The role of health systems research is to “make the invisible, visible,” said Julio Frenk, the Dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, at today’s concluding plenary session. He noted the case of Mexico, where he was formerly the Minister of Health. Before an analysis was done by the ministry in 2001, he said, poor people who found themselves facing catastrophic health expenditures were largely absent from public debate. Doing health systems research documents a hidden problem, quantifies its magnitude, and in so doing, can make a powerful case of the need for reform, he said.

Once reforms happen, it opens up whole new research opportunities – ones that ministries of health and other researchers often miss out on, said Frenk. New policies are meaningless unless they are actually put into practice: implementation research is needed to answer that question. The even more complicated part of the research equation, often neglected, is determining how the reforms are actually working. This kind of rigorous implementation research needs to be an integral part of the process, he said, noting that it was used to great effect during the reforms he implemented as Minister of Health to insure 50 million people. Not only did it help them refine their policy reforms, the evidence produced by the implementation research made a strong case for continuing the reforms when the next government took over. Yet too often, he said, policy reformers miss out on the opportunity to build implementation research into their plans. “Evaluation cannot be an afterthought.”

Comparative analysis, between countries, is also an extremely powerful tool. From his time at WHO, he recalled that some countries were defensive about their low rankings in a comparative global health report. However, he said, the more savvy officials used their country’s low rankings as a way to fire up political will within their own countries to push through reforms.

Learning from other countries is an opportunity that the global health community does not take advantage of nearly enough, said Frenk. “We desperately need a repository of best and worst practices,” he said. “Even more valuable than examples of success are examples of failure.”

“Any time a country tries out an innovation, this is a learning opportunity for the rest of the world,” said Frenk. “Research is an integral part of the efforts to improve health systems performance.”