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The World Health Organization is bringing together international public health experts, development agencies and academia to share experiences and identify quick wins for universal health coverage (UHC) at a Conference on Advancing Universal Health Coverage in South-East Asia in Paro.

Bhutan has made significant progress in all three dimensions of UHC. A recent assessment completed by the Ministry of Health shows Bhutan's health system provides over 75% coverage with the majority of the population having access to good-quality services, health workers, medicines and technologies, without causing them financial hardship.

"Bhutan, as for other countries of the Region, now needs to strengthen efforts to counter the increasing burden of noncommunicable diseases, especially through preventive activities that are low-cost and sustainable," said Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director WHO South-East Asia.

Dr Khetrapal Singh is on her first official visit to Bhutan as Regional Director of the WHO South-East Asia Region. She prioritized universal health coverage and robust health systems in her vision statement as one of four strategic areas for WHO's work in the Region. Other strategic areas in her vision statement are: addressing persisting and emerging epidemiological and demographic challenges; strengthening emergency risk management for sustainable development; and articulating a strong Regional voice in the global health agenda.

Highlighting Bhutan's role in global health, Dr Khetrapal Singh said "Bhutan has brought human well-being to centre stage of the development debate."

Bhutan convened a High Level Meeting at the United Nations in New York in April 2012 to discuss a shift in the focus of international development from measuring improvements in Gross National Product to indicators of Gross National Happiness. Subsequently, the post-2015 development debate has focused on well-being as the core objective of the next international compact, with health as a key component.

The WHO Conference will share international experience on equitable financing for health systems so that people can get the care they need without being pushed into poverty. In South-East Asia, out-of-pocket payments for health are the highest among all the WHO regions and one-third of new annual poverty is health related. Discussions will also focus on access to affordable medicines and human resources, issues that are relevant for effective service delivery both in Bhutan as well as other countries of the Region. The Conference is expected to agree on the way forward for WHO's work to advance universal health coverage in the Region.