

Learning Health Systems: From Knowledge to Action

Implications & Insights

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Roadmap

1. What is involved in becoming a learning health system?
2. Why does being a learning health system matter?
3. How can learning be institutionalised within the South African health system?

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1. Becoming a learning health system

- Many of us in the health system are ‘learners’ –
  - we learn *from experience,* as we seek to ‘do better’
  - we are *students*, actively studying something in the system
  - we are *researchers*, whose professional role is to study & learn
  - we are *educators* supporting others to learn

But the wide range of *individual* level learning does not make it a ‘learning system’

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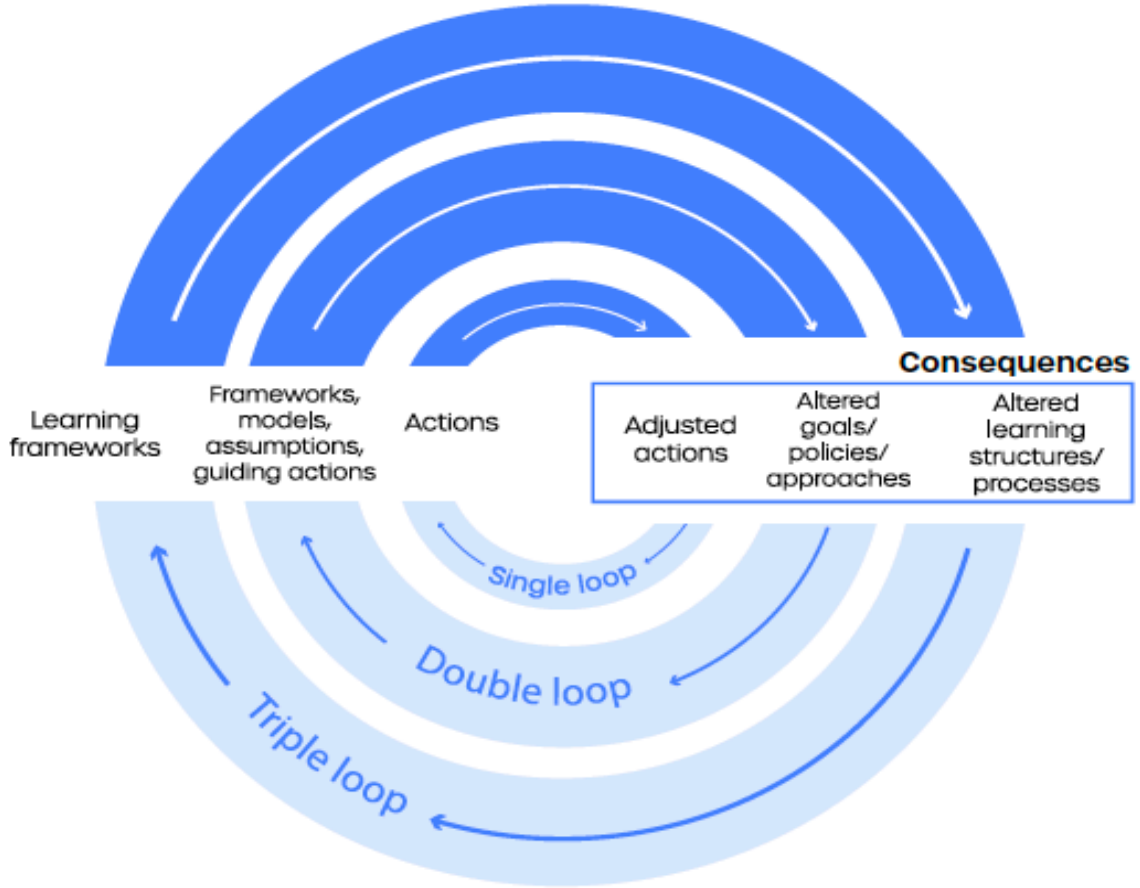
Moving beyond individual learning

The *three* loops of organisational learning

Fig. 4. Nested learning loops



Sheikh & Abimbola, 2021
Alliance for Health Policy & Systems Research

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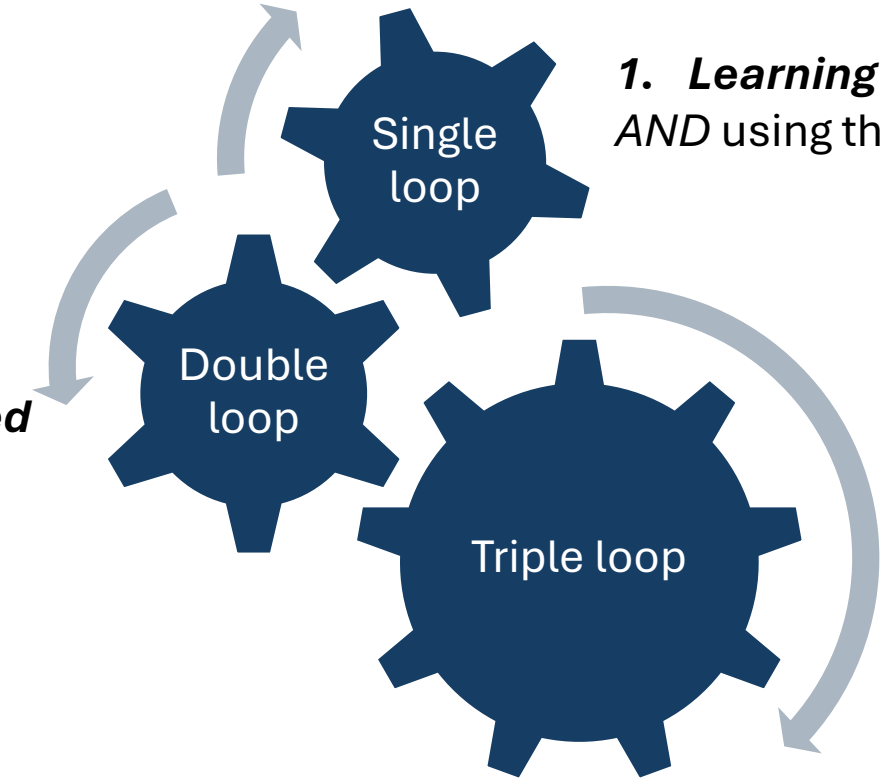
Only when we learn *collectively*, *in groups & teams, across all three loops*, will we become a learning health system…



1. ***Learning about our activities***
AND using that learning to adapt those activities

2. Learning about the system in which our activities are implemented
AND using that learning to revise the assumptions, objectives & policies underlying activities

3. Learning about the system of which we are part
AND using that learning to generate organisational changes that support continuous learning (e.g. in organisational values, beliefs, norms)

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This SAHR shows that

- single loop & some double loop learning is happening within the South African health system

BUT

- only limited signs of triple loop learning - generating system-level changes to support continuous learning
- learning occurs in specific spaces & places, rather than being shared across spaces within provinces, or across provinces

…not yet a learning health system!

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2. Why does being a learning health system matter?

Five benefits highlighted in this SAHR:

1. Better use of knowledge for decision-making and improvement
2. Builds confident people & professional capability
3. Stronger relationships & collaboration
4. Stronger organisational & health system functioning
5. Greater adaptation, equity & resilience

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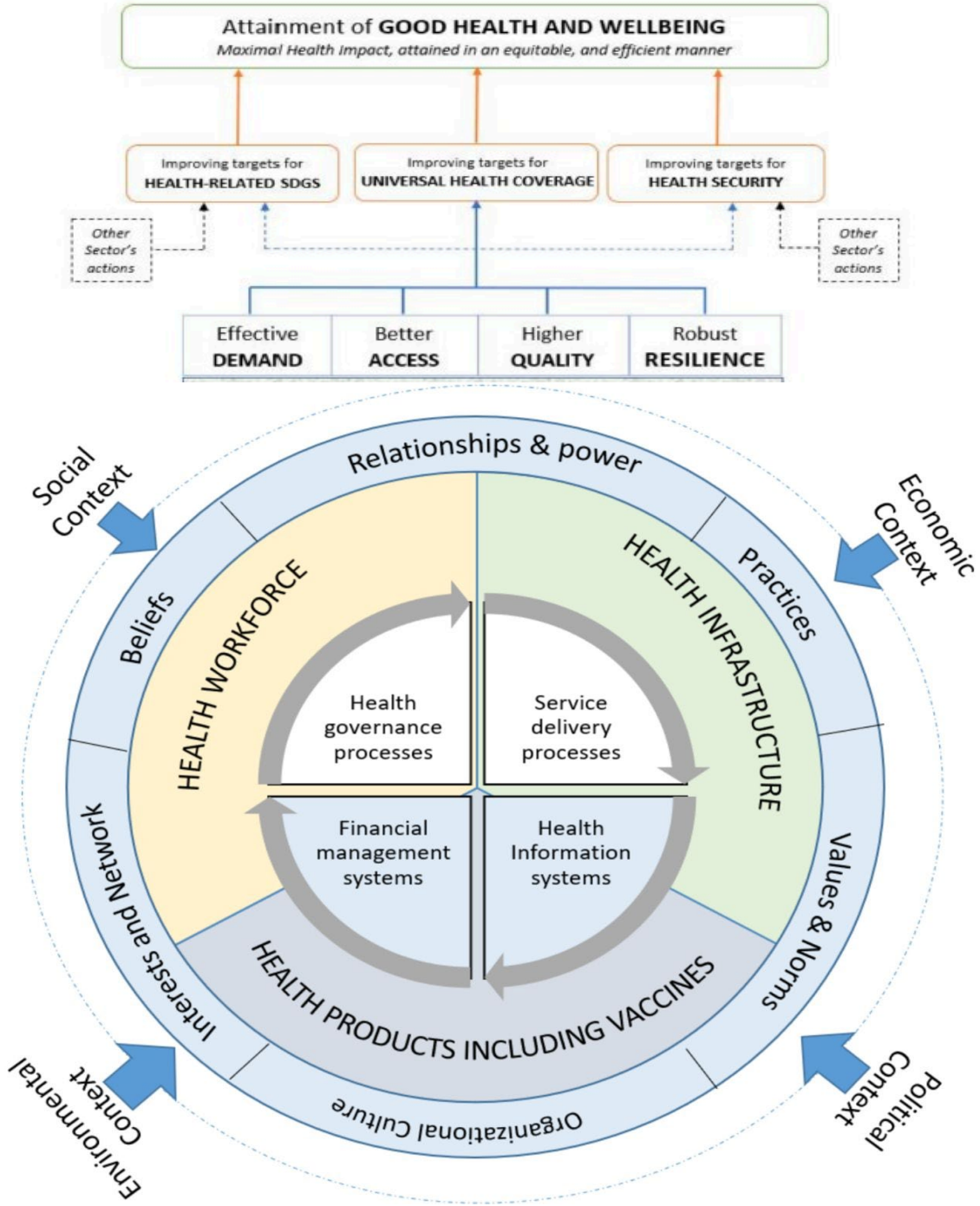
Health system performance driven by more than ‘the building blocks’



Karamagi et al 2021, BMJ Global Health

Figure 2 (

Every health system has dual foundations

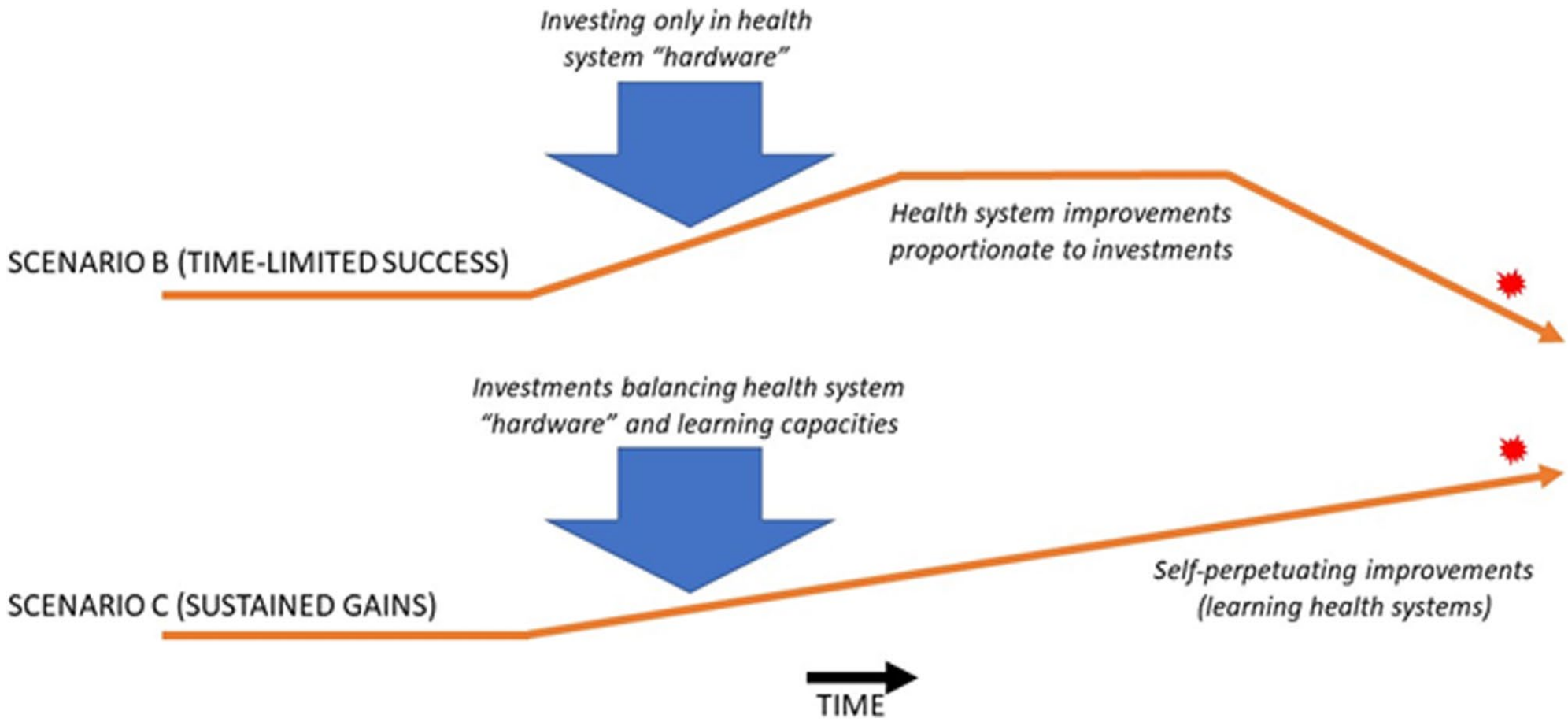
Hardware/structural foundations – system architecture

e.g. governance, financing, regulatory & service delivery arrangements, workforce supply, supply chain management

Software/relational foundations – system operating dynamics

e.g. trust & leadership, coordination, information and sensemaking***, learning & adaptation***, community engagement, power relations

Strengthening learning requires balanced investments



Sheikh & Abimbola 2022

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What relevance to South Africa?

- South African health system reform has not paid adequate attention to the software/relational foundations
  - focus on new ‘hardware/architecture’ (including clinical interventions)
  - ‘we have good policies, but implementation is weak’
- Elements of existing hardware/structural foundations work to limit learning
- In an uncertain & poly-crisis world, the health system needs to be resilient *and* to work differently to tackle inequity - learning is key

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3. How can learning be institutionalised within the South African health system?

Ideas from this SAHR:

1. Embedding learning within existing structures & routines
2. Investing in & mandating human capacity for learning
3. Developing the enabling conditions that support learning:
   - relevant leadership practices
   - trusting relationships & inclusive spaces
   - purposeful investments

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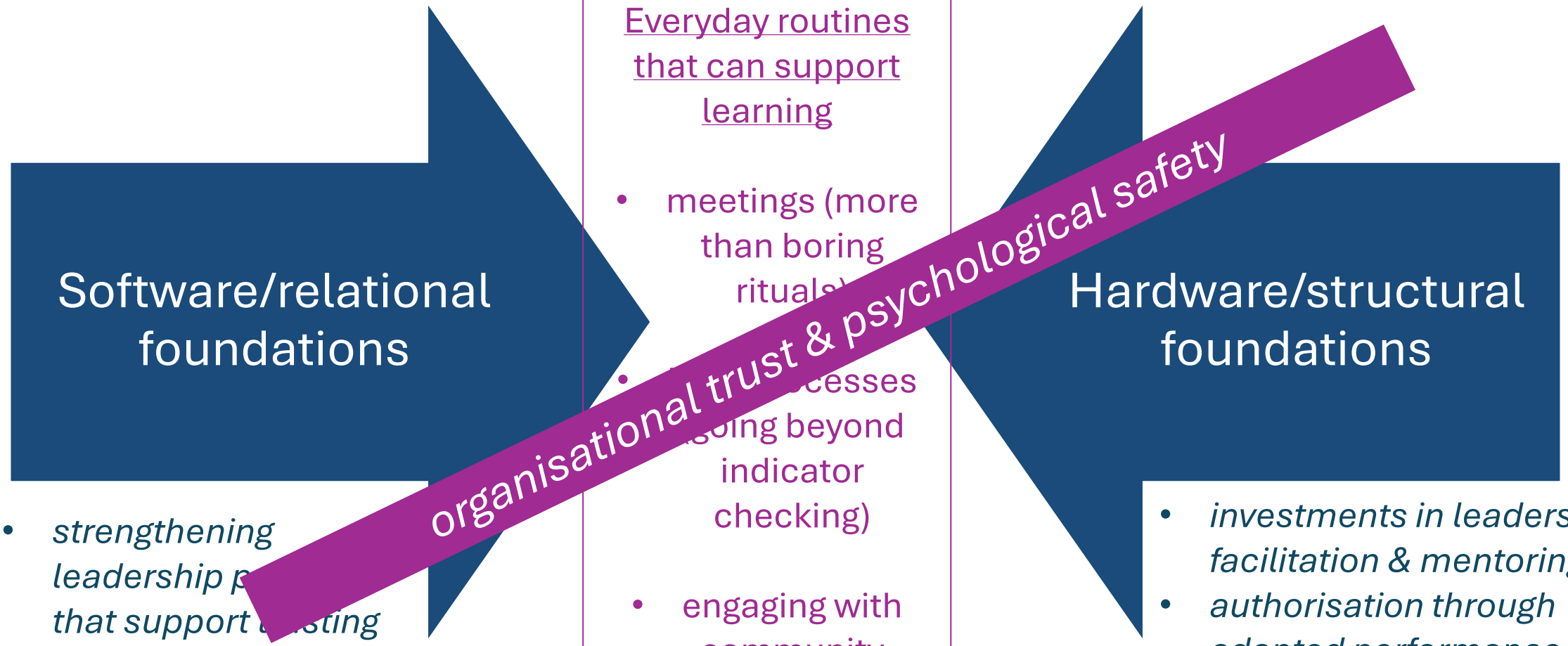

- *strengthening leadership p… that support …sting relationships, inclusive spaces, connecting across 'boundaries'*
- *sharing power: distributed leadership*

- *investments in leadership, facilitation & mentoring*
- *authorisation through adapted performance management systems*
- *creating new participatory platforms*

Messages for three key audiences

1. Local networks



3. Minister, MECs, HODs

2. Researchers/ Educators

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1. Messages for local networks

- Networks of health workers, managers (across sectors), community members/organisations & more…
- Messages:
  - local networks can learn together, despite the pressures
  - learning improves the quality of action
  - a key shift: do meetings differently to create time to learn from experience, reflect & deliberate, collaborate



South African Med Journal 2024

Learning in the district health system: How can meetings become spaces of reflection?

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2. Messages for researchers/educators

- Own our role as critical allies, part of the health system
- Work differently to strengthen the health system:
  - are we educating to support system learning?
  - are we learning through collaboration with local networks?
  - do we value research about the learning health system?
  - are we supporting experience sharing across spaces & places?
- Challenging own structural foundations:
  - collaboration & collective learning seen as valued organisational outputs

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3. Messages for Minister, MECs, HODs

- Make learning part of the long-term, strategic vision for the health system
- Role-model & authorise learning
  - enable & support inclusive learning spaces
  - value learning from experience, even ***& especially*** from problems
  - support collaborations for learning
- Strengthen distributed leadership

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SAMJ IN PRACTICE

South African Medical Journal, 2026

Strengthening system leadership for the District Health System

L Gilson,[1,2] PhD; H Schneider,[3] PhD; B Engelbrecht,[1] MB ChB, MFamMed; M Shung-King,[1] MB ChB, DPhil

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Last thoughts: Strengthening triple loop learning

- *All of us:* get involved in supporting learning across spaces & places
  - e.g. SALAD: cross-provincial learning network for the DHS
- *HST:* within every future SAHR, a learning health system focus
- *NDOH:* A Festival of Health System Learning in 2028
  - focus on the practice and processes of learning
  - time to interrogate & engage with experiences
  - identify critical system shifts needed to support learning as a continuous, everyday system practice

salad
South African
Learning Alliance for the DHS

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Thank You

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