

# **Universal Health Coverage at the center of sustainable development: contributions of sciences, technology and innovations to health systems strengthening**

## **Background**

Concerned that millions of people are driven below the poverty line each year because of catastrophic health expenditures, the UN General Assembly has called upon the “Economic and Social Council to consider the issue of Universal Health Coverage as part of its 2013 programme of work, with the participation of the World Health Organization, the World Bank, other relevant United Nations entities and other stakeholders”<sup>[1]</sup>.

The UN General Assembly resolution on *The Future we Want* acknowledged “Universal Health Coverage as a key instrument to enhancing health, social cohesion and sustainable human and economic development” all together<sup>[2]</sup>. The role of health as “a precondition for, an outcome and an indicator of all three dimensions of sustainable development” is also fully recognized. Member States have pledged to “strengthen health systems towards the provision of equitable universal coverage, through involvement of all actors for coordinated multi-sectoral actions to address urgently the health needs of the world’s population”.

Mid- February 2013, WHO and World Bank jointly convened a Ministerial-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage, at WHO headquarters in Geneva, during which Ministers of Finance and Health from 27 countries as well as other high-level stakeholders discussed, learned and shared lessons at policy and implementation levels, and further committed to accelerate UHC at their respective countries<sup>[3]</sup>.

In March 2013, the High Level Dialogue on Health in the Post-2015 Agenda in Gaborone proposed, inter alia, “Universal Health Coverage as an operational goal which should include access to all key interventions (promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, palliation), including those related to the health MDGs and non communicable diseases, as well as financial risk protection for everyone, and require strong, efficient and equitable health systems that can deliver quality services on country health priorities”.

## **The Case for Universal Health Coverage**

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) implies that all people, without discrimination, have access, to nationally determined sets of the needed promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative basic health services and essential, safe, affordable, effective and quality medicines.

UHC is crucial to increase healthy life expectancy, to reduce poverty, to promote equity, and to achieve sustainable development all together. UHC also presents an opportunity to improve the performance of the health system and service delivery outputs. UHC requires resilient and responsive health systems to provide comprehensive primary health-care services, with extensive geographical coverage, including in remote and rural areas, and an adequate number and equitable distribution of skilful and committed health workforce. Mechanisms to pool risks among the population on the basis of equity and solidarity can bring sustainable resources for strengthening health systems with the view to ensure universal access to essential health services and proven life-saving interventions.

## **Contributions of sciences, technology and innovations to the transition toward UHC**

Functioning health systems is an essential platform for UHC achievement; it requires adequate number and equitable distribution of skilful and committed health workforce; effective disease

surveillance systems for timely responses to infectious diseases and ensure national, regional and global health security; health information which guides evidence-informed policy decisions; availability and affordability of essential health technologies for which Sciences, Technology and Innovation, including ICT, plays a vital role.

In several countries, information and communication technology (ICT) is used to enhance health literacy, provide health information, support diseases surveillance, improve care and strengthen monitoring and evaluation. Prioritized and coordinated research and innovation is essential for development of new interventions, such as vaccines, medicines and diagnostic devices, while strengthen research institutions and systems in low- and middle-income countries are recommended <sup>[6]</sup>. Adoption of new health technologies, often expensive and out of reach by the poor, requires improved country capacities to conduct health intervention and technology assessment to guide procurement and management of technologies; this ensures value for money and long term financial sustainability <sup>[7]</sup>.

The data revolution, called upon by the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons in Bali on March 27th 2013, will require substantial improvements in national and subnational health information systems to ensure the availability, quality and timeliness of baseline data, as well as adherence to the highest standards of personal data protection. ICT capacity building can significantly improve health coverage for remote and rural areas, including through eHealth and mHealth technologies. Appropriate use of ICT can increase the level of engagement of patients in their own care while supporting sustainable financing of health-care systems with universal access. Stronger monitoring and evaluation at all levels, and in all processes of health policy-making will help guide evidence-based decision, update priorities and ensure accountability.

### **Proposal for addressing Universal Health Coverage at the 2013 ECOSOC high-level segment"**

In its resolution 67/81 entitled "Global Health and Foreign Policy", adopted in December 2012, the General Assembly called upon the Economic and Social Council to consider the issue of universal health coverage as part of its 2013 programme of work, with the participation of the World Health Organization, the World Bank, other relevant United Nations entities and other stakeholders.

Such consideration of the issue is particularly relevant in the context of the Council's 2013 Annual Ministerial Review. Sciences, technologies and innovations can greatly contribute to supporting health systems. Pilot initiatives have been tested in many countries, for example in the field of mobile health, but much remains to be done to scale up promising activities in order to make a real step forward towards universal health coverage.

In view of the global, regional and national movement to achieve UHC; the importance of health systems and the potential contributions of sciences, technologies and innovations to support health systems; *and the request contained in General Assembly resolution 67/81 on Global Health and Foreign Policy*, it is essential that the ECOSOC considers the matter as an integral part of its 2013 high level segment. *A high level panel discussion is therefore proposed, entitled "Universal Health Coverage at the center of sustainable development: contributions of sciences, technology and innovations to health systems strengthening.*

This panel will include a mix of Ministers, UN Executive Heads and civil society representatives in order to facilitate cross-fertilization of ideas from different institutional perspectives, and consist of two interactive sessions.

Session 1 will focus on the general conceptions of UHC and its aspects of implementation such as, among others: challenges and key factors for successful implementation of UHC, how UHC can contribute to sustainable development and the role of international organizations in promoting UHC. Session 2 will specifically address the contribution of science, technology and innovation to UHC.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Global Health and Foreign Policy, UN General Assembly Resolution, A/67/L.36
- 2 Sustainable development, The Future We Want, UN General Assembly Resolution, A/66/L.56, para 138-141.
- 3 WHO/World Bank Ministerial-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage [access 26 Feb 2013]  
[http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/meetings/2013/universal\\_health\\_coverage/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/meetings/2013/universal_health_coverage/en/index.html)
- 5 Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases; UN General Assembly Resolution, A/RES/66/2
- 6 UN Secretary General, Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health 2010
- 7 Health technologies; World Health Assembly Resolution 2007, WHA60.29