, institutions and governance, quality service delivery, human resources, information and technology, and supportive public policies.
4. Effective SBC interventions must consider the needs and capacity of the people it seeks to serve as well as other actors in the system, including governments, institutions, non-governmental organizations and other entities within the sector.
5. Measures to prepare and mitigate risk should be instituted across all social sector systems. This encourages community resilience, continuity of services and early recovery in the most vulnerable, at-risk and affected populations.

More information

- HC3 – [THE SBCC CAPACITY ECOSYSTEM: A Model for Social and Behaviour Change Communication Capacity Strengthening](#)
- Breakthrough ACTION – [Eight Principles for Strengthening Public Sector Social and Behaviour Change Capacity](#)
- [ESARO C4D/SBCC Capacity Development Framework](#)
- The World Bank – [Improving Public Sector Performance: Through Innovation and Inter-Agency Coordination](#)
- USAID – [Health Systems Strengthening](#)
- OECD – [Public Sector Governance and Institutions](#)
- UNICEF – [Child Protection Systems Strengthening](#)