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Bangladesh

Universal Health Coverage (UHC)



Accelerating Progress on Universal Health Coverage Hinges on Local Level Awareness and Engagement

Health is Transitioning from a Sectoral to a Strategic Agenda

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals have elevated health from a sectoral issue to a strategic, cross-cutting global priority. Four meta-trends have contributed to this: increased threat of new health risks from climate change; unprecedented health consequences of air and water pollution due to unplanned urbanization; epidemiological transition towards non-communicable diseases caused by sedentary lifestyles, stresses of modern living, and shrinking commons spaces; and elevated financial risks for the poor and middle classes alike due to persistently high levels of out-of-pocket spending on health. The convergence of these four meta-trends has also led to the transition of health from a sectoral to a strategic priority in Bangladesh. Against this backdrop, Universal Health Coverage (UHC) has become a potent rallying point for global and national actors charged with shaping policy.

PRERONA: Regional Dialogues for UHC Advocacy

In 2015, USAID's health financing and UHC assessment identified the need to build wider understanding about UHC and how it can be achieved in a given context¹. In Bangladesh, the USAID-funded Health Finance and Governance project (HFG) partnered with the Health Economics Unit (HEU) of

the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to raise awareness about and advance the UHC agenda, in line with HEU's UHC communication strategy². As part of this, HFG partnered with the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), a national-level policy research center with significant cross-sectoral convening capacity and outreach, to undertake an innovative regional-level UHC awareness initiative, *PRERONA: Building Awareness for UHC in Bangladesh – Divisional and Sub-divisional Level UHC Dialogues*. *PRERONA*, meaning "inspiration" in Bangla, was an HFG-supported follow-on to a complementary program at the national level implemented from 2016 to 2017 by the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.

Objectives of the Program

The overall objective of *PRERONA* was to disseminate core UHC messages to regional constituencies while also eliciting grounded ideas about sustainable paths towards realizing UHC goals. This contributed towards HFG's broader objective in Bangladesh – to develop a "critical mass" of informed professionals to progress the UHC agenda.

The specific objectives were to:

- Increase local level awareness about UHC goals and social demand for UHC policies;
- Develop a contextualized and empirically-enriched UHC strategy; and
- Increase policy buy-in for the UHC agenda through cross-sectoral and macro-micro dialogues.

Program Approach

PRERONA consisted of a series of activities implemented between July 2017 and May 2018 in 10 districts and in the capital, Dhaka.

These included:

- Multi-stakeholder district dialogues and civic walks;
- Post-dialogue TV talk shows; and
- A national event to engage selected district dialogue participants as “UHC Champions”.

The program team also conducted reality check visits to schools and health facilities in several districts.

Accomplishments

Program accomplishments from June 2017 to May 2018 included the following:

- Over 2,850 stakeholders participated in the 11 regional multi-stakeholder dialogues, including mayors, councilors, civil surgeons, administrative officials, health professionals (doctors and nurses), civil society representatives, youth representatives, and media persons.
- Over 75 experts and resource persons from over 60 organizations contributed to the 11 regional level dialogues, four TV talk shows, and the national event, “Progressing on UHC – Awareness for Action: Knowledge Exchange, Capacity Building, and Policy Dialogue on Universal Health Coverage”.

“I really appreciate this type of dialogue with the different stakeholders, who can work towards building a healthy society. This “breaking the silence” program will motivate us to work for a healthy society.”

- Taskin Ahmed Chisti, Mayor, Satkhira Municipality

Table 1 : Summary of PRERONA Activities on Raising Awareness about UHC in Bangladesh

Activity	Event date	Number of participants in civic walk			Number of participants in multi-stakeholder dialogue			Number of resource persons ⁱⁱ			
		Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	
1	Regional dialogue on UHC at Bera, Pabna	22 July 2017	137	2	135	341	46	295	6	1	5
2	Regional dialogue on UHC at Jhenaidah	13 Aug 2017	237	56	181	263	77	186	11	1	10
3	Regional dialogue on UHC at Nilphamari	15 Nov 2017	213	114	99	355	95	260	4	0	4
4	Regional dialogue on UHC at Satkhira	28 Nov 2017	180	124	56	195	100	95	6	2	4
5	Regional dialogue on UHC at Sylhet	9 Dec 2017	218	152	66	167	113	54	6	1	5
6	Regional dialogue on UHC at Rangamati	24 Dec 2017	178	102	76	274	76	198	8	1	7
7	Regional dialogue on UHC at Manikganj	30 Dec 2017	213	107	106	281	105	176	12	2	10
8	Regional dialogue on UHC at Noakhali	8 April 2018	220	90	130	177	57	120	12	2	10
9	Regional dialogue on UHC at Patuakhali	16 April 2018	239	137	102	227	137	90	7	0	7
10	Regional dialogue on UHC at Dhaka City	26 April 2018	--	--	--	206	191	15	13	3	10
11	Regional dialogue on UHC at Dhamrai, Dhaka	6 May 2018	216	168	48	145	42	103	7	0	7
1	National event of knowledge exchange, capacity building, and policy dialogue on UHC	21-22 April 2018	--	--	--	266	171	95	20	8	12
1	1 st TV talk show	21 Aug 2017	--	--	--	--	--	--	6	1	5
2	2 nd TV talk show	23 Nov 2017	--	--	--	--	--	--	4	0	4
3	3 rd TV talk show	18 Dec 2017	--	--	--	--	--	--	5	1	4
4	4 th TV talk show	29 Dec 2017	--	--	--	--	--	--	5	1	4
	Total		2051	1052	999	2897	1210	1687	141ⁱ	27	114

ⁱ77 unique experts/resource persons (14 female, 63 male) from over 60 organizations contributed to the dialogues and TV talk shows.

ⁱⁱChannel i's Tritiyo Matra, a popular TV talk show moderator, Zillur Rahman, is not included in the number of experts.

- A leading English-language daily newspaper published an opinion piece about UHC Day 2017 titled, Middle Income Bangladesh has to be Healthy Bangladesh, authored by Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman:
<http://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/society/middle-income-bangladesh-has-be-healthy-bangladesh-1504012>
- The national event was held on April 21-22, 2018 in Dhaka to build the capacity of multi-sectoral Healthy Bangladesh and UHC Champions – eight district teams prepared district action plans and committed to their implementation.
- Over 85 district level journalists were engaged on UHC at the dialogues, and over 85 news articles/reports were published in more than 75 local and national newspapers, including coverage after the national event.

External Media Coverage

Published news articles (as mentioned above), one from each district, include the following:

- “Two-day awareness program started at Bera” – *Daily Prothom Alo* (22 July 2017).
- “Healthy Bangladesh’s district dialogue held in Jhenaidah” – *Daily Dakshin Bangla* (16 August 2017).
- “No alternative to building awareness to realize UHC” – *Daily Dainik Sylhet* (10 December 2017).
- “Citizen dialogue held to build healthy Bangladesh under Prerona program” – *Daily Koborpatro* (16 November 2017).
- “Citizen dialogue and civic walk held at Satkhira” – *Satkhira News* (29 November 2017).
- “Civic walk and dialogue held at Sylhet” – *Daily Jugantor* (10 December 2017).
- “Dialogue on health held at Rangamati” – *Daily Purbadesh* (25 December 2017).
- “Public awareness dialogue held at Manikganj” – *Manikganjer Kagoj* (4 January 2018).
- “Citizen dialogue on Universal Health Coverage by Healthy Bangladesh” – *Daily Amar Sangbad, Patuakhali* (16 April 2018).
- “Experts for community participation to achieve universal health coverage” – *The Independent* (22 April 2018):
<http://www.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/146798>
- “Citizen dialogue on health coverage held at Dhamrai” – *Daily Samakal* (7 May 2018).

“Building awareness on UHC requires us to talk to new partners and new audiences. We also need to go beyond the capital city to the regions and districts. PRERONA has been very innovative in this regard, and I have personally widened my horizon on these issues.”

– Professor Dr. Tahmina Banu, Director, Chittagong Research Institute of Child Surgery

Lessons Learned

Contextualizing the UHC Challenge

The PRERONA regional dialogues highlighted some key contextual specificities. For example, an important phenomenon highlighted during the dialogue in Jhenaidah in south-western Bangladesh was the monopoly on doctor time by medical representatives promoting pharma interests. This impacts on both access and affordability, reducing the availability of doctor-patient time. By imposing a ban on medical representative visits during official hospital hours, the Jhenaidah hospital authority with support of the mayor identified an important reform idea, which holds promise for national replication.



Figure 1: Multi-stakeholder dialogue at Jhenaidah

Catalyzing New Stakeholders for the UHC Agenda

One of the most promising achievements of PRERONA was identifying the need to catalyze urban local governments to fulfill multiple roles, including building momentum for the UHC agenda.

Mobilizing Schools for the Prevention Agenda

An important by-product of PRERONA was the mobilization of schools – secondary and higher secondary – to increase UHC awareness, especially about prevention issues.

The project team found that many girls avoided school during menstruation due to the absence of girl-friendly toilets. Risks of urinary tract infections were widespread for the same reason. Mayors from Satkhira and Jhenaidah have already acted on this urgent need. In addition, the team identified two game-changing agenda items for both boys and girls in relation to schools – the need for increased health and hygiene awareness, and early screening for certain conditions, such as anaemia, eye problems, and dental issues.



Figure 2: Ten districts and the capital, Dhaka, reached to raise awareness about UHC



Figure 3: TV talk show at Channel i's Tritiya Matra, a popular show on contemporary issues.

Development of Locally-Relevant UHC Progress Indicators

An exciting outcome of the dialogues was pinpointing indicators to capture progress on the broader UHC agenda. In Jhenaidah Sadar Hospital and Sylhet Osmani Medical College and Hospital, two key indicators were: 1) marked improvement in the cleanliness of the hospital environment; and 2) positive impact of innovative on-site patient education on streamlining access and preventing unnecessary expenditure. This was a direct achievement of motivated hospital staff and others working effectively together.

Focus on the Social Determinants of Health

A priority issue identified by district dialogues was the multi-dimensional significance of progress towards urban sanitation and its consequences for health. This discovery is very important to the health agenda. Unclean kitchen markets result in unsafe food, while inadequate garbage management exacerbates air and water pollution. Many of the hospitals visited during the regional dialogues highlighted the increasing number of patients with respiratory complaints.

Micro-Innovations Towards Hospital Cost Reduction

Reducing the burden of high out-of-pocket spending on health is a multi-faceted challenge requiring attention to the many encounters where patients incur costs. A positive example identified during the Nilphamari regional dialogue was an initiative by the Diabetic Hospital to access specialist diagnostic opinions about x-rays. The hospital has an x-ray machine but cannot afford a full-time specialist. In the past, patients were advised to travel to the nearby larger town of Rangpur, entailing multiple costs. The hospital has now made arrangements with a service provider in Dhaka, who is accessed through the internet. The x-ray is sent digitally, and the specialist's opinion obtained for a small fee. For patients, this translates into significant cost-savings.

Conclusion

PRERONA activities documented evidence of specific actions taken to advance the UHC agenda, as well as stakeholders' steps towards achieving it. HFG and PPRC will distill this evidence in policy briefs to inform wider action at both national and global levels.

Sustaining UHC Awareness

The national event (described earlier) brought together over 180 stakeholders from eight districts. Part of the purpose was to engage multiple stakeholders as "UHC Champions" to move forward the UHC agenda in Bangladesh. Based on peer learning and discussions among the teams, the UHC Champions developed eight district action plans for further UHC advocacy and action, which is a critical activity towards sustaining UHC awareness.

PRERONA's awareness activities will be meaningful only if they are sustained. An exciting opportunity is the new civic platform – Healthy Bangladesh – which is a multi-partner initiative with the potential to contribute towards the goal of sustainability. Moving forward, PPRC will leverage the Healthy Bangladesh platform to sustain UHC activities on the ground.

References

- ¹ Karen Cavanaugh, Mursaleena Islam, Sweta Saxena, Muhammod Abdus Sabur, and Niaz Chowdhury. 2015. Universal Health Coverage and Health Financing in Bangladesh: Situational Assessment and Way Forward. Washington, DC: USAID.
- ² Health Economics Unit, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. 2014. Communication Strategy for Universal Health Coverage in Bangladesh 2014-2016. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The Health Finance and Governance (HFG) project works with partner countries to increase their domestic resources for health, manage those precious resources more effectively, and make wise purchasing decisions. Designed to fundamentally strengthen health systems, the HFG project improves health outcomes in partner countries by expanding people's access to health care, especially to priority health services. The HFG project is a five-year (2012-2017), \$209 million global project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Cooperative Agreement No: AID-OAA-A-12-00080.

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