“Universal Health Coverage: everyone, everywhere” is the theme for the World Health Day this year. Celebrated every year on 7 April, the World Health Day marks the anniversary of the founding of WHO. It provides a unique opportunity to mobilize action around a specific health topic of concern to people all over the world.

The World Health Organization was founded on the principle that all people should be able to realize their right to the highest possible level of health. ‘HealthForAll’ therefore, has been WHO’s guiding vision. It is also the impetus behind the current organization-wide drive to support countries in moving towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC). As WHO Director-General Dr Tedros says, “I envision a world in which everyone can live healthy, productive lives, regardless of who they are or where they live.”

UHC as the theme for the World Health Day 2018 is fortuitous indeed as there is already a groundswell of momentum in India to move swiftly on the path of UHC.

**UHC matters**

In recent decades, UHC has emerged as a key strategy to make progress towards other health-related and broader sustainable development goals. Access to quality health services and financial protection not only enhances people’s health and life expectancy, it also protects countries from epidemics, reduces poverty and the risk of hunger, creates jobs, drives economic growth and enhances gender equality.

UHC has three dimensions: (i) Population – to include all people; (ii) Services – to include the whole range of services, from promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative, and (iii) Financial protection – to ensure that people do not fall into poverty by paying the health care bill. To achieve UHC, attention on all three dimensions is important.

**Making health services universal**

UHC is a priority objective of WHO. The draft WHO Global Programme of Work is committed to providing health coverage to one billion more people by 2023. UHC is also the Flagship Priority for the WHO South-East Asia Region.

“The promise of UHC is bold: that all people can access quality health services, when and where they need them, without suffering financial hardship. Healthier populations in turn create more productive economies that raise living standards. UHC will help achieve a healthier, more equitable and secure South-East Asia Region,” says Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region.
India on the path to UHC
Delivering the 2018-19 budget, Mr Arun Jaitley, the Union Finance Minister said, “The government is steadily but surely progressing towards the goal of Universal Health Coverage.”

Towards this goal, the union budget has enunciated the landmark 'Ayushman Bharat' programme, which aims at addressing health holistically through two components: (i) the National Health Protection Mission (NHPM) will cover 100 million poor and vulnerable families up to INR 5 00 000 per year for secondary and tertiary care, and (ii) strengthening primary health care through 150 000 Health & Wellness Centres.

This gives India's journey on the path to UHC the desired momentum.

The roadmap
The National Health Policy 2017 envisions UHC. It aims at increasing the government’s health expenditure to 2.5% of GDP from the current 1.1% and achieve universal access to good quality health care services. Moving towards UHC will contribute to India's social and economic growth.

The Ayushman Bharat programme is a major and bold step forward in India's journey on UHC. The success of the initiative, especially NHPM, over time will depend on its ability to increase coverage, not only for the poor but for everyone, allowing pooling of funds and cross-subsidisation, wherein the young subsidise the old, the healthy subsidise the sick and the rich subsidise the poor.

Extending health insurance coverage to the entire population is a long-term goal, and important direction and vision. It can be achieved step by step and starts with informal sector and the most vulnerable population groups.

WHO is committed to continue supporting the government and other stakeholders in making India a healthier and more prosperous nation.

Finally, each one has a part to play, stimulating conversations and contributing to structured dialogue towards policies that help the country achieve UHC.

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WHO Representative to India