



HEALTH SYSTEM STRENGTHENING EVIDENCE GAP MAP SYSTEMS THINKING

INTRODUCTION

Health system strengthening (HSS) interventions are most effective in supporting health system capacity, performance, and sustainability when they apply approaches that are evidence based. To promote such approaches, there is a global need to systematically capture the full spectrum of emerging evidence on the effects of HSS in improving health system outcomes. USAID’s HSS Learning Agenda frames efforts to continuously gather evidence, learn, and adapt by articulating six Learning Questions that reflect current HSS priorities across the programming cycle.

In support of that Learning Agenda, the USAID Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS) conducted a comprehensive mapping exercise to curate existing evidence for each of the six Learning Questions and identify opportunity areas for strengthening the evidence base. The project accessed the PubMed database and other targeted gray literature websites to identify, screen, review, and catalog relevant evidence from peer-reviewed and gray articles from the past five years. The curated evidence is presented in an interactive [Evidence Gap Map](#).

This two-pager is part of a series of six that summarizes LHSS’s findings from the evidence mapping process for USAID’s six Learning Agenda questions. The two-pager series does not aim to answer the Learning Questions, but rather provides a high-level characterization of the identified state of the evidence for each question. This two-pager focuses on USAID’s Learning Question I, “What are the contributions of systems thinking approaches and tools to changes in health system outcomes? How do systems thinking approaches affect health system outcomes?”

Health System Strengthening Evidence Gap Map

The Evidence Gap Map identifies existing literature examining the impact of health system strengthening on health outcomes. Evidence is organized around USAID’s Health System Strengthening Learning Agenda.

[About EGM](#) | [Methodology](#) | [How to Navigate](#) | [Q&A](#)

What are the contributions of systems thinking approaches and tools to changes in health system outcomes? How do systems thinking approaches affect health system outcomes?

	Approaches and Frameworks for Systems Thinking	Applications of Systems Thinking	Evaluations and Learnings from Systems Thinking	Systems Thinking in Non-Health Sectors
Equity	32	37	16	13
Quality	97	101	76	42
Resource Optimization	42	43	43	18
Resilience	13	17	12	7

OBJECTIVES

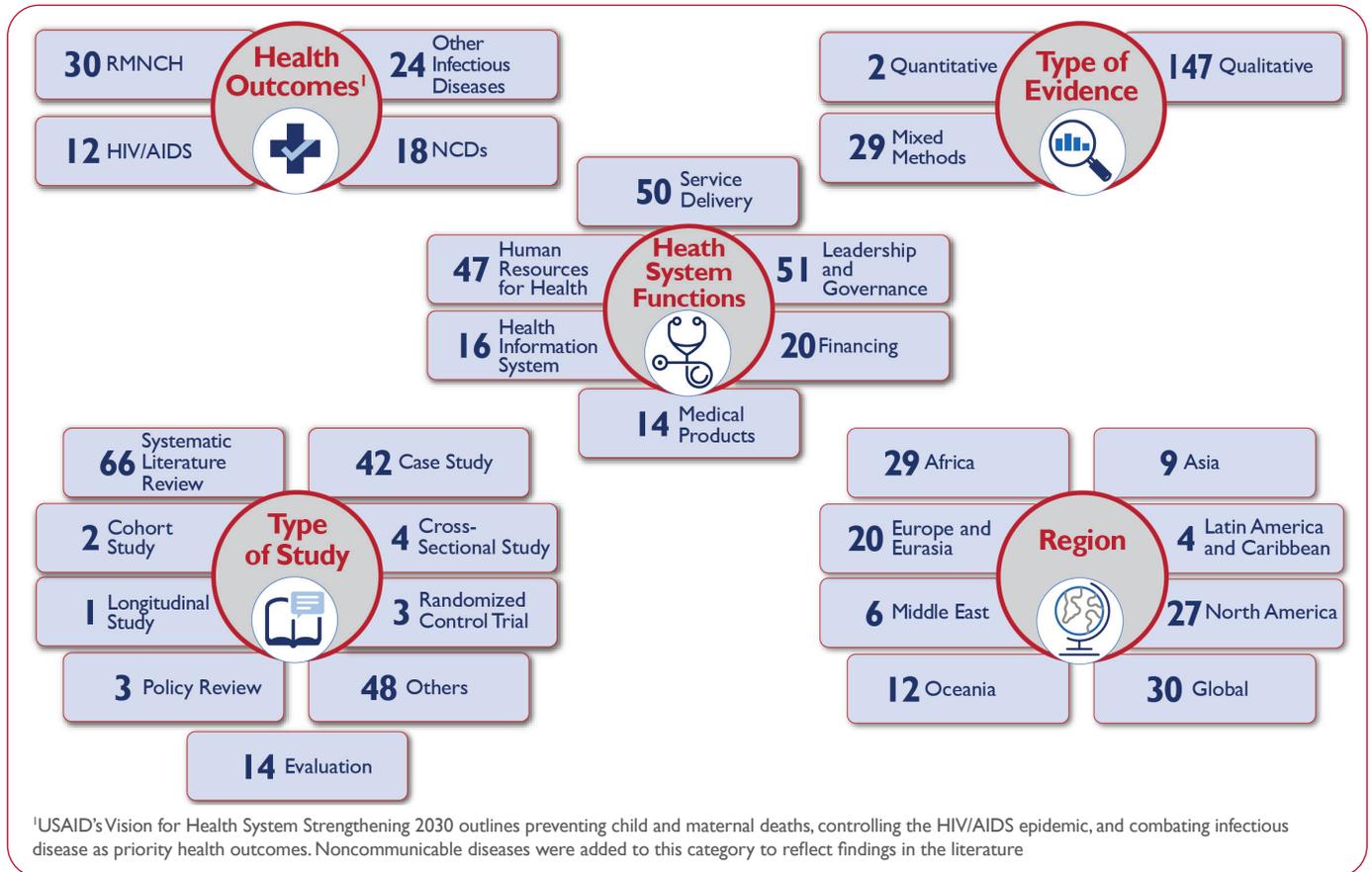
1. Provide a snapshot of the type, range, and extent of identified evidence related to Systems Thinking (Learning Agenda Question I).
2. Provide a high-level summary of themes from the curated evidence as a starting point for users of the Learning Question I Evidence Gap Map.
3. Highlight gaps in the curated Learning Question I evidence to inform targeted HSS programming by governments, funders, and HSS practitioners.

KEY FINDINGS

Descriptive Analysis

LHSS’s Evidence Gap Map is organized around seven categories that serve as filters: Health Outcomes, Health System Function, Region, Country, Type of Evidence, Type of Study, and Date Range. The mapping for the Systems Thinking Learning Question identified **179** relevant peer-reviewed and gray literature items published from 2017 to 2022. The figures below show the extent of findings in five of the categories.

Figure 1: Articles related to Systems Thinking disaggregated by number and type for Health Outcomes, Health System Functions, Type of Evidence, Type of Study, and Region categories of the Evidence Gap Map



Key Themes

- Systems thinking is widely applicable and used by practitioners across sectors, including health care, water and sanitation, education, climate and energy, nutrition, agriculture, and organizational development.
- There are ample opportunities to apply the most commonly used systems thinking tools and approaches more widely (e.g., political economy analysis, process mapping, network analysis, and fishbone diagram).
- Systems thinking is used to understand context, influence priorities, inform program design, assess implementation facilitators and barriers, and facilitate continuous learning.
- Systems thinking approaches help promote equity by highlighting the physical, socioeconomic, and political factors that affect health outcomes among different populations.
- Systems thinking promotes a holistic understanding of the alignments and misalignments among constituents and stakeholders that produce creative adaptations and efficiencies required for health systems to withstand shocks and gain long term resilience.

Gap in the Literature

- There are a limited number of publications on how systems thinking tools and strategies can be adapted to different contexts.
- There is significantly less documentation of how systems thinking tools have been applied in low- and middle-income countries compared to documented experiences in high-income countries.
- There is little documentation about building systems thinking capacity in low- and middle-income countries, including how to strengthen the ability of users to communicate and utilize data that emerges from these approaches.
- Systems thinking is recognized as a valuable tool to advance intersectoral initiatives, but there is limited evidence about its effectiveness when applied to intersectoral collaboration around strengthening health systems.

Explore the Evidence Further

Click [here](#) to directly access the curated evidence around the topic of Systems Thinking and learn more.

The LHSS Project wants to hear from you! If you are aware of relevant material that should be included in the Evidence Gap Map, please send it by filling out this [form](#).