

Building Resilience in Health Systems through Engineering

Abdullahi Abdirahim Bashiir

Faculty of Engineering Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

In an era of mounting health threats from pandemics and climate change to systemic resource constraints the ability of health systems to absorb shocks, adapt under stress, and transform for future demands is vital. Health system resilience, defined by robustness, resourcefulness, redundancy, and swiftness, is increasingly recognized as foundational to sustainable healthcare delivery. This paper examines how engineering can play a transformative role in enhancing health system resilience. Through interdisciplinary approaches, engineers design technologies, infrastructure, logistics, and digital tools that allow health systems to maintain core functions during disruptions. From optimizing supply chains to developing climate-resilient facilities, engineering solutions enhance operational agility and support evidence-based policy. Case studies from low- and middle-income countries demonstrate the efficacy of such interventions, while the integration of engineering with finance, ethics, and public health planning reveals a blueprint for systemic strengthening. Finally, the paper highlights the urgency of investing in health systems engineering education, interdisciplinary collaboration, and resilient infrastructure as global health threats escalate.

Keywords: Health system resilience, health engineering, adaptive capacity, public health infrastructure, crisis preparedness, digital health, climate-resilient healthcare.

INTRODUCTION

Weak health systems cannot be resilient, and a strong health system decreases a country's vulnerability to risks and ensures high preparedness to mitigate crises. Resilient health systems can prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters while maintaining routine functions and reconfiguring based on lessons learned. Resilience involves the ability to absorb, adapt, and transform under stress to maintain control over structure and functions. Structural change and crisis severity influence a system's capacity to absorb, adapt, and transform, with broader organizational adjustments needed during harsher crises. Resilience is also studied in information systems, highlighting the integration of digital resilience within health systems. Traits of resilience include robustness, redundancy, resourcefulness, and swiftness, with adaptive capacity considered a key overarching element. A framework for measuring health system resilience should be standardized worldwide. Key points include ensuring sufficient resources workforce, infrastructure, technology, utilities, and medical products that are maintained year-round. Competent staff capable of managing healthcare organizations, especially in epidemiology and public health analysis, are essential, with regular competency-based training. A system for monitoring and evaluation of data collection, analysis, and sanitation is necessary. Public health governance must be flexible and multi-sectorial to coordinate and mobilize resources quickly during emergencies [1, 2].

The Role of Engineering in Health Systems

Engineering contributes to resilient health systems through the design of technology, infrastructure and processes. Addressing everyday variability and large-scale shocks, engineering can assist health system strengthening, enabling transformation towards universal health coverage and sustainable development goals. Health services and the wider system face a range of shocks and chronic stresses. A critical design and engineering challenge is to maintain access to care during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic,

particularly for low- and middle-income countries where the burden is greatest. At the same time, noncommunicable disease is reaching epidemic proportions, while population growth, rapid urbanization, environmental pollution and climate-related risks undermine deliverability. Resilient health systems absorb, adapt and transform under stress, for example by switching from noncommunicable to emergency care through the reprioritization of staff and infrastructure, by the deployment of digital telehealth technology to maintain universal access, and through the rapid production of essential medical supplies. Engineering has played a vital role in adaptive solutions worldwide, providing the basis for multidisciplinary approaches to challenges in health system strengthening, public health, environmental management and disaster risk reduction [3, 4].

Challenges Facing Health Systems

Health systems face multiple stresses: inadequate resources; an aging population; environmental change; changing technology; workforce shortages; and seasonal fluctuations. In addition, the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that affected the entire globe has reminded us of the severe consequences of shocks to the healthcare sector. Large, complex health systems cannot be rebuilt overnight, so it is essential to ensure that systems are designed to resist, at least to a degree, the stresses and shocks that they will invariably face. Resilient health systems can maintain core functions and respond effectively to a crisis such as an epidemic. Resilience is the ability to absorb, adapt and transform in response to a shock, while maintaining control over structure and functions. In health systems, resilience encompasses the ability to respond effectively to shocks in a manner that enables the system to maintain its core functions and respond to the needs of the population. When stresses become prevalent and routine, systems must transform to meet the diverse demands placed on them. Structural changes become more radical as the crisis becomes harsher, requiring organizational adjustments to maintain the delivery of healthcare with fewer resource inputs. The transformative potential of a health system is its capacity to change operations and create new knowledge in response to a new environment [5, 6].

Engineering Solutions for Health System Resilience

Engineering contributes to creating adaptive systems capable of preparing for, withstanding, and recovering rapidly from multi-factorial crises and shocks, even when the health system is subject to chronic stress and resource constraints. Measures include supply-chain management, strategic stockpiling, capacity building, capacity substitution, and de-centralisation. Adaptive capacity refers to a system's ability to successfully manage these capabilities. Resourcefulness involves the timely identification of priorities and the mobilisation of resources when conditions exist to treat patients on a functional trajectory towards discharge. Robustness and redundancy are related but distinct: the former implies the strength of a system before significant degradation occurs, while the latter denotes sufficient, important, and potentially substitutable elements to support system functions in the event of degradation elsewhere, such as the over-capacity of the UK National Health Service. Decision analytics, operations research, and the digital transformation of care delivery can underpin policy development that builds adaptive capacity, enhances the effective mobilisation of resources, and embeds partial, simple, and locally-led solutions within system design. Concurrently, engineering lessons can create a suite of sub-components buildings, plants, processes, logistics chains, and techno-commercial arrangements that can robustly absorb or re-direct additional loads, sustaining healthcare delivery during or following an event [7, 8].

Case Studies of Resilient Health Systems

Resilient health delivery systems are crucial for addressing various shocks, including epidemics, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises. Accessibility and responsiveness are essential, especially for vulnerable groups like displaced populations. Utilizing frameworks on health systems resilience, methods such as stress testing and scenario planning help assess a system's ability to absorb or adapt to challenges. Engineering solutions have been implemented in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic. Case studies demonstrate the performance of these systems under stress and enhance understanding of resilience, which remains poorly defined in health contexts. Resilience aims to protect human life and the capacity to deliver critical services while avoiding narrow views found in risk management. Evaluating health system resilience over time poses challenges, yet engineers possess the skills necessary for designing and monitoring these systems. By integrating engineering and social science principles, a comprehensive approach to sustainability can be established. LMIC systems face significant post-conflict issues, including difficult geography and a loss of skilled labor, as seen in landlocked, post-conflict regions of North and East Sri Lanka [9, 10].

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Health Engineering

Health engineering describes the systematic application of physical sciences, design and analytic principles, and methods to healthcare delivery systems and services. Collaborative work spanning public health, social sciences, health systems research, medicine, and other fields is needed to engage engineering and promote resilient implementation of effective interventions. Such approaches must address adaptations of research techniques and tools for remote or mobile delivery; accounting for a greater range of variables and sources of uncertainty; incorporating noncontrol variables explicitly; and framing research participation as an intervention. Opportunities exist to build capacity and strengthen infrastructure in health engineering by making educational materials available, and despite significant funding constraints, established trends suggest pervasive continued growth in demand [11, 12].

Impact of Climate Change on Health Systems

Climate change represents a significant and pressing threat to health systems across the globe; comprehending and effectively addressing climate-related health risks is essential for the well-being of populations. Implementing resilient engineering designs is crucial to ensure that health infrastructure can withstand a variety of extreme-weather hazards, including cyclones, floods, droughts, and heat waves, all while simultaneously reducing the carbon footprint throughout the entire value chain. Adaptation measures can encompass a range of strategies, such as the relocation of facilities to safer locations away from vulnerable areas, implementing sustainable land use practices, adopting innovative green building designs, utilizing efficient low-carbon technologies, and investing in renewable energy sources as well as robust emergency power generation systems. Engineering practices can significantly enhance the resilience of health systems to climate hazards and other unexpected shocks through the development of adaptive and robust systems. Such systems are designed to maintain operability by altering existing processes or by reconfiguring components while staying true to their fundamental architectural conditioning. Through such proactive measures and strategic planning, health systems can be better equipped to handle the increasing threats posed by a changing climate [13, 14].

Funding and Investment in Health Engineering

The relationship between financing mechanisms and resilience in health-systems development and design remains underexplored despite evidence suggesting significant influence on system structure. Engineering principles have proven instrumental in addressing financial barriers by providing decision-making tools and integrating supply chains and patient transportation for vulnerable illnesses. Equipping engineers with an understanding of funding, financing, design mechanisms, and system linkages is essential for positioning engineering contribution to resilience challenges. Financial barriers, variously termed barriers to access, user fees, or out-of-pocket payments, are exacerbated by inefficiencies in administrative or organizational structures and processes. Engineering application to financing mechanisms through modelling offers potential to mitigate these artificial restrictions. Different financing strategies influence types of removal schemes, enabling identification of system design elements that reduce barriers through understanding potential components, their hierarchies, dependencies, and interconnections. Modelling methods such as system dynamics, discrete event, agent-based, or hybrid simulations support analysis of dynamic financial structures, transparency, and accountability processes; furthermore, the same models underpin epidemic and financial risk assessments [15, 16].

Ethical Considerations in Health Engineering

Engineering plays a vital role in discovering solutions to the intricate challenges faced by health systems. It works in collaboration with numerous disciplines such as public health, environmental science, medicine, and economics, creating a multifaceted approach to problem-solving. However, it is important to recognize that engineering alone does not always offer a complete solution to these issues, nor does it inherently promote social equity or guarantee better health outcomes for all individuals. Thus, a well-defined strategy for more deeply integrating engineering into health systems research, education, and practice is essential for addressing these complex challenges effectively. The provision of health services is a critical component of overall social well-being, influencing various aspects of people's lives. Health emergencies are particularly significant events that not only incur direct human costs, including loss of life and suffering, but they also lead to substantial economic and political repercussions that can destabilize entire communities. It becomes increasingly vital to develop and establish systems capable of absorbing these shocks and maintaining functionality during crises. This is where engineering emerges as a pivotal ally in this effort. By designing resilient and adaptable systems, engineers can help ensure that health services continue to function even in the face of adversity. Such systems must be robust, meaning they should be well-prepared to handle common disruptions that may arise. Furthermore, resilience entails having the capacity to respond effectively to unpredictable shocks. This involves not only the

design of systems that can withstand disturbances but also fostering an innovative mindset that encourages creative solutions and effective adaptations when challenges occur [17, 18].

Future Trends in Health Systems Engineering

Health systems engineering encompasses the design, the improvement and the implementation of integrated systems of people, materials, information, equipment and energy in the delivery of healthcare services. Engineering innovations offer clear pathways to build the resilience required for current and future health systems, both in normal operations and as systems adapt to additional system stresses and social shocks. Techniques and approaches derive from a wide variety of engineering disciplines, including industrial and systems engineering, civil and infrastructure engineering, information and communications technology, control engineering, and biomedical engineering. Health systems engineering focuses on the particular needs and characteristics of healthcare systems that can achieve desirable levels of healthcare safety, quality and access despite severe and disruptive stresses. It considers national, regional and local health infrastructures and the interdependencies that exist among sectors and systems. Health systems need to be adapted to the stresses they operate under through resource commitment, design and investment. Investment, capacity building and active preparation are required in areas such as urban and agro-ecological systems, critical infrastructure and hazards to avoid negative impacts on the capacity of health systems to deliver services and to reduce demand for them [19, 20].

Education and Training for Resilient Health Systems

Education and training in health systems resilience are essential for preparing future biomedical engineers and clinical experts to confront the complex challenges of adaptive health systems. Engineers are vital in creating health-care infrastructure and technology that can rapidly restore and adapt under stress, such as during pandemics. Resilient health systems must maintain equity while protecting populations and health-care workers. Building resilience involves linking physical infrastructure and technology with organizational, financial, and social processes. Community engagement is key to monitoring risks and ensuring feedback between environments and health systems. As complex socio-technical systems, health systems benefit from diverse approaches from various disciplines, including public health, medicine, and policy. Climate-related risks threaten health systems and community recovery capacity, making it crucial to secure investments for sustainable health-care design and management. Financial support, capacity development, and technology transfer efforts must also address ethical concerns and emphasize timely, intergenerational engagement [21, 22].

Community Engagement in Health System Resilience

Ensuring resilient health systems demands a participatory approach engaging stakeholders like research institutions, healthcare organizations, and local communities. Healthcare systems should employ responsive community engagement methodologies during crises to tackle health equity issues, fostering sustainable collaboration. Extreme weather and disease outbreaks challenge already strained health systems, with community groups filling crucial resource gaps. However, lack of supervision, incentives, low perception of community inclusiveness, and insufficient community health workers lead to decreased service usage for maternal and child health. Therefore, a strong health workforce is vital, advocating for investments in community-health initiatives. Decentralized decision-making and local-level training empower districts to reallocate resources effectively and swiftly confront various crises. Resilience building also necessitates intersectoral engagement to meet population needs like food and water. Preparedness and flexibility are crucial for agile emergency responses, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, despite previous lessons, the pandemic response inadequately addressed service disruptions for diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis. Only 34% of preparedness plans included non-COVID essential health services, while fewer than half incorporated health-system-wide emergency planning. Funding cuts across local governments and organizations in the UK heighten community pressure to manage without support. Resilience should be seen as inherent within individuals and organizations. Enhancing system-level resilience through collaboration between paid workers and communities is key to addressing structural pressures and improving health outcomes. A public health team tests a resilience framework in disadvantaged neighborhoods, promoting local inquiries to strategize actions and assess their effects [23, 24].

Monitoring and Evaluation of Health Systems

Resilience of health systems enables preparation for, recovery from, and adaptation after shocks. The concept has garnered heightened attention as a consequence of recent outbreaks and health emergencies. Weak health systems remain less resilient, rendering nations more vulnerable. Fragility received widespread recognition after the 2014 Ebola virus disease outbreak in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. The systematic decline of routine reproductive, maternal, and neonatal health service utilization

contributed a mortality burden comparable to the direct Ebola virus disease deaths. A resilient health system sustains core functions through absorption, adaptation, and transformation while retaining structure and control. The quality of the response at the point of delivery also shapes resilience. The degree of structural change required correlates with the severity of the crisis. The ability to reorganize and still maintain operations with fewer or different resources reflects organizational resilience. The rapid introduction of digital infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic further underscores that because health systems integrate digital technology for data reporting and management, health information system resilience constitutes a critical component of system-wide digital resilience. Resilience encompasses robustness, redundancy, resourcefulness, and swiftness, collectively reflecting adaptive capacity [25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Building resilience in health systems is no longer a supplementary strategy it is a necessity. Engineering offers a vital arsenal of tools, models, and frameworks to strengthen health systems' ability to respond to, recover from, and evolve beyond crises. As health systems worldwide grapple with increasingly complex and concurrent challenges, engineering provides adaptive, efficient, and scalable solutions. However, engineering must not operate in isolation; it must be integrated with public health, policy, social science, and ethical considerations. Investment in engineering education, collaborative frameworks, and system-wide reforms will be essential to embed resilience as a structural characteristic of healthcare systems globally. With the proper commitment and interdisciplinary effort, engineering can enable the transformation of fragile systems into resilient, responsive, and future-ready healthcare ecosystems.

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