

Policy Brief: Accelerating Progress Towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2030

By Judith Owoicho



Key Insights

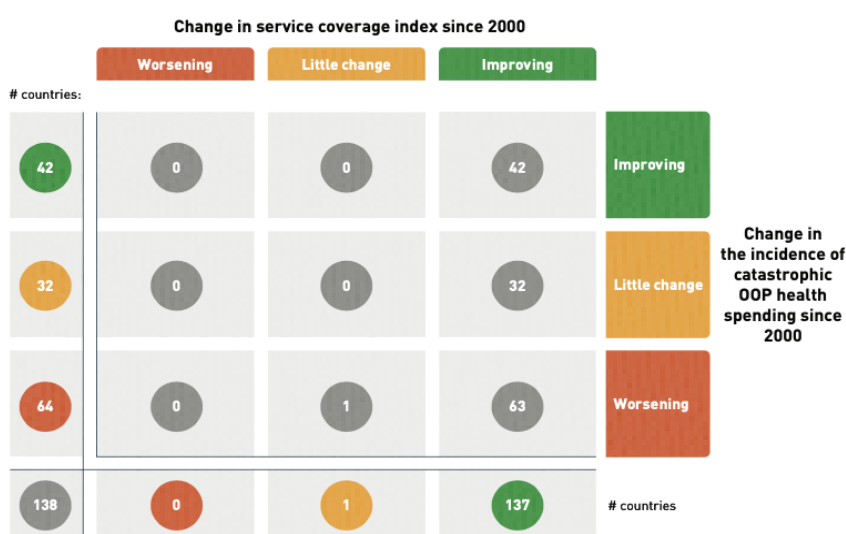
- Global progress toward Universal Health Coverage (UHC) has stagnated since 2015, with only minimal improvements in health service coverage and worsening financial protection.
- Over 4.5 billion people were not fully covered by essential health services in 2021, and more than 2 billion experienced financial hardship due to out-of-pocket (OOP) health spending in 2019.
- Inequalities persist, with underserved populations, including rural communities and the poorest households, facing the greatest barriers to access.
- Primary health care (PHC) systems remain underdeveloped, and Non Communicable Diseases (NCD) services are highly underfunded in many regions.
- Policy Urgency: Without proactive measures, achieving UHC by 2030 is at risk.



Policy Problem or Background

The goal of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is to ensure everyone can access the health services they need such as prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care, all delivered at a level of quality that ensures they are effective, without causing a financial strain on the user. It is a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring access to quality health services without financial hardship (SDG Target 3.8). However, global trends indicate slow progress in expanding essential health service coverage and financial protection. In addition, COVID-19 further disrupted health systems, widening inequities and financial burdens.

Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) LMICs face the most significant challenges, with health systems depending on OOP payments. The costs keep millions of people from seeking care, deepening health inequities and the cycles of poverty. The lack of growth in service coverage since 2015, and the increase in the risk of catastrophic and impoverishing health spending, underscores the need for targeted policy interventions.

Fig. 2. Categories of change in SDG indicators 3.8.1 and 3.8.2 for 138 countries since 2000


Notes: Analysis only includes the 138 countries with at least two reported data points for SDG 3.8.2 since 2000; annualized rate of change based on the available periods for each indicator, for SDG 3.8.2, the median minimum year was 2004, and the median maximum year was 2017; for SDG 3.8.1, all years 2000–2021 were available for all countries.

Thresholds are based on average annualized rate of change to define change: worsening financial hardship (>0.1), no change [-0.1–0.1]; improving financial hardship (<-0.1), worsening service coverage (<-0.1), no change [-0.1–0.1]; improving service coverage (>0.1).

Sources: SDG indicator 3.8.1, WHO global service coverage database, May 2023 (1); SDG indicator 3.8.2, Global database on financial protection assembled by WHO and the World Bank (2,3).

Recommendations:

Strengthen Primary Health Care (PHC)

- Invest in PHC infrastructure, workforce, and digital health innovations.
- Ensure PHC services include diagnostic tools, outpatient medicines, and NCD treatments.
- Remove user fees for vulnerable populations and introduce capped co-payments for others.

Increase Financial Protection Measures

- Transition from OOP funding to pre-paid pooled contributions through taxes or insurance.
- Expand public funding for essential health services, focusing on low-income households.
- Exempt individuals living in poverty from all forms of health-related payments.

Address Inequities in Service Access

- Strengthen community health initiatives and subsidize transportation for care access.
- Use disaggregated data to monitor and address disparities in health outcomes.
- Target underserved rural populations and poorest quintiles with tailored health programs.

Expand and Modernize Data Systems

- Develop comprehensive health information systems to track service coverage and financial hardship.
- Monitor progress using updated UHC indicators and ensure data transparency.
- Integrate real-time reporting tools for better policy responsiveness.



Prioritize NCD Services and Emerging Risks

- Scale up prevention and treatment services for NCDs, mental health, and climate-related health risks.
- Strengthen resilience against public health emergencies by aligning with International Health Regulations (2005).

Enhance Regional and Global Cooperation

- Share best practices and foster joint capacity-building initiatives.
- Partner with international organizations, private sectors, and civil society to mobilize resources.
- Align national health strategies with regional and global UHC frameworks.

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- World Health Organization & World Bank. (2023). Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report. Geneva: WHO and World Bank.
- Sustainable Development Goals. (2015). Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. United Nations.
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N I G E R I A

4-6 Independence Road
Kano State.

28 Osun Crescent,
Maitama, FCT, Abuja.

U . S . A

1200 G Street NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
USA

G E R M A N Y

Prenzlauer Allee 186
10405 Berlin

www.ehealthafrica.org

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