

# Community Health and UHC: Progress One-year after the HLM-UHC

### Introduction

In September 2019, [the Political Declaration for Universal Health Coverage \(UHC\)](#) was unanimously adopted by member states at the UN General Assembly. The global community renewed its commitment to achieve UHC and made a promise to secure health access for all and to prioritize hard-to-reach populations. As part of the Political Declaration, member states committed to the scale-up of competent, skilled, and motivated health workers, including community health workers (CHWs). Community-based primary health care (PHC) delivered by a strong frontline health workforce is critical for achieving this goal as it bridges the gap between facilities and a country's hardest-to-reach populations. To deliver optimal outcomes, community health programming must be integrated into national health systems, be financially sustainable and rooted in quality. Community health is essential for pandemic preparedness, remains critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and is the most efficient and equitable way to achieve UHC.

After emerging in late 2019, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which has affected every country worldwide, risks exacerbating existing high burdens on health systems from a rise in communicable diseases associated with millions of preventable deaths every year. The pandemic has introduced great obstacles and intensified existing ones to countries for achieving progress in their commitments to achieve UHC. However, despite these obstacles, many countries have been able to move forward with their commitments. It is clear that controlling the pandemic, strengthening greater global health security and achieving UHC are inextricably linked to robust community health systems.

### Country Updates

In Kenya, the Ministry of Health (MoH) introduced [the Community Health Policy, 2020-2023](#) that is aligned with global commitments, as well as the country's UHC agenda. One main objective of the policy is to "ensure the recruitment and retention of community health human resources for health, including obtaining appropriate numbers and strengthening mechanisms for capacity building and supportive supervision of community health personnel." The MoH is moving forward with multiple other initiatives to strengthen community health in order to achieve UHC, including digitizing the community health information system and prioritizing the community health workforce in COVID-19 response with more than 63,000 CHWs reaching more than 5.5M households with prevention information. During the 2019/2020 financial year, domestic resource allocation for community health was set to the tune of ~\$420,000 for training Community Health Assistants as well as ~\$2.6 million for the set up of new Community Health Units in efforts to increase coverage.

Uganda has made great strides to strengthen community health as a part of UHC efforts. The MoH has institutionalized the community health acceleration tracker, finalized the UHC roadmap and included community health in the health sector development plan. CHWs - or VHTs in Uganda - are also an important part of the COVID-19 response as reflected in the Guidance on Continuity of Essential Health Services During the COVID-19 Outbreak and the COVID-19 Community Health Guidelines.

The Rwandan MoH continues to be a champion of strong community health systems. The MoH is testing whether [community-based management](#) of COVID-19 is feasible as a way to manage the pandemic.

They are at the stage of piloting the model in different districts to see how feasible it is. If the system is to be used, the government will equip CHWs with skills and the necessary protective equipment needed. Rwanda's success has been made possible due to strong leadership for UHC and well-supported health workers, as praised by the [WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom](#).



Uganda CHW Joyce Nassonko, protected with a mask and gloves, provides medication for a new mother during a household visit. Credit: Living Goods

In [Bangladesh](#), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare recruited more than 10,000 new health workers to help with COVID-19 response, the largest recruitment in the country's history. As part of the health workforce, CHWs have been heavily engaged in case identification and monitoring home quarantine. Increased investments in the health workforce including CHWs is critical for progress toward UHC.

The **Zambian National Community Health Strategy (NCHS)** was officially launched in January 2020. The strategy recognizes the critical role community health plays in achieving UHC, and identifies key priorities for the country to strengthen the community health system, including building a motivated, skilled and equitably distributed community health workforce; health systems strengthening; increasing access to services; improving community health information systems; and identifying and supporting innovative community health solutions. The community health strategy has been fully costed and is complemented by a community health investment case.

Ghana recognizes the importance of PHC as a central lever for achieving UHC. The MoH launched 'Ghana's Roadmap for Achieving Universal Health Coverage 2020-2030' in January 2020. With support from the Global Financing Facility of the World Bank, the MoH is currently developing a costed prioritized operational plan that will help implement the roadmap. The Ghana Health Service (the implementation arm of the MoH) unveiled the National PHC Strategy in December 2019, following a 2018 assessment of the 'health' of the country's PHC system.

Community health in **Malawi** is guided by The National Community Health Strategy 2017-2022 (NCHS), which sets Malawi's agenda for community health across stakeholders in order to create a more sustainable, integrated and efficient community health system. The NCHS is in line with the broader health sector strategy, the Health Sector Strategic Plan II 2017-2022 (HSSP II). In response to COVID-19, Malawi has recruited more than 1,600 new CHWs, and has produced community-focused guidance including the "Operational Guide for Community Health Workers on COVID-19 in Malawi" for CHWs responding to COVID-19 at the community level and additional guidance on home-based treatment of COVID-19 patients. Malawi has also announced the first-ever National Community Health Day to take place on October 9th every year, beginning with the inaugural launch on October 9th, 2020.

The campaign will continue to work with our members to organize and support networks to track progress on the commitments to community health and primary health care. CHWs, if equipped and empowered, can play a pivotal role to prevent, monitor and respond to both the current outbreak and future challenges. We must accelerate investments in community health in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Political will is important, but developing implementation strategies and funding plans to achieve UHC are equally so.