CONCEPT NOTE

Investing in Health Systems Strengthening for Universal Health Coverage through a Primary Health Care-Oriented Approach

3rd Annual Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of Universal Health Coverage and Global Health

Date: 21 September 2022
Time: 11.00 – 12.30 EDT
Location: Permanent Mission of Thailand to the UN (invitation only); livestream (details to follow)
Co-sponsors: Co-chairs of the Group of Friends of UHC and Global Health (Georgia, Japan, Thailand), WHO, UHC2030, IFRC, UN Foundation

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the necessity of strong health systems for ensuring future global health and economic security. The impacts of the pandemic have been far-reaching, across all countries and sectors: global poverty has increased for the first time in a generation, progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has reversed, and inequality within and between countries has grown – disproportionately burdening emerging economies and disadvantaged populations, where income losses caused by the pandemic revealed and worsened in preexisting economic fragilities.

Universal health coverage and health security are complementary goals for which accelerated action is urgently needed. The latest data shows that 30% of the global population cannot access essential health services and that 1.4–1.9 billion people face catastrophic or impoverishing health spending, with significant inequalities affecting the most vulnerable. Progress towards WHO’s target of 1 billion more people benefitting from UHC by 2023 is less than one quarter of what is required and COVID-19 sent us further off track, with 92% of countries reporting disruptions to essential health services during the pandemic. The five biggest barriers countries faced included health workforce challenges, insufficient funding, supply and equipment shortages, demand-side challenges (acceptability and affordability for communities), and inadequate data/information. To build resilience and better integrate UHC and health security, WHO recommends investment in the essential public health functions and the foundations of the health system, with a focus on primary health care (PHC).

Essential public health functions focus on health promotion, prevention, determinants and security, and include aspects such as surveillance and monitoring, public health workforce, governance, regulation and public health legislation, public health system planning and management, public health research, social mobilization and participation, preparation and response to health hazards and emergencies, and promotion of health and health equity. Investing in these functions is critical to the sustainability of health security and UHC.

A PHC approach ensures that all people have integrated access in their everyday environments to the full range of quality services and products they need for good health and well-being. As the first point of contact between individuals and the health system, 90% of essential health services can be delivered through PHC. PHC entails three inter-related and synergistic components, including: comprehensive integrated health services that embrace primary care as well as public health goods and functions as central pieces; multi-sectoral policies and actions to address the upstream and wider determinants of health; and engaging and empowering individuals, families, and communities for increased social participation and enhanced self-
care and self-reliance in health. PHC is also critical to make health systems more resilient to situations of crisis, more proactive in detecting early signs of epidemics, and more prepared to act early in response to surges in demand for services.

Investing in PHC has enormous benefits for promoting health, preventing diseases, advancing equity, and for health security. Estimates show that investing in PHC could increase global life expectancy by as much as 6.7 years by 2030. WHO, therefore, recommends that every country allocate or reallocate an additional 1% of GDP to PHC from government and external funding sources in order to close coverage gaps. A PHC approach, in tandem with strengthening essential public health functions, is effective, efficient and equitable.

In recent years, there has been important progress at the political level, with the Declaration of Astana on Primary Health Care in 2018, and the Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage at the UN General Assembly in 2019. As we look to strengthen health systems in the wake of COVID-19, re-orientation of resources toward primary health care and essential public health functions will be critical for the achievement of UHC and the health-related SDGs.

**OBJECTIVES**

- Take stock of the implementation of the 2019 Political Declaration on UHC, evaluate gaps, challenges, and share best practices and lessons learned to advance progress on UHC.
- Identify the effects of COVID-19 on UHC and share efforts to build back better and accelerate progress towards UHC.
- Kickstart thematic discussions leading up to 2023 High Level Meeting on UHC, including identifying a shared vision of Health for All and clear objectives for UHC and global health security, around: 1) financing, 2) PHC, and 3) coordination and governance.
- Promote political action and leadership for sustainable domestic and global health financing, particularly in the contracted fiscal space for social spending resulting from COVID-19, including through debt suspension and relief for low and middle-income countries (LMICs);
- Encourage commitments for strengthening national health systems using a PHC approach to deliver integrated quality services with financial protection and equity, including through increased budgetary allocations for PHC.

**TENTATIVE AGENDA**

**Panel 1: Government Representatives**

- H.E. Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand
- H.E. Mr. Yoshimasa Hayashi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan
- Georgia TBD
- Other invited ministerial representatives

**Panel 2: UN System & Key Stakeholders**

- World Health Organization
- UNICEF
- World Bank Group
- Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
- UHC2030