

Prioritising universal health insurance in Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan is a transition economy that has been seeking in recent years to halt the relative decline of its social protection system. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the country's social protection interventions have mostly comprised pensions for government employees and other workers in the formal sector.

However, during this transition period a significant proportion of its workforce has shifted to informal work, while the share of elderly people receiving pension benefits has declined noticeably.

This One Pager argues that to strengthen its overall social protection system, Uzbekistan must aggressively prioritise establishing a comprehensive health care system—starting, at least, with extensive and effective primary care facilities. Recent reports published by the World Health Organization (WHO) corroborate that the government has already been seeking to significantly expand the coverage of public health services (e.g., see WHO 2021).

This initiative seems to be part of broader efforts across Asia. High-income countries in the region, such as Japan and the Republic of Korea, have had well-developed universal health systems for many years. Moreover, middle-income countries, such as the People's Republic of China, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Lao PDR, have been moving aggressively in recent years to expand their public health care systems.

While Japan and the Republic of Korea have devoted about 30-40 per cent of all social protection expenditures to their universal health care systems, the four middle-income countries mentioned above have only managed, for example, to devote about 10-20 per cent. Nonetheless, the health care systems of all of these countries have accounted for over half of all their social protection beneficiaries.

What is most noteworthy is that the movement towards universal health insurance represents the most significant change in social protection across Asia as a whole over the last decade.

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

The Government of Uzbekistan has done a commendable job of containing the spread of COVID-19. The country's public health

interventions against the epidemic began in February 2020. As of early January 2022, out of a total population of over 34 million (as of late 2021), there had been only 1,485 COVID-19-related deaths. By contrast, 98.6 per cent of the people who contracted COVID-19 have recovered from it.¹

However, the pandemic has confirmed that Uzbekistan's public health system needs to be substantially strengthened. With support from the WHO, the government has already initiated a pilot health project in Syrdarya Oblast to develop a prototype of an effective system for universal health coverage.

The current priorities are to strengthen service delivery of primary health care and offer quality, affordable care that is located close to patients' communities. This initiative also seeks to restructure service delivery in hospitals to reduce the high expenditures incurred by patients as a result of seeking tertiary-level care. Such reforms represent a significant shift from the country's previous system, which relied heavily on a limited number of hospitals and specialist clinics.

These reforms were initiated by Presidential Decree in December 2018. The goal has been to ensure universal coverage of essential health services by building a fully developed system of mandatory health insurance. The decree also stipulated that a technical feasibility study should be carried out to assess how to most effectively and equitably increase the financing of such a system (WHO 2021).

This fiscal study concluded that general taxation is the best option for pooling the funds needed to achieve universal health care coverage, while also redistributing resources in an equitable manner. Interestingly, it also recommended that additional financial resources could be generated by taxing 'undesirable and environmentally costly consumption', such as of tobacco and alcohol.

Reference:

WHO. 2021. *Feasibility Study for the Introduction of Mandatory Health Insurance in Uzbekistan*. Health Financing Policy Papers. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

Note:

1. See: <<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/uzbekistan/>>.