

Making fair choices on the path to universal health coverage

Final report of the WHO Consultative Group
on Equity and Universal Health Coverage



World Health
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Preface

Universal health coverage (UHC) is at the center of current efforts to strengthen health systems and improve the level and distribution of health and health services. This document is the final report of the WHO Consultative Group on Equity and Universal Health Coverage. The report addresses the key issues of fairness and equity that arise on the path to UHC. As such, the report is relevant for every actor that affects that path and governments in particular, as they are in charge of overseeing and guiding the progress toward UHC.

Background

The goal of UHC has a strong basis, and the underlying aspirations have a long history. The constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that a right to health is “one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.” This message has since been repeatedly reinforced; perhaps most prominently in the 1978 Declaration of Alma-Ata. Since the turn of the century, the quest for UHC has gained momentum in numerous countries and in the global health community. In 2005, the member states of WHO endorsed UHC as a central goal and stated that health systems must “be further developed in order to guarantee access to necessary services while providing protection against financial risk.”

The World Health Report 2010 followed up by providing practical guidance for how countries can reform their health financing systems in order to pursue UHC. Since then, more than seventy countries have requested policy support and technical advice for such reform from WHO. In 2011, the World Health Assembly responded by calling on WHO to develop a plan of action for providing such support and advice. One of the action plan’s twelve points is action on equity, a key issue that cuts across most other components of a health system. Specifically, the WHO Consultative Group on Equity and Universal Health Coverage was set up to develop guidance on how countries best can address the central issues of fairness and equity that arise on the path to UHC.

Since 2011, the pressing need to make progress toward UHC has been repeatedly affirmed, for example, in the Bangkok Statement on Universal Health Coverage and the Mexico City Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage. Moreover, in late 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution emphasizing the responsibility of governments to “urgently and significantly scale up efforts to accel-

erate the transition towards universal access to affordable and quality health-care services.” Later, WHO published the World Health Report 2013, *Research for Universal Health Coverage*, which again emphasized the need to make progress toward UHC and described several means to that end. Further underscoring WHO’s commitment, advancing UHC has been identified as a leadership priority for WHO in the 12th general programme of work during the 2014-2019 period. UHC is also a central theme in the ongoing deliberation over the post-2015 development agenda.

In parallel with the work of WHO and other actors in the multilateral system, many countries have intensified their efforts in progressing toward UHC. The results have been encouraging and supported the Director-General’s assertion that UHC is “the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer.”

Process

As described, WHO’s plan of action motivated the establishment of the Consultative Group. The group consisted of eighteen ethicists, economists, policy experts, and clinical doctors, spanning thirteen nationalities. The group worked on the report from May 2012 until January 2014 and convened three times. The meetings took place in Stavanger (Norway), Boston (US), and Geneva (Switzerland). At several stages in the process, drafts were also circulated for external review, including to selected national ethics committees and to the WHO Collaborating Centers for Bioethics. In addition, feedback was obtained from numerous other individuals and groups working in relevant areas.

Content

This report addresses the critical choices of fairness and equity that arise on the path to UHC. Accordingly, the report is not primarily about why UHC ought to be a goal, but about the *path* to that goal. The report may differ from others in the direct way it addresses fundamental issues and difficult trade-offs. This approach was facilitated by the involvement of philosophers and ethicists in addition to economists, policy experts, and clinical doctors.

Target audience

Numerous actors influence the progress toward UHC. Among them are institutions.

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