

Meeting Report

FOURTH MEETING OF THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP ON UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGION



19–21 August 2020

Virtual meeting

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

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ON UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGION

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NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants of the Fourth Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Universal Health Coverage in the Western Pacific Region and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the conveners.

This report has been prepared by the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific for Member States in the Region and for those who participated in the virtual Fourth Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Universal Health Coverage in the Western Pacific Region from 19 to 21 August 2020.

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COVID-19 / Delivery of health care / Healthcare financing / Health services
accessibility / Universal health insurance

SUMMARY

The impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to reflect on and transform our economies, society and health system not only to adapt to a world with COVID-19 in the shorter term but also to meet future challenges in the longer term. These include further pandemics and other profound challenges that are reflected in *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region*, the vision of WHO's work with Member States and partners in the Western Pacific, adopted by the WHO Regional Committee in 2019. To achieve this shared vision, Member States committed to "future proof" their health systems to overcome the health challenges posed by a rapidly changing world and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and universal health coverage (UHC).

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed stark contrasts between countries in the Western Pacific Region that have made substantial progress towards UHC and those that are lagging. The pandemic has also shown us that the health systems of the future must be responsive and versatile and recognize the various societal levers and influences that can be mobilized to improve and sustain individual health services and population health outcomes.

The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific established the Universal Health Coverage Technical Advisory Group (UHC TAG) to provide advice to WHO and Member States to advance UHC in the Region. In this time of crisis, the UHC TAG is examining through the lens of COVID-19 the critical dimensions of realizing UHC in a changing world, seeking an accelerated approach to health system transformation and achieving UHC.

The Fourth Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Universal Health Coverage in the Western Pacific Region was held virtually from 19 to 21 August 2020, with the overall objective for Member States to recommit to UHC under the "new normal" of COVID-19 and future threats.

Conclusions

- COVID-19 and other emerging challenges confirm the relevance of UHC and shine a light on aspects that need more attention from a futures perspective.
- Country progress towards UHC will be determined by how health systems can turn the "new normal" into a "new better normal" in which UHC becomes a platform for health and socioeconomic recovery/development.
- COVID-19 is a stress test for the health system through its direct and indirect impacts and lays bare weaknesses and challenges for sustained investments in UHC.
- If directed wisely, strengthening aspects of UHC for COVID-19 can help to "leapfrog" our health systems, based on true whole-of-system approaches and accelerated innovation.
- Considerations for advancing UHC
 - To achieve UHC in the future, we need to transform our health systems to make them people and community centred and owned, as well as worthwhile investments for societal development.
 - UHC is a shared foundation for advancing health, and programmes, systems and data are equally accountable for and contribute to its realization/development.

Recommendations

Member States are encouraged to consider the following:

- (1) Explicitly link COVID-19 related investments to broader health systems development for advancing UHC and build understanding and commitment to UHC as an investment in socioeconomic development despite the potentially shrinking fiscal space.
- (2) Prior to the 2021 UHC TAG meeting, review COVID-19 responses for response-specific and health system weaknesses and strengths to inform implications for advancing UHC as well as future emergency preparedness, including: (i) availability of public health expertise and appropriate workforce; (ii) inter- and intra-agency leadership, communication and excellence in operational management and monitoring, lines of accountability, and teamwork;

- (iii) community engagement and communication; and (iv) clarity of public health messages and their impact on behaviour change.
- (3) Build on increased attention to health and broaden participatory UHC governance within and external to the health sector, including by involving other public, private and not-for-profit sectors in multisectoral collaborations such as with finance, community engagement, education and others.
 - (4) Translate the UHC commitment into a vision for health and transformational plans that can be operationalized, monitored and regularly reviewed and enhanced, including through intra- and multisectoral collaboration and accountability with patient and community control over the way health services are provided.
 - (5) Accelerate health services and health sector transformation by ensuring transformational plans incorporate: innovations such as digital health and devices that enable self-care; updated health workforce capacity and capability, including for leadership and change management; stronger primary health care; and the collection, reporting and analysis of disaggregated data, including equity-focused disaggregated data to support policy, monitoring and ongoing UHC enhancements including reaching the unreached.
 - (6) Remove barriers to health workers working to their full scope of practice and consider the potential for utilizing other complementary workers in emergency responses.
 - (7) Reinvigorate the UHC focus on unreached and vulnerable populations, ensuring their engagement now and in the future as other health challenges emerge.

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has thrust us into the future much faster than anticipated. Restrictions of civic and commercial activity across entire countries have highlighted how our economic, social and political systems operate and interact with our health system. It has put health front and centre in the political and economic discourse in all countries. It has demonstrated how health is impacted by policies and actions in different sectors, and how health in turn impacts multiple sectors. It has also shown us that while a disease may be indiscriminate in who it infects – rich or poor – its impacts are felt disproportionately by the disadvantaged, including vulnerable and unreached populations. It has revealed stark contrasts between countries that have made substantial progress in providing universal health coverage (UHC) and those that are lagging.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the urgent need for us to reflect on and transform our health systems not only to face the challenges of today but also to anticipate and address the challenges of tomorrow, in order to have a better future. In 2019, the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific adopted *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region*, a five-year vision for WHO's work with Member States and partners in the Region. In adopting *For the Future* as the vision for health, Member States committed to “future proof” their health systems to overcome the health challenges posed by a rapidly changing world. Taking a systems approach, with UHC as the foundation, is central to this vision.

UHC is defined as all people having access to quality health services without suffering the financial hardship associated with paying for care. It is the overarching global vision for health sector development. It is key to delivering improved health and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Member States in the Western Pacific Region. The Universal Health Coverage Technical Advisory Group (UHC TAG) was established by the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific to provide advice to WHO and Member States to advance UHC in the Region. The first UHC TAG meeting in 2016 emphasized the need for WHO to support Member States in collecting and using policy-relevant evidence to drive health system performance as well as for Member States to strengthen health system functions such as supervision, coordination and accountability. The second UHC TAG meeting in 2017 emphasized quality and safety, service delivery models for demographic and epidemiological transitions in relation to care provision, health technology assessment, priority setting and resource allocation in relation to health financing and governance. The third UHC TAG meeting in 2018 focused on equity within the UHC dimensions of service delivery, financing and governance.

This fourth UHC TAG meeting re-examined – through the lens of COVID-19 – the critical dimensions of realizing UHC in a changing world. While being enormously disruptive and painful, COVID-19 may also serve as a major catalyst for accelerating health system transformation and achieving UHC. Given this context, this UHC TAG meeting was convened to provide an opportunity for participating Member States to share their UHC journey and how it has been impacted by COVID-19, to recommit to health system transformation for UHC and to subscribe to UHC as a shared responsibility of disciplines in health and beyond.

1.1 Meeting organization

The Fourth Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Universal Health Coverage in the Western Pacific Region was held virtually from 19 to 21 August 2020. It brought together high-level policy-makers and decision-makers from 19 countries and areas, technical advisers, several partner organizations, WHO Collaborating Centre representatives and members of the WHO Secretariat. The list of participants is available in Annex 1.

The structure of the meeting and format of sessions – smaller working group and forum discussions, interwoven with plenary sessions – enabled countries to draw on the expertise of technical advisers, share experiences, exchange learnings, and analyse and identify opportunities for advancing UHC in the “new normal”. In addition to this, a TAG Coordination Meeting was also organized to explore ways for the different TAGs and WHO technical advisory mechanisms in the Region to work more closely

together in the coming years to drive the *For the Future* vision. The programme of activities is available in Annex 2.

1.2 Meeting objectives

The overall objective was for Member States to recommit to UHC under the “new normal” of COVID-19 and future threats. Specifically, the meeting objectives were:

- to review how COVID-19 is impacting country progress towards UHC and how the disease shapes our perspective of UHC as a foundation for realizing the SDG agenda;
- to investigate the pathways upon which to advance UHC in the “new normal” and other emerging challenges to health; and
- to identify opportunities for initiating health sector transformation for UHC in the “new normal” and the respective contributions of actors across and beyond the health sector.

2. PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Opening session

The opening session laid the background and expectations for this UHC TAG meeting. The session emphasized the importance of political leadership in bringing together multiple sectors and multiple disciplines that are needed for achieving UHC. While this was the fourth UHC TAG meeting, it was the first meeting since the adoption of *For the Future*, which identifies four focus areas: health security, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and ageing, the health impact of climate change, and reaching the unreached. It outlines the five-year vision of WHO’s work with Member States and partners in the Western Pacific Region. The future that this vision enumerated unfolded swiftly as manifest in the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset of the meeting, it was acknowledged that there is a need to look at what the journey with COVID-19 is revealing, the weaknesses it is exposing and the opportunities it is opening. The discussions in the meeting aimed to provide guidance on the areas to improve and to guide the entire work of the Region for achieving UHC.

The session also emphasized that this UHC TAG meeting was different from the past three meetings in that it recognizes the importance of multiple disciplines in achieving UHC. The Western Pacific Region has multiple technical advisory mechanisms dealing with different diseases or health challenges, but these are also connected to the UHC TAG. Moving forward, it is intended for the UHC TAG to serve as an umbrella group, heralding a new platform for enhanced coordination, engagement and interaction across the different technical advisory mechanisms in the Region to deliberate on how to advance UHC in the “new normal”.

2.2 Ministerial panel discussion: UHC in Western Pacific Region in the time of COVID-19

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