

PRIMARY HEALTH CARE: A Pathway To Universal Health Coverage

THE FOUNDATION OF HEALTH SYSTEMS

Primary Health Care (PHC) is the foundation of every health care system: the first contact and ongoing link between people and their health providers. PHC is how individuals and families connect with the health care system throughout their lives, from prenatal checkups and routine immunizations to the treatment of illness, rehabilitation and the management of chronic conditions. When PHC works, people are able to get the care they need to stay healthy.

Yet an estimated **400 million people** around the world lack access to quality services at this basic level of care. Despite its crucial importance, comprehensive PHC is often the weakest link in a country's health system: underfunded, understaffed, and deprioritized. Being unable to rely on public services forces people to seek unqualified providers. Paying cash for healthcare also pushes people into poverty.

ACHIEVING HEALTH FOR ALL

Improving primary health care has long been recognized as a key to achieving **health for all**, and several global platforms have called for strong, accessible PHC systems. These include WHO's 2008 World Health Report, *Primary Health Care (Now More Than Ever)*, which asserted that PHC reforms can deliver equitable health services that focus on people's needs and expectations.

The movement toward universal health coverage (UHC) is defined and measured with respect to two primary goals—service coverage and financial protection. However, it is difficult to achieve UHC goals without a strong primary health care system. Improved PHC systems will help to generate equitable coverage, increase access and improve the quality of services.

Primary Healthcare: A Pathway to Sexual and Reproductive Rights



Primary health care (PHC) is an important enabler for countries to achieve the health-related SDGs that benefit women and girls. In a high-performing system, PHC is where women go for family planning services, antenatal and postnatal care, and vaccines and nutrition support for their children. A strong PHC system not only delivers quality care and services, it builds trust with families and communities to promote health and wellbeing as well as treatment when necessary.

With respect to maternal health, a strong PHC system—including referral mechanisms—is important for prenatal care, skilled birth attendance, postnatal care, and family planning, and serves as a critical entry point for women and girls to access emergency obstetric and newborn care.

Gender inequality, and gender bias in the health system underpin many systemic health issues. Even as decision-makers work to address these problems, primary health care can mitigate the negative health consequences of gender inequalities.

HIGH-PERFORMING PHC SYSTEMS ARE:

People's first contact — they serve as the entry point into the health care system and the first source of care for most health needs.

Comprehensive — they deliver a broad spectrum of preventative, promotive, rehabilitative, curative and palliative care.

Coordinated — they manage care across levels of the health system, referring patients to specialists as needed and effectively following up to ensure improvement.

People-centered — they are organized around the health needs and expectations of people, rather than diseases.

Continuous — they connect people with trusted providers who address their ongoing health needs throughout their lives.

Accessible — they are offered within people's communities, at a price they can afford.

Improving PHC systems is linked to better health outcomes and is a cost-effective way to reach more people. It fuels public health progress and contributes to the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) including universal health coverage. Building high-performing PHC systems is a critical means to achieving UHC.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS KEY TO ADVANCING PRIMARY AND UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and advocates play an important role in advancing primary health care and keep the focus on people and their needs. Community participation contributes to a PHC system that is relevant and equitable and community mobilization builds awareness about access to care. CSOs are the brokers and bridge-builders among diverse stakeholders, adept at complex coordination and creating platforms for dialogue and solutions.



“ PHC ensures a focus on equity, accessibility and quality of care in the pathway to universal health coverage. ”



PAI convenes the Primary Health Care Global Strategy Group (PHCGSG), a diverse group of civil society advocates and partners, with representatives from Alliance for Reproductive Health Rights, CHESTRAD International, Global Health Advocates, Kaiser Family Foundation, MamaYe Nigeria, PAI, PATH, Results, Save the Children (UK), and the White Ribbon Alliance. PHCGSG seeks to increase recognition and support for PHC in the global development arena, and in particular to advocate for PHC as a foundational pillar of universal health coverage.