

# Universal Health Coverage (UHC): Q&A Fact Sheet

## Fact Sheet

2022

**Q: What is universal health coverage (sometimes called universal health care, or UHC) and how is it understood from a broad global health perspective?**

A: The World Health Organization (WHO) defines universal health coverage most simply as “universal access to health services with social health protection” [*Health Systems Strengthening Glossary*. World Health Organization 2011. <https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/health-systems-strengthening-glossary.pdf>.]

The goal of universal health coverage is to ensure that all people obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them; this requires a strong, efficient, well-run health system; a system for financing health services; access to essential medicines and technologies; and a sufficient capacity of well-trained, motivated health workers. [Glossary. *Health in All Policies: Training Manual*. World Health Organization 2015. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241507981>]

**Q: Where can I learn more about UHC?**

A: The WHO maintains a “universal health coverage” portal online at <https://www.who.int/health-topics/universal-health-coverage> with accessible descriptions of UHC and links to the following related resources:

- Data and statistics
- Publications
- Related programs and activities
- Multimedia
- In-country progress information
- Media releases
- Related feature news stories

**Q: Where can I read the latest scholarship and policy summaries from global experts on why UHC matters worldwide and in select country examples?**

A: It’s impossible to provide a comprehensive list of reputable resources on the UHC debates and realities around the globe, but below is a small sample of representative resources by global experts that might assist you in understanding the issues and controversies:

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[Last Updated: December 2022]

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- **Report:** Hsiao W, Li M, Zhang S. Universal Health Coverage: The Case of China. Working Paper 2014-15. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2014.  
<https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/hsiao-et-al.pdf>.
- **Report:** Making Fair Choices on the Path to Universal Health Coverage: Final Report of the WHO Consultative Group on Equality and Universal Health Coverage. World Health Organization 2014.  
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241507158>.
- **Report:** Cotlear D et al. Going Universal: How 24 Countries are Implementing Universal Health Coverage Reforms from the Bottom Up. World Bank Group 2015. [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/09/10/090224b0830cc779/1\\_0/Rendered/PDF/Goinguniversalsofromthebottomup.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/09/10/090224b0830cc779/1_0/Rendered/PDF/Goinguniversalsofromthebottomup.pdf).  
See especially Chapter 6, “Strengthening Accountability” (pp. 161-185).  
(Note: this report was published before the final release of the Sustainable Development Goals and may differ in detail from current World Bank and World Health Organization information.)
- **Article:** Yamin AE. Taking the Right to Health Seriously: Implications for Health Systems, Courts, and Achieving Universal Health Coverage. Human Rights Quarterly 2017; 39(2): 341-368.
- **Opinion Essay:** Schmidt H, Gostin LO, Emanuel E. Public Health, Universal Health Coverage, and Sustainable Development Goals: Can They Coexist? The Lancet 2015; June 30.  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)60244-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60244-6).
- **Video:** WHO: The Many Paths Towards Universal Health Coverage. World Health Organization 2013.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3sHfYzcv8>.  
This video explains the concept of universal coverage and uses examples from six countries—China, Oman, Mexico, Rwanda, Thailand and Turkey—to show ways that all countries can provide accessible and affordable care for their people.

### **Q: The United States is the only developed country in the world without universal health care. Why do some Americans oppose the idea of UHC?**

A: For an insight into this debate, here are three recent publications that contain diverse but representative common arguments for and against UHC in the United States:

- **Against UHC in the U.S. from a conservative economic perspective** (*opinion piece*): Roy A. Conservative Think Tank: 10 Countries With Universal Health Care Have Freer Economies Than The U.S. Forbes.com 2015; Jan 27. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theapothecary/2015/01/27/conservative-think-tank-10-countries-with-universal-health-care-are-economically-freer-than-the-u-s>.
- **Pro-UHC in the U.S. from a human rights perspective** (*editorial*): Rudiger A. “Why Universal Health Care is Essential for a More Equitable Society.” Huffington Post [blog] 2015; May 31.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anja-rudiger/universal-health-care\\_b\\_6973164.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anja-rudiger/universal-health-care_b_6973164.html).
- **An Economic Data Analysis** (*brief*): U.S. Health Care From a Global Perspective: Spending, Use of Services, Prices, and Health in 13 Countries. The Commonwealth Fund 2013.  
<http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2015/oct/us-health-care-from-a-global-perspective>.

**Q: How might accountability work in designing effective UHC?**

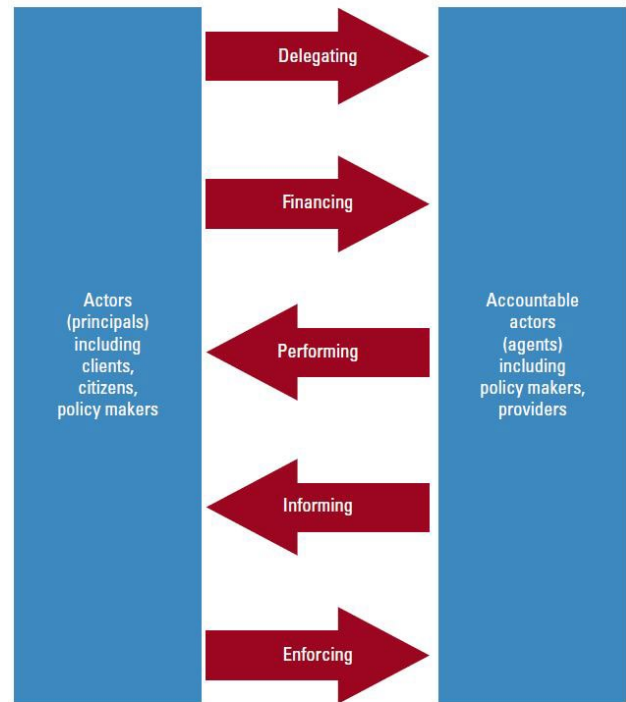
A: Lines of accountability flow in many different directions. At right, for example is a graphic illustrating this issue from a 2003 World Bank report [cited on p. 163 by Cotlear et al. in *Going Universal: How 24 Developing Countries Are Implementing Universal Health Coverage from the Bottom Up*. World Bank Group 2015.]

To help address this question more specifically using one particular example, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General in 2016 appointed a nine-member expert Independent Accountability Panel (IAP) as part of the UN “Every Woman Every Child” strategy, to help develop an updated accountability framework to ensure strong implementation of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Learn more at:

<http://www.everywomaneverychild.org/accountability/independent-accountability-panel>.

Five Features of Accountability



Source: World Bank 2003.