Implementing Universal Health Coverage: How the Private Sector Can Help

Remarks by
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“Accelerating Adoption of Universal Health Coverage in the Post-2015 Era: The Role of the Private Sector”
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I’m pleased to participate in this forum on the occasion of the 70th United Nations General Assembly to discuss universal health coverage (UHC) – a critical topic in global health and development today.

Globally, an estimated 400 million people do not have access to basic health care services – roughly one in sixteen of our fellow human beings. Moreover, access to health services is unevenly distributed. Depending on the country and context, there are gaps between the rich and poor, men and women, and people of different ethnic backgrounds.

One of the main aims of UHC is to close these gaps in access and make sure that everybody benefits from access to high-quality health care, while also reducing the risk of catastrophic financial harm as a result of seeking health services. This, in turn, will foster better health and greater economic prosperity.

But the promise of UHC remains elusive for many countries. Serious gaps in health infrastructures and the health workforce, fragile economies, and high burdens of disease remain obstacles to UHC. This is particularly true for least developed countries, many of them in Africa.

As Member States chart a path to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, we have both an opportunity and an obligation to support national efforts to reach these new targets, including universal health coverage. The road to UHC will vary for each country, and greater political commitment is required to ensure that the aspirations for UHC become reality. Nations need to lead by developing sustainable, comprehensive plans; fostering transparency; establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, and contributing to joint accountability frameworks.

The good news is that UHC is now clearly on the political agenda. But political declarations do not translate automatically into practical results for people. Success will require a concerted, multisectoral approach and fruitful partnerships. It’s time now to shift the focus from policy to practice, which was a clear message of the Financing for Development Conference held in Addis Ababa in July.

That frames the question we’re here to discuss today: **What role can the private sector play in advancing UHC in the post-2015 era?** All stakeholders can contribute to assisting countries in providing greater access to more equitable, higher quality health care.
For its part, the private sector contributes in two major ways. First, by sharing its expertise and experience in a wide range of business disciplines relevant to attaining the UHC goal. (These include research and development, technology solutions, human resources management, logistics and supply chain management, media and communications, and finance.) Second, by participating in multi-sectoral partnerships, we can support countries to strengthen health systems, create innovative finance models and build the bodies of evidence that will be crucial to implementing UHC.

Drawing upon these examples of what the private sector has already being doing to help with global health and development, I’d like to offer six observations about how and why the private sector should help countries to scale up UHC.

1. **Strong health systems aren’t just good for health, they are also good for business.** Weak supply chains, lack of regulatory harmonization and insufficient human resources for health, for example, are issues that companies grapple with constantly, particularly in developing and emerging markets. Building the health infrastructure makes it better equipped to deliver the necessary services required for healthier populations. Companies large and small have a vested interest in UHC because healthy employees are important for businesses to grow and flourish.

2. To achieve the UHC goal of increased access to quality health services, **we must build strong, resilient health systems.** Such systems can recover quickly from shocks such as natural disasters and disease outbreaks, while continuing to provide access to critical health services, including the management of chronic illness. The private sector should be a full partner in planning processes as governments prepare to address the practical challenges of health system strengthening.

3. **The lack of adequate numbers of trained health workers is arguably one of the biggest barriers to UHC implementation.** Especially as UHC is targeted more and more to the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, the human resource challenges are magnified. While we already know of many innovations in the use of a range of health care workers – not just specialized physicians, we have several opportunities in front of us to fully exploit the potential of training and management of other front line health workers (such as physicians’ assistants and community health workers). This is particularly applicable to NCDs management, for instance hypertension or diabetes.

Here too, the private sector is partnering with the public sector to train such workers rapidly and support them through relevant mobile devices and apps. Improving health worker capacity should be integrated into all health systems strengthening policies and programs. Without health workers, there is no sustainable access to care.

4. Like UHC, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are part of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda. They **collectively comprise a significant proportion of the global disease burden, ramping up our work on them is critical to achieving UHC.** We know that reducing risk factors for disease is an effective means of prevention: it is also less expensive to prevent than to treat disease. UHC fosters a greater focus on primary and secondary prevention, early detection, and management of chronic illness through the life course. Ultimately, the combination of these strategies will lead to better health outcomes and lower health care costs for individuals, their families and economies.

5. **Let’s not forget access to quality medicines and services.** When we discuss UHC, the focus is often on costs. While this is clearly an important factor, the efficacy and quality of novel technologies and medicines should also be taken into account. Greater work needs to be done to address the barriers to access and availability. These included regulatory policies, taxes and tariffs and distribution inefficiencies within the health system, among others.

6. Finally, to address the health system challenges in achieving UHC, **we should work to foster multi-sectoral partnerships that will mobilize and share the knowledge, creativity and resources of the public sector, private sector and civil society alike.** Such partnerships should be embedded within national UHC plans, with provisions for the dialogue and engagement necessary to establish trust and to find common ground on which to build innovative solutions. Ideally, those solutions will reach beyond the health sector. Policies and practices in the environment, transportation, information and communications, and education sectors, to note just a few obvious examples, have implications for health and well-being. Sustainable solutions will require partnership frameworks that encourage collaboration across these sectors.
Partnerships matter, but we need to take them to a new level. The global health field is full of interesting and innovative partnerships, but we can do even more, for instance with new private-private partnerships. For example, given the digital revolution happening before our eyes, how can we take better advantage of new media and communications tools to reshape the many interactions among payors, providers and patients that occur daily in health systems? Developing more partnerships like this will enable healthcare companies to deliver products and services more efficiently, while also lightening the government’s burden of dealing with multiple private providers. The more we partner and bring one-stop solutions to governments, the more successful we will be – and the more likely that governments will achieve UHC quickly.

One of the major lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals, and more recently, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, is that the private sector has a significant role to play in building resilient health systems and in fostering inclusive economic development around the world. We work with partners across all sectors to leverage our respective strengths to reduce poverty and improve health. As Member States embark on the challenging tasks of implementing UHC and the Sustainable Development Goals, I am heartened by the progress we’ve made over the past 15 years. I look forward with hope to what we can accomplish together as a global community to achieve more equitable, economically productive and healthier societies by 2030.

Thank you.