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## Virtual workshop: From political will to law: Advancing universal health coverage in Africa and Asia-Pacific

2 March 2021, 9:00 – 10:30 CET

### REPORT

#### Speakers

Ms. Pechdau Tohmeena, Member of Parliament, Thailand; member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health  
Mr. David Clarke, Team Leader, UHC And Health Systems Law, World Health Organization  
Mr. Natondé Ake, President of the Committee on Education, Culture, Employment and Social Affairs, National Assembly of Benin  
Ms. Aleksandra Blagojevic (moderator), Programme Manager for International Development, Inter-Parliamentary Union

#### Introduction

Countries worldwide committed to universal health coverage (UHC) as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and reiterated their commitment in 2019 through the resolution adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) [Achieving universal health coverage by 2030: The role of parliaments in ensuring the right to health](#). As these political commitments need to be formalized through national legislation, a virtual workshop was organized on 2 March 2021 to deepen the understanding of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in the Africa and Asia-Pacific regions about what UHC law is and how to develop and reform legislative frameworks to support UHC.

The virtual workshop was attended by more than 60 participants from 23 countries, including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and members of the IPU Advisory Group on Health.

Following the presentation by Ms. P. Tohmeena (IPU Advisory Group on Health) of the report [Parliamentary action on universal health coverage in times of COVID-19](#), the first report on implementation of the IPU resolution on UHC, an expert perspective on UHC law was provided by Mr. D. Clarke (WHO). A country perspective was presented from Benin and, during an interactive discussion, participants shared their country experiences on the topics under discussion.

#### International environment for UHC

The goal of UHC is enshrined in the SDGs and reiterated in the 2019 IPU resolution on UHC. Regional bodies such as the African Union also play an important role in promoting the adoption of UHC principles by countries.

The report *Parliamentary action on universal health coverage in times of COVID-19* highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed many of the development gains achieved over the past 25 years, including on UHC. Parliaments reported challenges such as the diversion of resources away from UHC, the disruption of essential health

services and new barriers to healthcare coverage access for vulnerable and marginalized populations.

However, the report illustrates that parliaments worldwide remain committed to UHC. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, they are taking steps to: adopt legislation in support of the right to health; ensure adequate allocation of resources to the health sector for the COVID-19 response and for improved access to health; and monitor the impact of the government response to the pandemic. UHC can provide a framework to countries to take decisions on health services during the pandemic based on the principles of equitable access to health services, financial risk protection and quality of health services.

Although global and regional instruments can provide a road map to advance UHC at the national level, the workshop also drew attention to instances in which health policies and health financing can be negatively affected, for example due to the imposition of sanctions.

### **Role of legislation**

It emerged from the workshop that countries recognize the importance of legislation, not only to respond to COVID-19 but also to maintain health services, in particular for vulnerable and marginalized groups, and guarantee the right to health. It was noted that the right to health has different components, such as the right to participate in decision-making on health systems and the right to access health services. There is no one-size-fits-all solution on legislation, and parliamentarians are best placed to make decisions adapted to their contexts. An important dimension is to ensure that laws are suitable for the policy interventions that countries want to implement in the COVID-19 response. The workshop also highlighted the role of science and scientific evidence to guide UHC priorities at the national level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weak health laws and the pandemic provides an opportunity to advocate for stronger legislation. It was further stressed that legislation itself can create vulnerabilities and restrict access to health. Implementation of existing legislative frameworks was also identified as a key challenge, due among other factors to insufficient financial and human resources.

### **UHC as an instrument to address poverty and inequalities**

The poorest segments of society are among those suffering the greatest burdens of ill-health and those exposed to increased risks of financial hardship due to payments made to obtain health services. The workshop illustrated how countries are targeting these populations in UHC schemes, as well as other vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, children and the elderly.

Participants in the workshop made clear that health is a key sector for the reduction of poverty. UHC must be part of more comprehensive efforts for social reform to address poverty and inequalities in which the right to health and the right to economic security are closely associated.

### **National governance**

Parliaments play a key role in both promoting legislative initiatives and supporting health reform efforts initiated by the government. Workshop participants highlighted the importance of communication and collaboration between legislative and executive branches of government. Systemic challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and

the advancement of UHC require a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. Progress on UHC also contributes to building public trust, which can facilitate public cooperation in the implementation of measures for disease prevention such as in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IPU and its partners will continue to support parliaments to strengthen their capacities to engage on complex, multisectoral health issues. The outcomes of the workshop will inform the next report on the implementation of the IPU resolution on UHC, which will be prepared at the end of 2021.