Lenses and levels: the why, what and how of measuring health system drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health with a governance focus

Asha George,¹ Amnesty Elizabeth LeFevre,² Tanya Jacobs,¹ Mary Kinney,¹ Kent Buse,³ Mickey Chopra,⁴ Bernadette Daelmans,⁵ Annie Haakenstad,⁶ Luis Huicho,⁷ Rajat Khosla,⁸ Kumanan Rasanathan,⁹ David Sanders,¹ Neha S Singh,¹⁰ Nicki Tiffin,^{11,12} Rajani Ved,¹³ Shehla Abbas Zaidi,¹⁴ Helen Schneider¹

To cite: George A, LeFevre AE, Jacobs T, *et al.* Lenses and levels: the why, what and how of measuring health system drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health with a governance focus. *BMJ Glob Health* 2019;4:i143–i153. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2018-001316

Handling editor Stephanie M Topp

Received 16 November 2018
Revised 16 January 2019
Accepted 15 February 2019

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2019. Re-use permitted under CC BY. Published by BMJ.

For numbered affiliations see end of article.

Correspondence to
Professor Asha George;
asgeorge@uwc.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Health systems are critical for health outcomes as they underpin intervention coverage and quality, promote users' rights and intervene on the social determinants of health. Governance is essential for health system endeavours as it mobilises and coordinates a multiplicity of actors and interests to realise common goals. The inherently social, political and contextualised nature of governance, and health systems more broadly, has implications for measurement, including how the health of women, children and adolescents health is viewed and assessed, and for whom. Three common lenses, each with their own views of power dynamics in policy and programme implementation, include a service delivery lens aimed at scaling effective interventions, a societal lens oriented to empowering people with rights to effect change and a systems lens concerned with creating enabling environments for adaptive learning. We illustrate the implications of each lens for the *why*, *what* and *how* of measuring health system drivers across micro, meso and macro health systems levels, through three examples (digital health, maternal and perinatal death surveillance and review, and multisectoral action for adolescent health). Appreciating these underpinnings of measuring health systems and governance drivers of the health of women, children and adolescents is essential for a holistic learning and action agenda that engages a wider range of stakeholders, which includes, but also goes beyond, indicator-based measurement. Without a broadening of approaches to measurement and the types of research partnerships involved, continued investments in the health of women, children and adolescents will fall short.

INTRODUCTION

Health systems play a critical role in improving and sustaining the health of women, children and adolescents by supporting intervention coverage and quality, promoting the rights of end users and intervening on the

Summary box

- ▶ By making explicit the different framings or lenses through which we see the health of women, children and adolescents, we make more transparent the choices made in terms of what is measured, why, how and for whom.
- ▶ Health systems measurement metrics to date largely focus on variables brought into view by the service delivery lens. However, both societal and systems lenses reveal important variables that are context specific and often intangible. These more intangible health systems drivers are subjective in nature and need joint interpretation by researchers and research participants.
- ▶ While cross-national governance and health metrics exist, they may be less useful for national-level policy-makers who are looking for more applied analysis of why, where and how to improve governance in health systems.
- ▶ A broader understanding of policy needs for advancing the health of women and children requires investing in a broader measurement agenda. This entails other research methodologies and methods, and also a reconsideration of the kinds of research partnerships constituted and how embedded they are with decision-makers who govern health systems at different levels for women's, children's and adolescents' health.

social determinants of health. Health systems consist of all the organisations, institutions, resources and people whose primary purpose is to promote and improve health.¹

Key health systems inputs include human resources, financing, commodities, infrastructure and information systems to ensure high-quality health services. In addition to coordinating these inputs, health policy implementation and programme scale-up hinges

Figure 1 Elements of governance.

on mobilising a multiplicity of actors for collective action to realise common goals within health programmes and across other sectors. This requires attention to people and how their relationships govern health systems across diverse contexts over time. These governance features, while less easily observable and often referred to as the underlying or ‘software’ of health systems, are key to understanding health systems performance and variation within and across jurisdictions.^{2–4} Governance is therefore not an additional building block of ancillary input in health systems, but the overarching frame within which the people, organisations, institutions and resources that make up health systems work.⁵ It is the force which binds or repels actors, relationships and resources across all levels of the health system to collectively realise health goals.

Governance involves the formal and informal rules and mechanisms that influence decision-making between citizens, providers, and the state in the public interest or not (figure 1). At its core, governance entails the mediation of power between diverse actors to influence the design and implementation of policies and services, although multiple definitions and frameworks for governance exist and continue to evolve, signalling its multidisciplinary origins.^{5–8}

A governance perspective encourages taking a step back to understand how the health of women, children and adolescents is viewed before focusing on the micro-details of specific measurement metrics for health systems drivers. Three common framings or lenses include a *service delivery lens* aimed at scaling effective interventions, a *societal lens* oriented to empowering people with rights to effect change and a *systems lens* concerned with creating enabling environments for adaptive learning.

To illustrate this multidimensional view of health systems drivers, we apply these lenses to three examples. We use digital health to illustrate health systems dynamics relevant to governance at micro (individual level), maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response (MPDSR) to highlight facility-level meso (organisational level) dynamics, and multisectoral action for adolescent health for macro (structural level) dynamics.⁹

We conclude with reflections on the implications of these lenses and levels for measuring health systems drivers of the health of women, children and adolescents. The purpose of this methodology paper is not to propose universal measurements or indicators, but to develop understanding on how measuring health system drivers of the health of women, children and adolescents with a governance focus requires a broad approach to measurement, opening up our understanding of what we should be measuring, how, why and for whom. By doing so, we contribute to a more effective fulfilment of commitments to monitor progress in the health of women, children and adolescents in priority countries.

FRAMING OF WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR WHY AND WHAT WE MEASURE

Political analysis engaged with understanding power relations and governance dynamics considers among other things how the framing of a problem, often unconsciously, shapes responses to it.¹⁰ In this paper, we argue that the framing of women's, children's and adolescents' health is influenced by particular views of power¹¹ and modes of governance,¹² and that this framing in turn shapes how we understand health policy and programme implementation. This shapes our rationale or *why* we

Table 1 Why, what and how we measure health systems drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health with a governance focus

Why we measure	What we measure		How we measure	
Framing	Health systems drivers relevant to governance	Measurement variables	Research epistemologies, methodologies and methods	Research continuum
Lens: Service delivery Focus: Health conditions with effective interventions View of power: Technocratic Mode of governance: Hierarchical Implementation focus: Blueprints for what works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Policy mandate ► Coordination for continuity across levels and sectors ► Service delivery readiness ► User characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Technical content of policies ► Management mechanisms: committees, review meetings, etc ► Inputs/resources (human resources for health, supplies, finances) ► User profile (literacy, gender, class, ethnicity, age) 	Epistemology: Positivist Methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Measuring adherence to recommended protocols (users and providers) ► Applying implementation checklists ► Analysing household, facility surveys or routine HMIS and system-generated data ► Ecological analysis of large datasets 	Disciplines: Epidemiology, demography Approach: Replicable measurements that validate progress or highlight gaps Evidence: Cross-national data sets
Lens: Societal Focus: People with rights View of power: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unidirectional/ power over/zero-sum 2. Co-produced/ relational Mode of governance: Negotiating interests, enabling collaboration Implementation focus: Social processes/ relationships	Macro: Political prioritisation Meso: Accountability dynamics Micro: Interpersonal dynamics supporting empowerment or marginalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Stakeholder positions and interests ► Participation/ mobilisation ► Organisational cultures ► Transparency ► Credibility/trust ► Social capital and networks ► Social/informal norms ► Framing 	Epistemology: Legal Pragmatic/ constructivist Methodologies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Legal analysis ► Health policy and systems research Methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Stakeholder analysis, political mapping ► Social network analysis ► Case study research 	Disciplines: Multiple social science disciplines Approach: Context embedded research Reflective practice Evidence: Tacit and experiential knowledge
Lens: Systems Focus: Complexity View of power: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Creative: disruptive/productive Mode of governance: Principles enabling emergence Implementation focus: Interventions and people interact and evolve overtime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Dis/equilibria ► Feedback loops ► Eventuality of change ► Emergence ► Path dependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Diversity of actors, varying power, alignment and interests ► Contextual permeability ► Adaptive or learning capacities ► Tipping points and motivation for emergence and change 	Epistemology: Constructivist Methodologies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Ethnography ► Participatory action research ► Systems modelling Methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Hidden transcripts ► Causal loop diagrams 	

HMIS, health management and information systems.

measure health systems drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health with a governance focus, but also *what* and *how* we measure these drivers (table 1).

Service delivery lens

The dominant framing of the health of women, children and adolescents is of health conditions that have effective

interventions. Implicit in this *service delivery lens* is a technocratic view of power that aims to separate science from politics and a mode of governance that is hierarchical assuming that authority flows from the top down. Implementation is therefore a matter of sequential inputs operationalised through predetermined blueprints or plans designed by experts from above into services to save lives.

From this service delivery lens, tangible health systems drivers that come into focus for measurement include policy mandates to support implementation (the availability of policies and their technical content), coordination to ensure continuity of care across levels and sectors (management mechanisms), service delivery readiness (health system building block inputs and resources) and user characteristics (gender, class, ethnicity, age, geography, etc). The later variable enables one to have a baseline to assess various equity dimensions of service delivery.

Societal lens

A different and equally compelling framing of women's, children's and adolescents' health is of the people involved and their rights shaped by the societies in which they are embedded. Within this societal lens, a legal rights-based perspective can view power as a series of zero-sum bargains or binary pairings. It therefore seeks to clarify roles and responsibilities, as well as entitlements of rights claimants and obligations of rights holders. A health policy and systems perspective, informed by a view of power that is co-produced or relational, examines the negotiations and discretion of communities, health-care users, health workers and/or managers to buy in to reforms or resist them. Both perspectives view implementation as a social process dependent on social context and the relationships brokered between diverse health system actors.

From a societal lens, there is not a universal checklist of tangible factors to measure, but rather a range of phenomena that can be measured depending on the issue, context and health system level. Three illustrative health systems drivers for women's, children's and adolescent's health within this framing are those related to (1) political prioritisation at the macro-level of societies, (2) accountability dynamics within the meso-level of organisations and (3) how interpersonal dynamics between individuals at the micro-level of health systems support empowerment or marginalisation. Measurement, depending on the issues at hand, would focus on, for example, the following intangible variables: actor interests and social networks; organisational cultures and trust; social capital; framing and social norms. These variables help to understand whether the interests and capabilities of marginalised actors are considered and transformed or whether power structures continue to disenfranchise them. These are vital to understand how and why inequalities persist and how they can be transformed.

Systems lens

As understanding of the social relationships that underpin implementation has deepened, so has an appreciation for the complexity¹³ and fluidity with which interventions and people dynamically interact and evolve over time through systems in anticipated, but also unanticipated ways. Implicit in this systems lens is a view of power as creative, which can be directed in disruptive and productive ways. Governance approached through this lens recognises that power is dispersed in organisations, and that planned change interfaces with spontaneous forms of self-organisation referred to as emergence. Enabling positive forms of emergence is key to governance and in this regard, implementation is aided by understanding current system dynamics, and the role of equilibria and feedback loops. Varying degrees of cooperation or contestation, and the overall effects of positive and negative feedback loops establish path dependence or the emergence of new equilibria in systems. Key dimensions to measure for policy implementation are the diversity of the actors involved and their dynamic interdependence, their adaptive learning capacities, the permeability of context, and key triggers or tipping points that motivate and support emergence or change.^{14–17} This perspective enables us to understand key triggers and alignment of actors that support more equitable change, but also the backlash against such social change.

These framings and corresponding lenses are not mutually exclusive or competing paradigms, but rather ways of looking at different dimensions of women's, children's and adolescents' health, which taken together provide a holistic understanding of health systems drivers. We explain them further with a focus on governance through examples in the next section.

WHAT TO MEASURE ACROSS LENSES AND LEVELS: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES FROM WOMEN'S, CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENT'S HEALTH

Given that governance and health systems relationships are pervasive contextual drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health, we use three examples to illustrate the possibilities of what to measure across lenses and levels (tables 2–4). These examples represent key interfaces between people in health systems and can be analysed at micro (individual), meso (organisational) and macro (structural) levels. Each of these examples, while initiated at different levels of the health system, can be seen as governance interventions potentially disrupting and recreating relations across health system levels.

Digital health

Digital health entails the use of digital, mobile and wireless technologies in support of health, with the potential to link users, providers and managers in new ways to improve uptake, quality and continuity of care. Despite its promise, few digital health solutions are successfully scaled in low-income and middle-income countries,

Table 2 Lenses and levels for examining drivers of digital health

Health systems drivers with a governance focus	Health system levels		
	Macro	Meso	Micro
Service delivery lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policy mandate ▶ Coordination mechanisms ▶ Service delivery readiness ▶ User capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policies on privacy of personal data, interoperability, procurement, etc ▶ Network coverage: cell phone towers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Composition and organisational location of task force ▶ Technology design choices ▶ Network coverage: mobile network operator verification systems ▶ Health worker workload ▶ Financial resources to support the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ User mobile literacy, access and ownership ▶ Network coverage: SIM turnover, handset type and functionality
Society lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Political prioritisation ▶ Accountability dynamics ▶ Interpersonal dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Trust in government or private companies maintaining information responsibly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Incentives and positionality of implementing partners (Ministry of Health, technology partners, mobile network operators, academic/research partners) ▶ Stakeholder relationships: NGOs with prior positive relationships with government more able to present data with negative findings to government ▶ Health worker responses and prioritisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Women with culture of concealing pregnancy, not being aware that they would be receiving SMS, can distrust or be jeopardised by text messages from unknown numbers ▶ DRC: more men than women accessing digital app on family planning originally targeted for women; is male power reinforced vs transformed?²³
Systems lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dis/equilibria ▶ Feedback loops ▶ Eventuality of change ▶ Emergence ▶ Path dependence (Dynamics can link across micro, meso and macro levels)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Tanzania: trained enumerators using smartphone apps in people's homes was a trigger for conversations and relationship building... community validation meetings where people discussed results offline and local health workers present who saw it as an opportunity to channel demands upwards to district authorities for resource allocation decisions²⁴ ▶ South Africa: health workers adapting registration processes from individual to batch registration; increases numbers of people registered, decreases waiting time for services, but uncertain consent procedures³³ ▶ Nigeria: women promised recharge cards to elicit participation, but then not all tech partners agreed, backfired against women who responded but belonged to these excluded tech partner networks... women then deleted messages and refused to participate²⁴ 		

DRC, Democratic Republic of Congo; NGO, non-governmental organisation.

including those addressing health governance.¹⁸ The reasons underpinning this are technological and social, encompassing resource constraints but also governance challenges.^{19–21}

We map what health systems drivers to measure in digital health through service delivery, society and systems lenses in [table 2](#). When we focus on user experiences at the micro-level interpersonal interface of health systems, a service delivery lens is essential to measure uptake of digital health interventions.^{18 22–25} Moving beyond this descriptive level, a societal and systems lens enables us to understand the social barriers to accessing digital health,^{26 27} as well as the social implications of such access. These additional lenses allow us to move beyond measuring whether or if digital health is being used, to

understanding how and why end users engage with the innovation and how they adapt them in diverse contexts over time.^{24 27 28}

Maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response

Moving from micro-level interpersonal interfaces aided by digital health to meso-level dynamics at facility level, a key quality improvement initiative is MPDSR as it supports review, learning and corrective action among diverse stakeholders responsible for providing services. MPDSR is the process of capturing information on the number and causes of deaths and then undertaking systematic, critical analysis of the quality of care received, in a no-blame, interdisciplinary setting, to develop and implement responses to prevent future deaths.^{29–31}

Table 3 Lenses and levels for examining drivers of maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response (MPDSR)

Health systems drivers with a governance focus	Health system levels		
	Macro	Meso	Micro
Service delivery lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policy mandate ▶ Coordination mechanisms ▶ Service delivery readiness ▶ User capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National MPDSR policy and guidelines ▶ Death notification requirements (legal framework for notifying deaths) ▶ Legal mandate to involve communities and other sectors ▶ Human resources shortages across the system but particularly for maternal and child health specialists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Committees formed ▶ Committee composition: profession, gender, seniority ▶ Meeting frequency ▶ Publication of proceedings ▶ Strategy for staff orientation to MPDSR ▶ Availability of MPDSR tools ▶ Health worker workload ▶ Functionality of information systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Competencies of managers, supervisors, providers to analysis and interpret data and information
Society lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Political prioritisation ▶ Accountability dynamics ▶ Interpersonal dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National prioritisation of preventing maternal and perinatal deaths ▶ Perceived preventability of deaths ▶ Social implications of political party affiliation, gender, class, among committee members, etc ▶ Community engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Leadership: individuals (champions) and of system (space for teamwork) ▶ Moving away from blame to learning environment/ trust ▶ Credibility of HMIS system ▶ Visibility of effect/impact ▶ Health worker responses and prioritisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Confidence of and capability of health workers to complete and analyse deaths ▶ Relationship between committee members ▶ Mentorship, clinical outreach and supervisory activities through district engagement
Systems lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dis/equilibria ▶ Feedback loops ▶ Eventuality of change ▶ Emergence (Dynamics can link across micro, meso and macro levels)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Kenya: MPDSR process/outcomes fail to deliver on actions due to health system barriers which perpetuates a demoralising work environment and undermines commitment to attending meetings³⁵ ▶ Nigeria: improved MPDSR led to increased reporting of deaths and therefore an increase in mortality further documenting poor performance. However, responses to insufficient blood supply led to community mobilisation for blood donor club formation. Inclusion of findings in State Medium Term Strategy led to the provision and maintenance of blood banks in state hospitals³⁶ 		

HMIS, health management and information systems.

Favourable policies for MPDSR are in place,³² yet few countries have robust operational MPDSR systems,³² and the likelihood for improvement only occurs if the audit cycle is fully implemented.³¹

We examine the health systems drivers of MPDSR through service delivery, societal and systems lenses and across health system levels (table 3), but focus on the meso-level here. At the meso-level or organisational level of health systems, a service delivery lens prioritises measurements of tangible markers of MPDSR implementation, such as number of meetings, dissemination of proceedings, number of trainings, use of guidelines, workload of MPDSR committee members and so on. In addition, a societal lens would examine issues of trust, credibility and hierarchies between MPDSR stakeholders.^{33 34} A systems lens would look at how MPDSR triggers responses across health system levels, unleashing

further scrutiny or resources, that would either empower or further demoralise health workers depending on how feedback loops are managed.^{35 36}

Multisectoral action for adolescent health

At a macro-level, the health sector works with sectors outside of those directed by ministries of health, depending on their alignment to address key social determinants. Calls for multisectoral action for adolescent health are frequently made, given that many of the determinants of the social and health inequalities faced by adolescents lie beyond the remit and resources of the health sector.³⁷ Yet beyond scattered projects, few examples of sustained and robust multisectoral action for adolescent health exist. Only a few service delivery school-based examples exist where health supports work led by the education sector.³⁸ Despite consensus on

Table 4 Lenses and levels for examining drivers of multisectoral action for adolescent health

Health systems drivers with a governance focus	Health system levels		
	Macro	Meso	Micro
Service delivery lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policy mandate ▶ Coordination mechanisms ▶ Service delivery readiness ▶ User capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policies across different sectors recognising adolescent health (Adolescent Health in All Policies approach)⁸⁴ ▶ Policies across different sectors recognising multisectoral action for adolescent health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Existence of adolescent health committee/unit⁸⁵ ▶ Constitution and functioning of committee/unit ▶ Location and linkages of the committee/unit within sectoral hierarchies ▶ Availability and authority to deploy resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Profile of policy champions: profession, seniority, age, gender ▶ Competency of all stakeholders in adolescent health and multisectoral actions ▶ Capacity to generate and use evidence on multisectoral action⁸⁶
Society lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Political prioritisation ▶ Accountability dynamics ▶ Interpersonal dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Adolescent leadership and participation and mobilisation overall ▶ Social determinants of health including, gender, diversity and socioeconomic and political context ▶ Framing and alignments of sector goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Incentives and constraints of stakeholders, including adolescents ▶ Leadership and organisational cultures supporting multisectoral action⁴⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Social networks and histories between policy advocates ▶ Trust, communication and credibility between policy advocates
Systems lens			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dis/equilibria ▶ Feedback loops ▶ Eventuality of change ▶ Emergence (Dynamics can link across micro, meso and macro levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Policies that prohibit adolescent girls from being pregnant while being in school, inhibits early care seeking for pregnancy care by these adolescents and has a negative impact on their future education and health³⁸ ▶ Not including adolescents in leadership and participation during the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of adolescent health programme will contribute to a negative feedback loop in terms of nature, quality and impact of the programme⁸⁷ ▶ Initial gains on collaborating on health education or HPV at schools, builds trust and relationships between sectors, that enables further work on more complex mutual aims such as mental health or comprehensive sexual and reproductive health programmes or violence prevention³⁸ 		

HPV, human papilloma virus.

the rationale for multisectoral action for health dating back to Alma Ata,³⁹ challenges realising it are not purely technical or programmatic, but rather relate to governance.^{40 41}

While all health systems drivers by lenses and levels are detailed in table 4, here we focus on macro-level drivers of multisectoral action for adolescent health. At a macro-level, a service delivery lens would count the existence of multisectoral policies and alignment of policies across different sectors. For example, school policies that expel adolescent girls from school for being pregnant do not align with health policies that aim to provide services to them. Marketing to adolescents by transnational corporations of alcohol, smoking and fast foods may align with trade policy, but not with health policy. A societal lens helps to assess whether the existence of policies is likely to lead to action by understanding the intangible workings of political alliances and constituencies involved and whether they share a common framing motivating

multisectoral action. Lastly, a systems lens would look at the history of these relationships to see whether adaptive learning supports ongoing trust, social capital and collaboration across sectors overtime, as detailed in the examples in table 4 below.

LENSES AND LEVELS FOR UNDERSTANDING HEALTH SYSTEMS DRIVERS WITH A GOVERNANCE FOCUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE MEASURE AND FOR WHOM

Numerous efforts to measure governance and health have evolved reflecting different disciplinary origins, research groups and policy audiences. Ecological analysis has linked good governance indicators with better health outcomes usually by improving the effectiveness of public health spending.^{2 42–45} Initiatives have also developed frameworks or indicators to measure health system governance.^{46–48} While these metrics enable cross-national comparisons that are useful for donors and international

organisations, they may be less useful for national-level policy-makers who are looking for more applied analysis of why, where and how to improve governance in health systems⁵ so that they deliver for those most likely to be left behind.

Understanding and responding to broader policy needs entails moving towards a broader range of disciplinary approaches in research on governance in health systems. Embedded research partnerships that can grasp historical and sociological contexts, and that facilitate co-production of emergent understandings of governance grounded in the programmatic realities of responding to women's, children's and adolescents' health and rights are critical. This entails building capacities of local research organisations, as well as the research affinities of those running health programmes.

Cross-national comparisons in measuring progress for women's, children's and adolescents' health relies on replicable measurements standardised across large numbers of jurisdictions (nation states, subnational districts). These are appropriate and effective for measuring the directly observable health systems drivers seen from a service delivery lens. However, many of the health systems drivers seen from a society lens are less easily observable aspects of human relationships that require research methods that enable a more in depth understanding of the social and system dynamics involved. These more intangible health systems drivers are subjective in nature and need joint interpretation by researchers and research participants. The corresponding context-specific embeddedness quality of such research necessitates research partnerships that are fostered over time beyond any data point or research study.

Understanding and reflecting on the different framings of women's, children's and adolescents' health and their corresponding service delivery, societal and systems lenses across health system levels enables an appreciation of the broad range of epistemologies and the continuum of research approaches^{49 50} that should be embraced to measure health systems drivers appropriately and effectively. A crucial first step towards that direction entails recognising the different epistemologies, or theories of knowledge, that underline the types of measurement that support understanding of health systems drivers identified by service delivery, societal or system lenses. We conclude this section by outlining these different epistemologies and the range of studies that can be supported depending on the specific lens and health issue focused on.

From a service delivery lens, the underlying epistemology is positivist. Illustrative examples of descriptive studies from this lens and research perspective include policy surveys of integrated Community Case Management (iCCM), infant and young child feeding^{51 52} and maternal death surveillance and response³⁶; iCCM health systems indicators⁵³ and various efforts to measure implementation strength^{54–56}; and readiness to scale newborn survival interventions⁵⁷ or, in the case of digital health, technical

functionality.²⁶ These studies provide valuable descriptive baselines of the technical content of policies and the readiness to implement them, often through objectively verifiable measurements. Other positivist studies also assess impact of interventions, even quite complex social interventions such as social accountability⁵⁸ or women's groups.⁵⁹ They mostly do not, however, explain how and why policies and interventions are implemented or why they work. Other methodologies are better suited to reveal the subjective and complex nature of consensus building, ownership or internalisation among diverse stakeholders needed to commit to the extensive collaboration and collective action required to sustain interventions and policy implementation overtime.¹⁵

From a society lens, the research approach tends to be pragmatic or constructivist. It includes health policy and systems research that examines health systems as context specific, constituted by people and their relationships imbued with symbolic meaning that is not always visible or observable. Illustrative examples include studies that examine macro-level political influences such as the prioritisation of maternal and newborn health^{60–62} or donor practices in global health.^{63–65} At the meso-level, evaluations have unpacked accountability dynamics in maternal and child health services^{33 58 66–70} or social network influences over provider behaviour.^{71 72} Recent attention to the disrespect and abuse of women seeking obstetric services and the perspectives of providers involved in such care has highlighted issues of trust, social norms and organisational culture as central to the patient-provider dynamics at micro and meso levels.^{73–76} Many of these studies include mixed methods or case study research approaches.

From a systems lens, the underlying epistemology tends to be constructivist, although the methodologies and methods of this approach range from ethnography and participatory action research to causal loop analysis, systems dynamic modelling and network analysis. Applications of this perspective include the sustainability of iCCM in Rwanda⁷⁷ or urban health programmes for maternal and child health in Bangladesh,⁷⁸ the drivers of coverage and governance of immunisation programmes in India,⁷⁹ and unforeseen resistance to global policy on male circumcision in Malawi⁸⁰ or to global HIV funding mechanisms in India.⁸¹ These analyses are highly context dependent and often reflect embedded research approaches, where implementers collaborate with researchers iteratively reflecting on practice and building on tacit and experiential knowledge.⁸²

CONCLUSION

Health systems drivers are key to understanding the enabling factors, social dynamics and rights that underpin coverage and equity of women's, children's and adolescents' health. These drivers are better understood when seen through service delivery, society and systems lenses. These lenses reveal complementary but distinct health

system drivers that together explain health system performance. While progress has been made in developing tools for describing these drivers from a service delivery lens, further understanding of the less observable elements that shape human behaviour in health systems identified by society and systems lenses is needed. This entails other research methodologies and methods, and also a reconsideration of what kinds of research teams are constituted and how embedded they are with decision-makers who govern health systems at different levels for women's, children's and adolescents' health.

Author affiliations

¹School of Public Health, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

²School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, Maryland

³Political Affairs and Strategy, UNAIDS, Geneva, Switzerland

⁴World Bank, Washington, District of Columbia, USA

⁵World Health Organisation, Geneva, Switzerland

⁶School of Public Health, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

⁷Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima, Peru

⁸United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland

⁹World Health Organisation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

¹⁰Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

¹¹Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Africa, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

¹²Computational Biology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

¹³National Health Systems Resource Centre, New Delhi, India

¹⁴Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University Faculty of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan

Acknowledgements This paper is part of a series that aim to address the challenges in measurement and monitoring women's, children's and adolescents' health in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. The series includes improved ways to measure and monitor inequalities, health system drivers of women's, children's and adolescents' health especially governance, early childhood development, reproductive maternal and child health in conflict settings, nutrition intervention coverage and effective coverage of interventions. These papers were presented at a Countdown measurement conference during 31 January to 1 February 2018 in South Africa and reviewed internally by Countdown 2030 members before being submitted for external peer review. We are grateful for constructive comments provided by Ties Boerma, Bob Black, George Patton, Theresa Diaz, Tanya Marchant, Jennifer Requejo and Monica Fox. Our work was financially supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation through a grant to the Countdown to 2030 for women's, children's and adolescents' health. Asha George and Helen Schneider are supported by the South African Research Chair's Initiative of the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant No 82769 and No 98919) and the South African Medical Research Council. Any opinion, finding and conclusion or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the author and the NRF and SAMRC does not accept any liability in this regard.

Contributors AG led the analysis and writing of the article with a core team (AEL, TJ, MK, MC, HS). The broader group provided inputs during multiple rounds of revisions. All authors saw and signed off on the last version.

Funding Asha George and Helen Schneider are supported by the South African Research Chair's Initiative of the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant No 82769 and No 98919) and the South African Medical Research Council. Countdown 2030 is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Disclaimer Any opinion, finding and conclusion or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the authors and the National Research Fund does not accept any liability in this regard.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement No additional data are available.

Open access This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported (CC BY 4.0) license, which permits others to copy, redistribute, remix, transform and build upon this work for any purpose, provided the original work is properly cited, a link to the licence is given, and indication of whether changes were made. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. *Everybody's business: strengthening health systems to improve health outcomes: WHO's framework for action*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2007.
2. Wehrmeister FC, da Silva ICM, Barros AJD, *et al*. Is governance, gross domestic product, inequality, population size or country surface area associated with coverage and equity of health interventions? Ecological analyses of cross-sectional surveys from 80 countries. *BMJ Glob Health* 2017;2:e000437.
3. Huicho L, Segura ER, Huayanay-Espinoza CA, *et al*. Child health and nutrition in Peru within an antipoverty political agenda: a countdown to 2015 country case study. *Lancet Glob Health* 2016;4:e414–26.
4. Akseer N, Kamali M, Bakhache N, *et al*. Status and drivers of maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health in the Islamic world: a comparative analysis. *Lancet* 2018;391:1493–512.
5. Mikkelsen-Lopez I, Wyss K, de Savigny D. An approach to addressing governance from a health system framework perspective. *BMC Int Health Hum Rights* 2011;11:13.
6. Gilson L, Lehmann U, Schneider H. Practicing governance towards equity in health systems: LMIC perspectives and experience. *Int J Equity Health* 2017;16:1–5.
7. Abimbola S, Negin J, Martiniuk AL, *et al*. Institutional analysis of health system governance. *Health Policy Plan* 2017;32:1337–44.
8. Pyone T, Smith H, van den Broek N. Frameworks to assess health systems governance: a systematic review. *Health Policy Plan* 2017;32:710–22.
9. Sheikh K, Gilson L, Agyepong IA, *et al*. Building the field of health policy and systems research: framing the questions. *PLoS Med* 2011;8.
10. Rushton S, Williams OD. Frames, paradigms and power: global health policy-making under Neoliberalism. *Glob Soc* 2012;26:147–67.
11. Sriram V, Topp SM, Schaaf M, *et al*. 10 best resources on power in health policy and systems in low- and middle-income countries. *Health Policy Plan* 2018;33.
12. Capano G, Mi H, Ramesh M, eds. *Varieties of governance: dynamics, strategies, capacities*. London and New York: Palgrave, 2015.
13. Chughtai S, Blanchet K. Systems thinking in public health: a bibliographic contribution to a meta-narrative review. *Health Policy Plan* 2017;32:585–94.
14. Pains L, Peters DH. Understanding pathways for scaling up health services through the lens of complex adaptive systems. *Health Policy Plan* 2012;27:365–73.
15. May C. Towards a general theory of implementation. *Implement Sci* 2013;8.
16. Nilsen P, Ståhl C, Roback K, *et al*. Never the twain shall meet?—a comparison of implementation science and policy implementation research. *Implement Sci* 2013;8:1–12.
17. Nilsen P. Making sense of implementation theories, models and frameworks. *Implement Sci* 2015;10:1–13.
18. Holeman I, Cookson TP, Pagliari C. Digital technology for health sector governance in low and middle income countries: a scoping review. *J Glob Health* 2016;6.
19. Peter J. Achieving scale, sustainability and impact: a donor perspective on a mobile health messaging service and help desk (MomConnect) for South African mothers. *BMJ Glob Health* 2018;3(Suppl 2):i9–11.
20. Peter J, Benjamin P, LeFevre AE, *et al*. Taking digital health innovation to scale in South Africa: ten lessons from MomConnect. *BMJ Glob Health* 2018;3(Suppl 2):i68–71.
21. Leon N, Schneider H, Daviaud E. Applying a framework for assessing the health system challenges to scaling up mHealth in South Africa. *BMC Med Inform Decis Mak* 2012;12.
22. Rothstein JD, Jennings L, Moorthy A, *et al*. Qualitative assessment of the feasibility, usability, and acceptability of a mobile client data APP for community-based maternal, neonatal, and child care in rural Ghana. *Int J Telemed Appl* 2016;2016:2515420.
23. Jennings L, Gagliardi L, Gill K. Influence of mHealth interventions on gender relations in developing countries: a systematic literature review. *Int J Equity Health* 2013;12:85.

24. Hrynick T, Waldman L. ICT-facilitated accountability and engagement in health systems: a review of Making All Voices Count mHealth for accountability projects. *Making All Voices Count* 2017;1–40.
25. Gaitonde R. Registration and monitoring of pregnant women in Tamil Nadu, India: a critique. *Reprod Health Matters* 2012;20:118–24.
26. LeFevre AE, Mohan D, Hutchful D, et al. Mobile technology for community health in Ghana: what happens when technical functionality threatens the effectiveness of digital health programs? *BMC Med Inform Decis Mak* 2017;17.
27. Bull S, Ezeanochie N. From Foucault to Freire through Facebook: toward an integrated theory of mHealth. *Health Educ Behav* 2016;43:399–411.
28. Dasgupt J, Sandhya YK, Lobis S, et al. Using technology to claim rights to free maternal health care: lessons about impact from the My Health, my voice pilot project in India. *Health Hum Rights* 2015;17:135–47.
29. Hounton S, De Bernis L, Hussein J, et al. Towards elimination of maternal deaths: maternal deaths surveillance and response. *Reprod Health* 2013;10.
30. Ivers N, Jamtvedt G, Flottorp S, et al. Audit and feedback: effects on professional practice and healthcare Outcomes. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2012;(6):CD000259.
31. Kerber KJ, Mathai M, Lewis G, et al. Counting every stillbirth and neonatal death through mortality audit to improve quality of care for every pregnant woman and her baby. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 2015;15(Suppl 2).
32. World Health Organization. *Time to respond: a report on the global implementation of maternal death surveillance and response (MDSR)*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016.
33. Martin Hilber A, Blake C, Bohle LF, et al. Strengthening accountability for improved maternal and newborn health: a mapping of studies in sub-Saharan Africa. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet* 2016;135:345–57.
34. Langley A, Denis J-L. Beyond evidence: the micropolitics of improvement. *BMJ Qual Saf* 2011;20(Suppl 1):i43–6.
35. Smith H, Ameh C, Roos N, et al. Implementing maternal death surveillance and response: a review of lessons from country case studies. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 2017;17.
36. Bandali S, Thomas C, Hukin E, et al. Maternal death surveillance and response systems in driving accountability and influencing change. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet* 2016;135:365–71.
37. Patton GC, Sawyer SM, Santelli JS, et al. Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. *The Lancet* 2016;387:2423–78.
38. World Health Organization. *Global accelerated action for the health of adolescents (AA-HA!) guidance to support country implementation*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2017.
39. Adeleye OA, Ofili AN. Strengthening intersectoral collaboration for primary health care in developing countries: can the health sector play broader roles? *J Environ Public Health* 2010;2010.
40. Rasanathan K, Bennett S, Atkins V, et al. Governing multisectoral action for health in low- and middle-income countries. *PLoS Med* 2017;14.
41. Pelletier D, Gervais S, Hafeez-Ur-Rehman H, et al. Boundary-spanning actors in complex adaptive governance systems: the case of multisectoral nutrition. *Int J Health Plann Manage* 2018;33:1–27.
42. Makuta I, O'Hare B. Quality of governance, public spending on health and health status in sub Saharan Africa: panel data regression analysis. *BMC Public Health* 2015;15.
43. Kipp AM, Blevins M, Haley CA, et al. Factors associated with declining under-five mortality rates from 2000 to 2013: an ecological analysis of 46 African countries. *BMJ Open* 2016;6.
44. Lin R-T, Chien L-C, Chen Y-M, et al. Governance matters: an ecological association between governance and child mortality. *Int Health* 2014;6.
45. Farag M, Nandakumar AK, Wallack S, et al. Health expenditures, health outcomes and the role of good governance. *Int J Health Care Finance Econ* 2013;13:33–52.
51. Islam. *Health systems assessment approach: a how to manual*. Arlington, 2007.
47. Lewis Gunilla MP. Governance in health care delivery: raising performance. *The World Bank* 2009.
48. WHO. Monitoring the building blocks of health systems: a handbook of indicators and their measurement strategies 2010.
49. Greenhalgh T, Russell J. Why do evaluations of eHealth programs fail? An alternative set of guiding principles. *PLoS Med* 2010;7:1–5.
50. Gilson L, Hanson K, Sheikh K, et al. Building the field of health policy and systems research: social science matters. *PLoS Med* 2011;8:e1001079.
56. Rasanathan K, Muñiz M, Bakshi S, et al. Community case management of childhood illness in sub-Saharan Africa—findings from a cross-sectional survey on policy and implementation. *J Glob Health* 2014;4.
52. Thow AM, Karn S, Devkota MD, et al. Opportunities for strengthening infant and young child feeding policies in South Asia: insights from the SAIFRN policy analysis project. *BMC Public Health* 2017;17.
53. McGorman L, Marsh DR, Guenther T, et al. A health systems approach to integrated community case management of childhood illness: methods and tools. *Am J Trop Med Hyg* 2012;87(5 Suppl):69–76.
54. Miller NP, Amouzou A, Tafesse M, et al. Integrated community case management of childhood illness in Ethiopia: implementation strength and quality of care. *Am J Trop Med Hyg* 2014;91:424–34.
55. Heidkamp R, Hazel E, Nsona H, et al. Measuring implementation strength for integrated community case management in Malawi: results from a national cell phone census. *Am J Trop Med Hyg* 2015;93:861–8.
56. Hargreaves JRM, Goodman C, Davey C, et al. Measuring implementation strength: lessons from the evaluation of public health strategies in low- and middle-income settings. *Health Policy Plan* 2016;31:860–7.
57. Moran AC, Kerber K, Pfitzer A, et al. Benchmarks to measure readiness to integrate and scale up newborn survival interventions. *Health Policy Plan* 2012;27(Suppl 3):iii29–39.
58. Bjorkman Nyqvist M, Svensson J. Power to the people: evidence from a randomized field experiment of a community-based monitoring project in Uganda 2007.
59. Seward N, Neuman M, Colbourn T, et al. Effects of women's groups practising participatory learning and action on preventive and care-seeking behaviours to reduce neonatal mortality: a meta-analysis of cluster-randomised trials. *PLoS Med* 2017;14:e1002467.
60. Smith SL, Shiffman J. Setting the global health agenda: the influence of advocates and ideas on political priority for maternal and newborn survival. *Soc Sci Med* 2016;166:86–93.
61. Smith SL, Shiffman J, Kazembe A. Generating political priority for newborn survival in three low-income countries. *Glob Public Health* 2014;9:538–54.
62. Shiffman J, Smith S. Generation of political priority for global health initiatives: a framework and case study of maternal mortality. *Lancet* 2007;370:1370–9.
63. Birn A-E. Backstage: the relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Health Organization, Part I: 1940s–1960s. *Public Health* 2014;128:129–40.
64. Pfeiffer J, Gimbel S, Chilundo B, et al. Austerity and the "sector-wide approach" to health: the Mozambique experience. *Soc Sci Med* 2017;187:208–16.
65. McCoy D, Kembhavi G, Patel J, et al. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's grant-making programme for global health. *The Lancet* 2009;373:1645–53.
66. Ten Hoope-Bender P, Martin Hilber A, Nove A, et al. Using advocacy and data to strengthen political accountability in maternal and newborn health in Africa. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet* 2016;135:358–64.
67. Blake C, Annorbah-Sarpei NA, Bailey C, et al. Scorecards and social accountability for improved maternal and newborn health services: a pilot in the Ashanti and Volta regions of Ghana. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet* 2016;135:372–9.
68. Schaaf M, Topp SM, Ngulube M. From favours to entitlements: community voice and action and health service quality in Zambia. *Health Policy Plan* 2017;32:847–59.
69. Topp SM, Black J, Morrow M, et al. The impact of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) service scale-up on mechanisms of accountability in Zambian primary health centres: a case-based health systems analysis. *BMC Health Serv Res* 2015;15.
70. George AS, Erchick DJ, Zubairu MM, et al. Sparking, supporting and steering change: grounding an accountability framework with viewpoints from Nigerian routine immunization and primary health care government officials. *Health Policy Plan* 2016;31:1326–32.
71. Mumtaz Z, Salway S, Nykiforuk C, et al. The role of social geography on lady health workers' mobility and effectiveness in Pakistan. *Soc Sci Med* 2013;91:48–57.
72. Malik AU, Willis CD, Hamid S, et al. Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: advice seeking behavior among primary health care physicians in Pakistan. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2014;12.
73. Warren CE, Njue R, Ndwiiga C, et al. Manifestations and drivers of mistreatment of women during childbirth in Kenya: implications for measurement and developing interventions. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 2017;17.
74. Warren CE, Ndwiiga C, Sripad P, et al. Sowing the seeds of transformative practice to actualize women's rights to respectful maternity care: reflections from Kenya using the consolidated

- framework for implementation research. *BMC Womens Health* 2017;17.
75. Bohren MA, Vogel JP, Tunçalp Özge, *et al.* "By slapping their laps, the patient will know that you truly care for her": a qualitative study on social norms and acceptability of the mistreatment of women during childbirth in Abuja, Nigeria. *SSM Popul Health* 2016;2:640–55.
 76. Bohren MA, Vogel JP, Hunter EC, *et al.* The mistreatment of women during childbirth in health facilities globally: a mixed-methods systematic review. *PLoS Med* 2015;12.
 77. Sarriot E, Morrow M, Langston A, *et al.* A causal loop analysis of the sustainability of integrated community case management in Rwanda. *Soc Sci Med* 2015;131:147–55.
 78. Sarriot EG, Kouletio M, Jahan S, *et al.* Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: sustainability evaluation as learning and sense-making in a complex urban health system in northern Bangladesh. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2014;12.
 79. Varghese J, Kutty VR, Paina L, *et al.* Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: understanding the growing complexity governing immunization services in Kerala, India. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2014;12:47.
 80. Parkhurst JO, Chilongozi D, Hutchinson E. Doubt, defiance, and identity: understanding resistance to male circumcision for HIV prevention in Malawi. *Soc Sci Med* 2015;135:15–22.
 81. Kapilashrami A, McPake B. Transforming governance or reinforcing hierarchies and competition: examining the public and hidden transcripts of the global fund and HIV in India. *Health Policy Plan* 2013;28:626–35.
 82. Lehmann U, Gilson L. Action learning for health system governance: the reward and challenge of co-production. *Health Policy Plan* 2015;30:957–63.
 83. Tiffin N, LeFevre A, George AS. What data can we use, and when? Digital data governance to ensure that health systems deliver for women's, children's and adolescent's health.
 84. World Health Organization. *Global accelerated action for the health of adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2017.
 85. Ndumbe-Eyoh S, Moffatt H. Intersectoral action for health equity: a rapid systematic review. *BMC Public Health* 2013;13.
 86. Tangcharoensathien V, Srisookwatana O, Pinprateep P, *et al.* Multisectoral actions for health: challenges and opportunities in complex policy environments. *Int J Health Policy Manag* 2017;6:359–63.
 87. UNAIDS. *All in to end the adolescent AIDS epidemic*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNAIDS, 2016.