

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

Universal Health Coverage

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UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE

In Context

- The expansion of Universal health coverage will be complex, but data and digital technology can smoothen the way.

Universal Health Coverage

- **Meaning:**
 - ♦ Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship.
 - ♦ It covers the full continuum of essential health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care across the life course.
- **SDG target:**
 - ♦ Achieving UHC is one of the targets the nations of the world set when they adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.
- **UHC in India:**
 - ♦ Currently, India aims to attain UHC through the expansion of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the flagship publicly financed health insurance (PFHI) scheme of the Union government.

Challenges

- **Off-track progress:**
 - ♦ The world is off track to make significant progress towards universal health coverage (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target 3.8) by 2030.
- **Stagnation:**
 - ♦ Improvements to health services coverage have stagnated since 2015, and the proportion of the population that faced catastrophic levels of out-of-pocket health spending increased continuously since 2000.
 - ♦ This global pattern is consistent across all regions and the majority of countries.
- **Shortage of manpower:**
 - ♦ Many Western and Central Asian nations today are staring at acute shortages of manpower in healthcare.
- **Disruption due to pandemic:**
 - ♦ The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted essential services in 92% of countries at the height of the pandemic in 2021. In 2022, 84% of countries still reported disruptions.
- **Increasing poor and non-poor gap:**
 - ♦ A **greater proportion of disposable incomes** is taken away from a poor household as compared to a non-poor one, **further broadening the gap** between the two.
 - If **sickness hits a working member** of the household, she/he must often withdraw from active employment and their main source of income dries up at the time when they urgently need more money for treatment.
 - Households have to **often sell or mortgage their productive assets**, such as land and cattle, to cover the treatment costs.
 - **This further reduces their capacity to bounce back.**
 - ♦ **According to the WHO**, 55 million people **fall into poverty or deeper poverty** every year due to **catastrophic expenditures on health**.
- **Lesser spending than the Lower and Middle-Income Countries:**
 - ♦ India currently spends about Rs 8 lakh crore or about 3.2 percent of its GDP on health.
 - ♦ This is much lower than the average health spending share of the GDP — at around 5.2 percent of the **Lower and Middle Income Countries (LMIC)**.
- **Comparing the data:**
 - ♦ Of this, the government (Centre and states put together) spends about roughly 1.1 percent of the GDP.

- ◆ Contrast this with the government health expenditure in countries like China (3 percent), Thailand (2.7 percent), Vietnam (2.7 percent) and Sri Lanka (1.4 percent).

Suggestions

- **Global Initiative on Digital Health:**
 - ◆ It is here that India's leadership in digital health becomes significant. Under India's G20 presidency, the WHO has launched a **Global Initiative on Digital Health** aiming to marshal investments into **digital health** and facilitate **regional and international exchange** and reporting on health.
- **Role of India's Digital Health journey:**
 - ◆ India's own **indigenous digital health movement**, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, preceded this initiative and is steadily gathering steam.
 - ◆ Digital health must be seen as a tool for effectively managing the inevitably complex nature of UHC expansion.
 - Here, it will have a wide-ranging role to play, right from helping administer diverse contracts to implementing terms for value-based provider reimbursement and incentives.
 - A robust digital and data infrastructure can address most of the challenges.
- **Role of AI:**
 - ◆ Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming health care worldwide, and India has the potential to be at the forefront of this revolution.
 - ◆ **Diagnostics:** One of the key areas where AI can make a significant impact is in diagnostics.
 - AI-powered tools can enhance the accuracy and efficiency of medical diagnoses, leading to faster treatment decisions and better patient outcomes.
 - ◆ **Predictions & preventions:** Additionally, AI can help predict disease outbreaks, analyse health-care data, and optimise treatment plans, expediting health-care procedures, and revolutionising drug discovery ultimately making health care more personalised and effective.
- **Need of Spreading the digital and data infrastructure:**
 - ◆ India is not alone in this journey. Many low- and middle-income countries are also looking to build on their existing systems to expand UHC for their citizens.
 - ◆ The Indian example could be instructive for them in terms of policy lessons.
 - ◆ Pervasive staff shortages in the West and initiatives such as **'Heal in India'** could **accelerate the medical brain drain** even as we suffer major staff shortages of our own.
- **Need of Private sector participation:**
 - ◆ The public sector cannot be the only solution for universal health coverage in India.
 - ◆ Expanding PFHIs would entail bringing a large chunk of the private sector under the public fold.
 - ◆ Multifaceted nature of modern health challenges require multilateral and synergistic coalitions involving both the public and private sectors.
- **WHO's recommendations:**
 - ◆ To build back better, WHO's recommendation is to reorient health systems using a primary health care (PHC) approach.
 - ◆ Most (90%) of essential UHC interventions can be delivered through a PHC approach, potentially saving 60 million lives and increasing average global life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030.

Way ahead

- It will be imperative that national interests don't lose ground to international ambitions and that digital technologies are leveraged to create non-competing solutions that are mindful of the Global South.
- Countries need to build on their existing systems, overlaying reforms and best practices incrementally.
- With concerted efforts and a commitment to excellence, a healthier and more prosperous India can be built for generations to come.

DAILY MAINS QUESTION

Examine the role of data and digital technology in achieving the goal of Universal health coverage (UHC). What are the challenges?