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Virtual workshop: Universal health coverage and equity: Always hand in hand?

26 October 2021, 14:00 – 15:30 CEST (Geneva)

REPORT

Speakers (in order of appearance)

- Mr. José Ignacio Echániz, Vice-Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health, Member of Parliament of Spain
- Mr. David Clarke, Team Leader, UHC and Health Systems Law, World Health Organization
- Ms. Ranjana Kumar, Head of Health Systems Planning, Management and Performance at Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
- Ms. Saraí Núñez, Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health, Member of Parliament of Mexico

Moderator

- Ms. Aleksandra Blagojevic, Programme Manager for International Development, Inter-Parliamentary Union

Introduction

Health equity is achieved when everyone can attain their full potential for health and well-being. Equity is a guiding principle of universal health coverage (UHC) for the realization of the right to health for all. The aim of the virtual workshop held on 26 October 2021 was to discuss what the equity principle meant in practice for country efforts towards UHC and how parliaments could integrate equity considerations in debates and action on UHC. It was part of the process to follow up on the IPU resolution [Achieving universal health coverage by 2030: The role of parliaments in realizing the right to health](#).

The event was attended by around 60 parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from 30 countries.

Welcoming remarks by the Vice-Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health were followed by a presentation of the recently published IPU Issue Brief [A Winnable Battle: Parliamentarians and universal health coverage](#). A conversation with experts from the World Health Organization and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance illustrated the different dimensions of equity and how the equity principle could guide UHC strategies at the country level. The final session featured a country presentation from Mexico. Several parliamentarians also spoke about their countries' experiences.

Fair choices for a progressive realization of UHC

The workshop highlighted that UHC was a journey. For its progressive realization, countries were faced with critical choices on which services to expand first, whom to include first, and how to shift from out-of-pocket payment towards prepayment of health services. Given that all countries faced resource constraints, equity was

therefore presented as the path for moving towards UHC by making fair choices based on health needs instead of the ability to pay for health services.

Marginalized communities often suffered most from preventable diseases and deaths due to intersecting factors of vulnerability, such as poverty and conflict. The expansion of primary health care was identified as a key factor in reaching those communities. Specific approaches based on evidence were required to identify them, tailor strategies and monitor health outcomes.

However, participants stressed the importance of also focusing on equity between countries. Inequitable access to vaccines at the global level during the COVID-19 pandemic was a clear example of the need for strengthened advocacy and solidarity. Greater attention needed to be paid to diseases and health threats such as malaria, which disproportionately affected certain countries and regions.

UHC governance for equity

Participants discussed the importance of institutionalized mechanisms for priority setting, including public participation and community engagement for more transparent and accountable decision-making.

It was clear from country experiences that the UHC agenda and its management were complex tasks for which countries were implementing different institutional arrangements in accordance with their own context. The governance of UHC required legal reform to implement international obligations in relation to the right to health and to provide a legal basis for expanding access to health services, as well as robust investment, including through domestic resources. Multisectoral collaboration, such as integrating health and nutrition services, were also mentioned as effective strategies to support more equitable health outcomes.

UHC and health emergency preparedness

Participants raised questions on the prioritization of agendas in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressing challenges of climate change, and on the cost of addressing those concurrent crises. It was pointed out that emergency preparedness needed to be the connecting link to build resilience and the COVID-19 pandemic was a clear signal of the importance of investing in health and universal health coverage. The Sustainable Development Goals were put forward as a guiding framework for COVID-19 response and recovery. It was further stressed that governments needed to play an important role to ensure equity, for example by keeping control over the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines at the country level.

The outcomes of the workshop will inform the next report on the implementation of the IPU resolution on UHC.

The meeting documents are available on the IPU website at:
<https://www.ipu.org/event/universal-health-coverage-and-equity-always-hand-in-hand>.