Health systems research "the purposeful generation of knowledge that enables societies to organize themselves to improve health outcomes and health services" is rapidly emerging as one of the most dynamic and complex areas of research for health.

Awareness is growing among politicians, policy-makers, healthcare providers and researchers that the evidence base to support the theory and practice of strengthening health systems is not strong, especially in low-and middle-income countries. Moreover, the scientific foundations for this type of research are in need of significant development and improvement.

Calls for more and better health systems research are not new but they have recently been given a boost. In November 2008, the High Level Task Force on Scaling up Research and Learning for Health Systems recommended:
1) a high profile agenda of research,
2) the engagement of policy-makers in this agenda,
3) stronger country and global capacity for research, and
4) increased financing for health systems research.

This four-point agenda was presented to the Ministerial Forum on Research for Health where it was unanimously endorsed in the Bamako Call to Action on research for health. Among the Task Force’s recommendations was a global symposium on health systems research in 2010.

In June 2009, further support was advocated in a report to the Task Force in Innovative International Financing for Health Systems which recommended: increasing the capacity of institutions in low-and middle-income countries to conduct high-quality health systems research; enhancing the capacity of policy-makers to apply evidence throughout the policy process; and supporting more multi-country studies to provide generalizable findings.
Symposium background

The time is ripe to harness this energy and generate “as fast as possible” more and better health systems research to improve health outcomes, health services and health equity.

UNIVERSAL HEATH COVERAGE

This first symposium is dedicated to improving the scientific evidence needed by health policy-makers and practitioners to inform their decisions related to accelerating universal health coverage.

Achieving and sustaining universal coverage requires attention to a broad range of issues that are central to health systems performance. This includes drawing on the six interdependent health system building blocks "finance, workforce, services, technologies, information, and governance" and understanding how policies and programmes from within and beyond the health sector can be developed and implemented effectively, efficiently, and equitably.

Although universal health coverage is highly country and context specific, rigorous scientific research has the potential to generate evidence to inform better policy and practice within and across countries. For example, robust methodologies could be instrumental in indentifying how the services for HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, immunization and maternal and child health can be scaled up to reach the poor and disadvantaged more quickly and sustainably in low-income countries. Similarly, prospective monitoring and evaluation of health coverage policies in middle-income countries can help to better target the vulnerable populations and make important mid-course corrections.