

UHC2030 Steering Committee Co-Chair submission to inform Australia's new International Development Policy

Submitted via: development.policy@dfat.gov.au

UHC2030 Contact:

Justin Koonin, Co-chair of the UHC2020 Steering Committee, President ACON (AIDS Council of New South Wales), president@acon.org.au

Marjolaine Nicod, Coordinator, UHC2030 Secretariat, nicodm@who.int

About UHC2030: [UHC2030](#) is a global movement to build stronger health systems for universal health coverage (UHC). It brings together health stakeholders and advocates to work together to advance progress towards UHC by mobilizing political commitment, promoting collective action for and social participation in designing health systems and services, and demanding and tracking accountability. UHC2030 is governed by a [Steering Committee](#), composed of countries, international organizations, global health funds, private foundations, [civil society organizations](#), and private sector. It is also guided by the UHC Movement [Political Advisory Panel](#) led by Her Excellency Maria Fernanda Espinosa (President of the 73rd UN General Assembly), which advises the Steering Committee and Secretariat while simultaneously conveying UHC2030's messages to high-level political leaders. Secretariat support is provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD). UHC2030 tracks progress on UHC commitments made by national governments and publishes an annual [State of UHC Commitment Report](#) with country profiles available on the [UHC data portal](#).

What key trends or challenges will shape Australia's engagement in our region and globally over the next five to 10 years? What risks and opportunities does this present for Australia's development assistance?

As highlighted in the [Terms of Reference](#), “the COVID-19 pandemic has returned another 97 million people to living in poverty[.] It has revealed the impact of inadequate capacity of health systems - intensifying existing health challenges and inequalities within countries. Disadvantaged and marginalised groups – including people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity – have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic's health, economic and social impacts.”

These dimensions highlighted in the TOR are addressed by universal health coverage (UHC). UHC means that everyone, everywhere, should have access to the health services they need without risk of financial hardship. It is embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDG target 3.8](#)) and includes the full range of essential health services, spanning health promotion, prevention, and treatment. UHC and health security are two intertwined goals to protect everyone, everywhere, that we achieve through the same health system - in crisis and calm. The three dimensions of UHC are i) population coverage (who receives services, linked to equity), ii) service coverage (what health services are available), and iii) financial protection

(ensuring health services do not lead to financial hardship). Countries' UHC efforts are fragmented and do not address all these three dimensions in an integrated, coherent way. Data and progress on UHC are also not systematically tracked by countries.

UHC is based on the principles of equity, non-discrimination & the right to health, ensuring that also the most marginalized populations are reached and covered, and no-one is left behind. UHC and resilient health systems also ensure that shocks – such as climate change - that impact health, can be responded to by the health system, and essential health services can continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the disastrous impact on people, societies and economies of underinvestment in health systems. To help partner countries deal better with future health threats and climate change that impacts health, it is important that Australia prioritise investment in health systems strengthening based on a primary health care approach, as the most effective way of achieving the intertwined goals of universal health coverage and health security. Critically, health security should not be pursued in isolation from efforts to strengthen health systems more broadly and make progress on universal health coverage, for [strong and resilient health systems](#) are a first line of defence against health security threats.

What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges?

Australia can through its development partnerships, official development assistance, and through multilateral initiatives and political processes such as G20 help strengthen health systems, in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Countries with strong and resilient health systems are better prepared to prevent and respond to health threats, including outbreaks with pandemic potential. For example, countries with enough trained health workers, lab and data capacity, and well-functioning basic services (such as immunization) can more rapidly detect and respond to outbreaks.

Countries with strong and resilient health systems are also more responsive to people's needs during and after pandemics, and can continue to deliver essential services (e.g., basic immunization, sexual and reproductive services, mental health services, and prevention and care services for infectious and non-communicable diseases).

How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?

As outlined in the TOR “Australians want an effective development program that is grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and works with our neighbours to help lift them out of poverty. Supporting sustainable and inclusive development in our region is both the smart and right thing to do.”

Focusing on UHC through [strengthening health systems](#) ensures everyone in a population has curative and preventive health services available to them by ample well-trained and well-supported health workers. Integrated, resilient health services that go beyond vertical health programs and strong government commitment enhance the impact and sustainability of

development programs, and through expansion of coverage and addressing inequities also address multidimensional and intersectional vulnerabilities.

How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitments to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality?

Prioritizing [primary health care](#) in health system strengthening, with community engagement, integrated health and multisectoral services and essential public health functions, and based on rights and social justice, is the most efficient and sustainable approach to achieve UHC. These build trust and respect, and further shared values of fairness and equality.

Primary health care is a people-centered, integrated approach to delivering health care. As nearly 90% of essential health services can be delivered through primary health care systems, a “PHC-oriented health system” maximizes equity and can reduce socioeconomic barriers to health individuals face due to gender, disability, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, and citizenship, among others. Vulnerable groups continue to face significant barriers and bottlenecks when trying to benefit from national health insurance schemes. Global average of expenditure on PHC has also been decreasing.

What lessons from Australia's past development efforts should inform the policy? What is Australia seen to be doing comparatively well?

Australia plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific region, but also in numerous global processes and initiatives, such as G20 and through its role in UN and IFIs. Australia should continue to leverage both its regional and global roles to ensure that everyone, everywhere, has access to the health services they need without risk of financial hardship. A leadership role and actionable commitments on UHC in the upcoming [UN High-level meeting on UHC in 2023](#) provide one such opportunity for engagement and leadership.

How should the performance and delivery systems be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance? Development requires longer term investments, which rest on building institutions and human resource capacity. It is important that performance and delivery systems include the necessary incentives to focus on longer-term results, aligned with country needs and priorities. Development assistance needs to complement efforts to encourage domestic resource mobilization, which ultimately will provide the fuel to achieve strong health systems worldwide.

Accountability mechanisms are crucial to expose who benefits and who is left behind from policy choices. Transparent and accessible data plays a key role in furthering this accountability. This should be complemented by multi-stakeholder review and remedial action.

How should the new policy address the role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of our regional partners?

Resilient and sustainable health systems require strong political commitment from all governments, as well as domestic financing. Australia can play a catalytic role in supporting countries build strong, resilient health systems that deliver for all people, while complementing through ODA support to the most vulnerable people and countries.

ODA can also play an important role in strengthening health governance. Governments alone cannot achieve universal health coverage. They must create space for non-state actors to [participate meaningfully](#) in relevant government processes. Whole-of-society engagement through social participation mechanisms is the basis for holding governments accountable for their commitments and improving the responsiveness and legitimacy of relevant policies. Such mechanisms must be invested in, strengthened, and embedded into the health sector planning and review processes, which can usefully benefit from ODA support. As a country with a proud record of civic engagement, Australia has a key role to play in championing the role of civil society and communities, in a context in which civic space is being progressively limited in many parts of the world.