



**ACTION FOR  
GLOBAL HEALTH**

FULL FUNDING  
STRONG SYSTEMS  
FAIR ACCESS

**HEALTH  
FOR ALL**

**12.12**

UNIVERSAL HEALTH  
COVERAGE DAY

# UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE: A KEY MECHANISM FOR ACHIEVING HEALTH FOR ALL

## Background

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is the principle that everyone can access quality essential health services without suffering financial hardship. It aims **to provide access to a full range of essential health services, including preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care, based on need, and not whether a person can afford it.**

Currently **400 million people lack access to one or more of seven lifesaving health services**, including childhood immunisation, skilled birth attendance, malaria control, HIV treatment, diabetes treatment or family planning. **17% of the world's population is pushed below the US\$2 a day poverty line by health costs** and nearly 1/3 of households in Africa and Southeast Asia must borrow money or sell assets to pay for healthcare.

The Ebola crisis had a devastating impact in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. At the root of the crisis were the under-resourced, under-staffed and under-equipped health systems, which made these fragile countries vulnerable to a large-scale outbreak and unable to contain it. We must learn lessons from this crisis – there is an **urgent need for strong and accessible health and community systems.**

In September 2015, UN member states signed up to the Global Goals for Sustainable Development, including target 3.8 to *'achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all'*. The UN General Assembly, the World Health Assembly and the G7 have all endorsed UHC.

It is crucial that UHC addresses both treatment and prevention equally. **Prevention is better than cure, and it is cheaper too.** The international Ebola relief effort in West Africa cost almost three times as much as it would have cost to strengthen the health systems in the first place. Building resilient health systems to deliver quality care in reach of everyone is a key means towards achieving UHC. **UHC helps to lift people out of poverty and decreases inequality which also helps drive economic growth.** From 2000-2011, health improvements drove 24% of full-income growth in developing countries. Every US\$1 invested in health is projected to return US\$9-US\$20 over the next 20 years. The High Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth has recognised the health sector itself as an important contributor to the creation of decent jobs and a key driver of inclusive economic growth, human security and sustainable development.

**The UK Government now has a unique opportunity to capitalise on the momentum of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promote UHC as the cornerstone of UK efforts to improve global health over the next fifteen years.**

## Core principles of UHC

### 1 Prioritise essential healthcare for the poorest and most marginalised

- From the start, UHC should ensure access to essential healthcare for the poorest and most marginalised and address persistent health inequities both within and between countries.
- There are wide and persistent disparities in access to critical healthcare services between the well-off and the poorest. There are acute disparities within countries for essential health interventions such as skilled birth attendance and the prevention and treatment of diseases such as HIV, malaria and tuberculosis.

### 2 Make public revenue central to the UHC agenda

- Public financing is essential for UHC, in order to protect those who cannot contribute financially. Public finance, raised through progressive pre-payment such as tax and other government revenues and contributions, is essential for ensuring access to healthcare and protection against financial hardship. This should be the main source of health financing.
- Governments should increase public spending on health to at least 5% of GDP and a minimum of \$86/person to provide essential services. Progress toward UHC also requires strengthening health systems, including human resources for health.

### 3 Make essential services free at the point of use

- Governments must increase public spending on health, moving away from private and out-of-pocket expenditure. Out-of-pocket spending on health, including user fees for services, are highly inequitable as they are a major barrier to accessing healthcare for the poorest.
- People can be pushed further into poverty when illness requires them to use their life savings, to sell assets or to borrow money. They may forego healthcare altogether if they cannot afford it. It is estimated that 11 million people in Africa fall into poverty every year due to high out-of-pocket payments for healthcare.

### 4 Invest in health systems, improve quality of care and address the underlying determinants of health

- UHC requires adequate investment in strengthening all the building blocks of health and community systems, including health workers, infrastructure, information systems, essential medicines and equipment, financing and governance.
- Adequately trained, remunerated and supported public and community health workers are key to delivering universal access to essential quality care.
- Health services must be safe, effective, people-centred and timely, with effective referral systems. They must be accessible by transport, and have access to safe water, sanitation and electricity.
- UHC also requires action to address the underlying determinants of health, such as access to improved water, sanitation and hygiene, gender equality, ending discriminatory laws, policies and practices, early childhood development, education and good nutrition.

## The UK Government can help developing countries achieve UHC by:

- Supporting and championing UHC in global fora such as the G7, the G20 and the United Nations, and in its bilateral and multilateral aid.
- Continuing to provide technical and financial assistance to countries to build effective health systems and strengthen their public financial management and health governance systems.
- Supporting countries' efforts to move away from inequitable health financing (such as reliance on out-of-pocket payments) and towards progressive financing, including by increasing countries' capabilities to increase their tax revenue and invest more in public services.
- Playing an active and supportive role in reforming global tax systems to implement progressive taxation and improving tax collection capacity from both individuals and corporations.

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