Areas of focus at the three main levels of the health system

- At community level: creating demand for and ensuring the provision of essential and affordable health and related services of appropriate quality, building on integrated community case management, seeking to influence social norms or barriers that deny the rights of children and women to access care, and related behaviors; supporting initiatives to overcome financial barriers to health service access; improving the accountability of local health and community leaders for the key determinants of health and for health outcomes; and strengthening resilience and emergency response capacity.

- At district level: improving health managers’ capacity for evidence-based planning, budgeting, supervision and monitoring of priority interventions for children and women; integration with community-based systems; coordination with other sectors (WASH, child protection, education, etc.); and efforts to formalize contingency planning and emergency response capacity.

- At national level: contributing to evidence-based and equitable national strategic plans and policies for children and women’s health, through strengthened use of evidence, equity analysis, costing and fiscal space analysis (in close collaboration with government and partner); leveraging of national and international resources; and linking with UNICEF contributions in other sectors (child protection and welfare, social inclusion and protection, education, C4D, WASH, HIV and nutrition).

Areas of focus on specific issues (as appropriate to the level of the health system and the local context)

- Improving the collection, analysis and use of data and information by strengthening the national health management, information, civil registration and vital statistics systems, and building on global tools and innovative technologies, including during health emergencies.

- Strengthening national and sub-national procurement, supply and distribution systems, engaging with the public and private sectors, civil society and development partners, particularly in emergency prevention, preparedness and response.

- Contributing to the social protection system and plan for financing UHC through the development of investment cases, fiscal space analysis and leveraging of resources (e.g., promoting insurance schemes focusing on the most vulnerable and prioritizing primary health care). Given the focus on a comprehensive and coordinated approach, linkages with social welfare services, early child development and adolescent engagement are also promoted.

- Supporting national and development partners to engage and regulate the private health sector in provision of UHC and in monitoring and surveillance systems, and to ensure that private providers and organizations, and the private sector more generally, contribute to equitable and quality health outcomes for children and women.

- Working with partners to support governments improve the quality of health care, especially community-level and maternal and newborn care, for example through the development and adaptation of standards, protocols and guidelines according to local contexts; capacity building of health and allied personnel; and ensuring institutional accountability.

UNICEF engages in health systems strengthening to promote the survival, growth and development of children and women, especially for the most vulnerable.
Tremendous progress in maternal and child health has been achieved since the Millennium Development Goal targets were set in 2000. However, unacceptable inequities remain both among and within countries; high rates of death, disability and malnutrition persist amongst vulnerable groups of children and women, including within middle-income countries. In addition, the recent Ebola crisis in West Africa highlighted the fragility of the health sector in the nations affected. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) continue to focus on the social and economic development and political security. In support of the SDGs, the United Nations Secretary-General Every Woman Every Child Global Strategy for Children and Adolescents (UNSGSG) focuses on improving non-communicable maternal, newborn and child health (“survive”) as well as ensuring health and well-being (“thrive”) and expanding enabling environments (“transform”).

Delivering on these ambitious goals, and systematically reducing inequities in health, requires more explicit attention to health systems, including their funding and financing. Strengthening well-embedded health systems is essential to achieving universal access to a core package of services, or universal health coverage (UHC), and ensuring global health environments (“transform”).

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UNICEF’s mandate is to advocate for and protect children’s rights, to help meet children’s basic needs, and to expand opportunities to help them reach their full potential in health and well-being. In order to achieve this, all programmes supported by UNICEF aim to:

- Address inequities in health outcomes;
- Promote integrated, multi-sectoral policies and action;
- Strengthen health systems, with a particular focus on emergency preparedness, response and resilience;
- UNICEF supports programmes focusing on priorities including health, nutrition, HIV, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); education; child protection; and social inclusion and policy. Early child development, adolescent health and community empowerment, income, resources, and fiscal space. UNICEF programmes adapt to context, needs and opportunities. This adaptability is also reflected in the agency’s approach to HSS.

UNICEF’s vision for health systems

UNICEF defines HSS as actions that establish sustained improvements in the provision, utilization, quality and efficiency of services delivered through the health system, and encourage the adoption of healthy behaviors and practices. These actions may also influence the health system context, including key performance drivers such as policies that impact on health sector governance, financing, management, capacity for implementation, social norms and country participation in initiatives designed to maintain national and global health security. They also implicitly improve health security by strengthening the system’s resilience and its capability to respond effectively and efficiently in the context of emergencies.

UNICEF’s HSS approach involves activities at all levels, acknowledging the importance of community engagement and sub-national management capacity of the health system, with a focus on the most disadvantaged. Activities build on UNICEF’s mandate, capacity, priorities and comparative advantages. They are guided by a results-based approach that includes situation analysis, followed by the stepwise identification of priorities and resolution of bottlenecks to effective coverage of health services, for the achievement of health outcomes (see Box). UNICEF's work on HSS is implemented under the general framework of its cooperation agreements with host governments. In all contexts, UNICEF partners closely with agencies with leading roles in the health sector (including WHO, UNFPA, the World Bank and others), and in support of the UN Development Assistance Framework UNICEF recognizes that its level of support will depend on the context and the capacity of government and development partners at local, national and global levels.

UNICEF’s HSS approach includes activities appropriate to the three major functional levels of health systems (country, sub-national and national) in different contexts, and entail the promotion of good health, delivery of essential interventions to children and women at-risk, and achievement of the MDGs.

In addition, it includes the five specific areas of existing capacity and potential opportunities. Their relevance and UNICEF’s activity vis-a-vis partners will vary according to the local context.

UNICEF’s areas of work in HSS for children and women

1. UNICEF’s involvement in health systems strengthening

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3. UNICEF’s health systems strengthening approach

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4. UNICEF’s HSS areas of work in HSS for children and women

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