

## Health for all: Time for Action Put the Last Mile First as We Strive to Achieve UHC by 2030

In September 2023, world leaders gathered to endorse the second United Nations (UN) Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), titled "[Universal Health Coverage: Expanding Our Ambition for Health and Well-Being in a Post-COVID World](#)." The [inaugural UN Political Declaration on UHC](#), charted in September 2019, set the trajectory for the global community to attain UHC by 2030 and to leave no one behind which is reinforced in 2023.

The [Global Fund Advocates Network Asia-Pacific \(GFAN AP\)](#), Seven Alliance<sup>1</sup>, [GFAN Africa](#) and [Civil Society For Malaria Elimination \(CS4ME\)](#) congratulate Heads of States for pledging to enact crucial national initiatives, make indispensable investments, fortify global cooperation and exemplify global solidarity at the highest political echelons in the 2023 Political Declaration with an aim to expedite progress toward UHC by 2030, employing a primary health care (PHC) framework. The 2023 Political Declaration not only reaffirms prior commitments from the UN high-level meeting on HIV/AIDS, it also expresses concerns over the reported 1.6 million tuberculosis (TB) deaths and a 3.6% surge in TB incidence between 2020 and 2021; along with 247 million malaria cases globally.

The 2023 UHC Political Declaration showcases notable strides in recognizing the significance of integrated, person-centred care compared to its 2019 precursor. It not only upholds but also extends references to this approach, underscoring its pivotal role in attaining global health objectives. Additionally, the 2023 Declaration adopts a forward-looking perspective, acknowledging the importance of coordination across health-related processes during the UN General Assembly.

Yet, the urgency to achieve UHC, especially for those living with, affected by, and/or vulnerable to HIV, TB, and malaria, is more pressing than ever. Shockingly, over half of the global population of approximately 4.5 billion people were not fully covered by essential health services in 2021. Financial hardships afflicted 2 billion individuals, with more than 1.3 billion being pushed or further driven into poverty while seeking basic healthcare – highlighting the stark reality of widening health inequities.<sup>2</sup> Key and vulnerable populations of HIV, TB and malaria are at the forefront of facing these challenges.

"Around the world, human rights, gender equality, and civic spaces face escalating threats, with countries enacting laws targeting key populations and vulnerable communities. Geopolitical tensions and violence globally further endanger HIV, TB, and malaria communities, disrupting access to life-saving services," said Harry Prabowo, Programme Manager of APN+. "In addition, we are highly concerned that the language concerning human rights in the 2023 Political Declaration has regressed with the removal of a paragraph referencing social justice as compared to the political declaration<sup>3</sup>. UHC will persist as a farfetched goal unless due attention is accorded to "the last mile" – key populations, marginalized and criminalized communities. This imperative includes key and vulnerable populations affected by HIV, TB, and malaria. It is critical that our endeavours to actualize UHC extend to key populations and marginalized groups, ensuring inclusivity and equitable access to quality healthcare for all!"

"It is imperative to acknowledge that human rights violations, gender inequalities, and gender-based violence are exacerbating the exclusion of marginalized and vulnerable communities from health services, thus impeding our progress towards UHC. To truly achieve UHC for all, we must prioritize human rights and gender equality. Investing in robust community systems is essential to ensure comprehensive community engagement in human rights and gender equality interventions, positioning communities as leaders and equal partners. National governments must commit to increasing and sustaining investments in these interventions. It is time to go beyond mere commitments and take concrete actions," emphasised Rosemary Mburu, Executive Director of WACI Health.

<sup>1</sup> The Seven Alliance is a consortium made up of Asia-Pacific regional networks of key populations and people living with HIV, comprised of APCOM, [Asia-Pacific Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS \(APN+\)](#), [Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers \(APNSW\)](#), [Asia-Pacific Transgender Network \(APTNT\)](#), [International Community of Women Living with HIV Asia-Pacific \(ICWAP\)](#), [Network of Asian People Who Use Drugs \(NAPUD\)](#), and Youth LEAD.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, Accessed on 27 November 2023, <https://shorturl.at/azLPR>

<sup>3</sup> Para 14. Recognize the fundamental importance of equity, social justice and social protection mechanisms as well as the elimination of the root causes of discrimination and stigma in health-care settings to ensure universal and equitable access to quality health services without financial hardship for all people, particularly for those who are vulnerable or in vulnerable situations.

UHC will remain a farfetched goal if we do not eliminate legal barriers and criminalisation of key populations; prioritise the last mile; communities and civil society who are marginalised and criminalised including key and vulnerable populations to HIV, TB and malaria, in our efforts to make UHC a reality for all.

Investments in health, both domestically and internationally, remain notably low. Estimates indicate that an additional investment of US\$200–328 billion per year is required to scale up PHC approaches in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), potentially saving 60 million lives and increasing average life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

"The inadequate investments of countries and donors remain a major barrier in realizing UHC. Despite commitments articulated on paper, UHC's attainment, leaving no one behind, hinges on the availability of funds. It is high time for global leaders to genuinely fulfil their commitments, manifested through augmented national budgets, amplified Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets, and decisive measures to address trade-related issues. In the absence of these tangible actions, our aspiration for UHC will remain an elusive dream. As communities and civil society, we remind our leaders to translate promises into action and substantiate their commitments," stressed Masaki Inaba, Co-Chair, [Africa Japan Forum \(AJF\)](#) and Steering Committee member, GFAN AP.

The funding gap for HIV programs in LMICs is widening, with the available funding of US\$20.8 billion in 2022 falling short of the required US\$29.3 billion by 2025.<sup>5</sup> Funding for TB services in LMICs in 2022 was US\$5.8 billion, only 44% of the global target of US\$13 billion annually by 2022.<sup>6</sup> The aggregate funding allocated to malaria in 2021 remained insufficient, failing to meet the estimated global requirement of US\$7.3 billion for the same year, crucial for maintaining adherence to the milestones set forth in the Global Technical Strategy for Malaria.<sup>7</sup>

While we acknowledge world leaders for their commitment to achieving UHC, political will is not only critical, it needs to be actioned to fulfil the agreed-upon commitments. Urgent action is needed to repeal laws, policies, and practices that deter those most in need of health services and to adopt measures protecting their access to health services and upholding their human rights.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we:

- Call upon national governments to **repeal laws that criminalise key populations that restrict access to safe and quality healthcare**, and for national governments to **ensure secure civic spaces for communities and civil society to meaningfully and actively engage** with states to foster UHC that truly leaves no one behind.
- Urge national **governments to work towards increasing sustainable financing for health through enhanced domestic resource mobilization**, aiming for at least 5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and for donor countries to increase allocations for Official Development Assistance (ODA) to reach 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI), as emphasized in the GFAN AP statement – [#TheUHCThatWeNeed](#).<sup>9</sup>
- Urge **donors to fully fund global multilateral health financing mechanisms like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria (Global Fund) and rally with peers to reach the full target of at least US\$18 billion for its Seventh Replenishment**. As one of the most transparent and accountable financing institutions, Global Fund achievements have been remarkable, and it has saved over 59 million lives, with 24.5 million people put on antiretroviral therapy for HIV; 6.7 million people treated for TB; and 219.7 million mosquito nets distributed by the end of 2022.<sup>10</sup>

The achievement of UHC is within reach if we prioritize the last mile first, ensuring that those criminalised, most vulnerable and often overlooked, including individuals living with, affected by, and/or vulnerable to HIV, TB, and malaria, have access to quality, free and dignified health services.

**Only when we put our money where our mouth is and prioritise our "last mile first", we can #MeetTheTarget of achieving UHC that leaves no one behind by 2030.**

<sup>4</sup> World Health organization, Accessed on 27 November 2023, <https://shorturl.at/azLPR>

<sup>5</sup> [The Path that Ends AIDS. 2023 UNAIDS Global AIDS Update](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Global Tuberculosis Report 2023](#)

<sup>7</sup> [World Malaria Report 2022](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Statement highlighting contrasts between the 2019 and 2023 UHC political declarations, Global Network of People Living with HIV](#)

<sup>9</sup> [#TheUHCThatWeNeed](#), <https://gfanasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Final-TheUHCThatWeNeed-Statement.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> [Global Fund Results Report 2023](#)