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Half the world lacks access to essential health services: World Bank and WHO

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The report is a key point of discussion at the global Universal Health Coverage Forum 2017, currently taking place in Tokyo, Japan



The findings, released recently in Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2017 Global Monitoring Report says that at least half of the world's population cannot obtain essential health services, according to a new report from the World Bank and WHO. And each year, large numbers of households are being pushed into poverty because they must pay for health care out of their own pockets.

Currently, 800 million people spend at least 10 percent of their household budgets on health expenses for themselves, a sick child or other family member. For almost 100 million people these expenses are high enough to push them into extreme poverty, forcing them to survive on just $1.90 or less a day.

The report is a key point of discussion at the global Universal Health Coverage Forum 2017, currently taking place in Tokyo, Japan.

Convened by the Government of Japan, the Forum is co-sponsored by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), UHC2030 which is the leading global movement advocating for UHC, UNICEF, the World Bank, and WHO.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, World Bank President Kim, WHO Director-General Tedros and UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake will all be in attendance, in addition to heads of state and ministers from over 30 countries.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO said, "It is completely unacceptable that half the world still lacks coverage for the most essential health services. And it is unnecessary. A solution exists: universal health coverage (UHC) allows everyone to obtain the health services they need, when and where they need them, without facing financial hardship."

Dr. Jim Yong Kim, World Bank Group President said, "The report makes clear that if we are serious – not just about better health outcomes, but also about ending poverty – we must urgently scale up our efforts on universal health coverage. Investments in health, and more generally investments in people, are critical to build human capital and enable sustainable and inclusive economic growth. But the system is broken: we need a fundamental shift in the way we mobilize resources for health and human capital, especially at the country level. We are working on many fronts to help countries spend more and more effectively on people, and increase their progress towards universal health coverage."

On a positive side, The report shows that the 21st century has seen an increase in the number of people able to obtain some key health services, such as immunization and family planning, as well as antiretroviral treatment for HIV and insecticide-treated bed nets to prevent malaria. In addition, fewer people are now being tipped into extreme poverty than at the turn of the century.

"There are wide gaps in the availability of services in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. In other regions, basic health care services such as family planning and infant immunization are becoming more available, but lack of financial protection means increasing financial distress for families as they pay for these services out of their own pockets", according to report.

This is even a challenge in more affluent regions such as Eastern Asia, Latin America and Europe, where a growing number of people are spending at least 10 percent of their household budgets on out-of-pocket health expenses. Inequalities in health services are seen not just between, but also within countries: national averages can mask low levels of health service coverage in disadvantaged population groups. For example, only 17 percent of mothers and children in the poorest fifth of households in low- and lower-middle income countries received at least six of seven basic maternal and child health interventions, compared to 74 percent for the wealthiest fifth of households.

Katsunobu Kato, Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan said, "Past experiences taught us that designing a robust health financing mechanism that protects each individual vulnerable person from financial hardship, as well as developing health care facilities and a workforce including doctors to provide necessary health services wherever people live, are critically important in achieving 'Health for All. I firmly believe that these early-stage investments for UHC by the whole government were an important enabling factor in Japan's rapid economic development later on."

The Forum is the culmination of events in over 100 countries, which began on Dec. 12—Universal Health Coverage Day—to highlight the growing global momentum on UHC. It seeks to showcase the strong high-level political commitment to UHC at global and country levels, highlight the experiences of countries that have been pathfinders on UHC progress, and add to the knowledge base on how to strengthen health systems and effectively promote UHC.

Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director said, "Without health care, how can children reach their full potential? And without a healthy, productive population, how can societies realize their aspirations? Universal health coverage can help level the playing field for children today, in turn helping them break intergenerational cycles of poverty and poor health tomorrow."