

Envisioning Universal Health Coverage in Pakistan – How to Make it Possible?

The [third High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage \(UHC\)](#) concluded at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2023. During this session, Heads of State, government representatives, and other key stakeholders meticulously assessed the progress of the 2019 political declaration titled, ‘Universal Health Coverage: Moving Together to Build a Healthier World.’ They aimed to pinpoint existing gaps and devise solutions to hasten the realisation of universal health coverage by 2030.

The political declaration highlights global leaders’ recognition of the paramount importance of health and well-being for all. At its core, UHC is defined as the ability for all individuals and communities to access a spectrum of health services - from promotive to palliative - that are of high quality and effectiveness. Importantly, availing these services should not place individuals in financial distress.

Throughout the discussions, there was a strong emphasis on a holistic approach to health. Leaders particularly stressed the vital role of Primary Health Care (PHC) in the broader context, especially for low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that primary care can address 80-90% of an individual’s health needs over their lifetime. A robust, adaptive, and resilient health system is essential to both champion UHC and ensure the delivery of top-notch PHC.

Much needs to be done at policy and operational level in L&MICs to strengthen and reorient healthcare systems towards UHC in order to effectively advance towards achieving SDG target 3.8 which calls for ‘provision of health at all times to everyone with quality and financial protection.’ Pakistan is a signatory to SDG agenda and has kept SDG-3 on priority with inclusion of UHC (SDG3.8) in National Health Vision 2016-2025 and is the first country which has developed a National Essential Package of Health Services based on Disease Control Priorities - III since 2019.

Unfortunately, despite this, Pakistan’s health indicators paint a concerning picture. Despite being home to the fifth-largest population globally, with 241 million people and a rapid growth rate of 2% - the highest in South Asia - its health metrics lag. For the past 15 years, the total fertility rate has remained largely unchanged at 3.6%. Furthermore, Pakistan remains under intense global observation as it is one of only two countries yet to eradicate poliomyelitis. These indicators not only underscore the challenges but also point to systemic weaknesses in the healthcare infrastructure. The nation has grappled with health emergencies, both predictable and unforeseen, from the effects of climate change like the 2022 floods, to epidemics such as COVID-19, vector-borne diseases, and natural calamities like the devastating 2005 earthquake. Inadequate emergency preparedness and sub-par responses strain the health system to its brink,

often at the expense of routine health services. It is imperative to craft a healthcare system that's both responsive to shocks and resilient to future health crises, emphasising the reinforcement of essential public health functions.

Private healthcare plays a pivotal role in Pakistan, catering to 70% of PHC. As PHC is foundational to UHC, its reinforcement is critical. It is commendable how the Pakistan Armed Forces offer comprehensive health coverage to their active and retired personnel and their families, spanning primary to tertiary care, across the nation. Additionally, the Provincial Employees Social Security Institutions serve as another beacon of healthcare for employees and their dependents. Social Health Insurance Reforms, initiated in 2015, have extended secondary healthcare to specific populations. Following this trajectory, it is vital to ensure that comprehensive health services and financial protection are available to every Pakistani citizen, spanning community care, PHC, secondary, and tertiary healthcare levels.

Recognising the aforementioned challenges, SDPI, in partnership with the School of Universal Health Coverage at STMU, is curating this panel discussion to gather technical experts representing pivotal entities in Pakistan's health sector. The primary focus of the discussion will be the prospective trajectory of UHC in Pakistan, considering the current health landscape and healthcare system. Panellists will shed light on their envisioned solutions, highlighting how different stakeholders can collaboratively propel the UHC agenda forward. The dialogue aims to culminate in a robust set of actionable recommendations, providing valuable guidance for policymakers and other key players within the healthcare ecosystem. Key questions will include:

1. How can the healthcare system be reformed towards a National Health Service where each sector and subsector contribute towards a unified vision and how can the government provide more robust stewardship for healthcare in Pakistan?
2. How can regulation, accountability and transparency be promoted in the health sector through better institutions and peoples' engagement?
3. Primary Health Care (PHC) is the foundation of UHC so how can the private and public sector work together to establish quality PHC?
4. The *Sehat Sahulat* programme is limited to inpatient care. How can this financial protection scheme be extended to include PHC in the private sector?
5. How can access to quality health services be improved in remote areas of Pakistan?
6. How can international partners support such health reforms in a more coordinated manner?

Panel Organiser

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