

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS HIGHLIGHTED BY THE 13TH MEETING OF THE COMCEC POVERTY ALLEVIATION WORKING GROUP

A policy debate session was held during the 13th Meeting of the Poverty Alleviation Working Group (PAWG). The Working Group came up with some concrete policy recommendations for improving access to health services, especially for the poor, in the OIC and approximating policies among the member countries in this important issue. The policy advices presented below have been identified in light of the main findings of the research report titled “Access to Health Services in the Islamic Countries” and the responses of the Member Countries to the policy questionnaire which was sent by the COMCEC Coordination Office.

Policy Advice 1: Developing a strategy/policy including a well-designed payment and health insurance schemes to achieve universal health coverage.

Rationale:

Access to health services is critical for human beings. However, access to health without having financial risks is even more challenging. In this respect, universal health coverage is an important asset enabling people's, particularly the poor, access to health services without having a risk of facing any financial hardship. To ensure that all people access to quality health services they need, universal health coverage involves services in promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative health services.

For a detailed analysis and to understand the dimensions of universal health coverage, widely monitored indicators such as life expectancy, maternal mortality and under-5 mortality rate need to be carefully examined. As a key indicator, life expectancy at birth signifies how well a country's health system is working in the provision of preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care. Life expectancy at birth has steadily increased for OIC countries over the period. However, the OIC average is still behind the global average. The same situation is observed in maternal mortality and under-5 mortality rates. In all these indicators, the OIC member countries are quite behind the world average. Moreover, the life expectancy achievements vary remarkably across the member countries.

In this context, there is a strong correlation between access to health services and the welfare of citizens. Universal health coverage, by ensuring that all have access to health, is one of the critical components in achieving Sustainable Development Goals and eradicating poverty. As a way of pooling risks and expanding health service coverage, health insurance schemes are needed to be designed carefully.

Policy Advice 2: Strengthening primary healthcare particularly in poorer areas through encouraging skilled health staff to work in rural and remote areas and enhancing integrated health promotion and prevention interventions.

Rationale:

As the cornerstone of health systems worldwide, primary healthcare is fundamental for the physical, psychological and social well-being of the people. Strengthening primary healthcare mechanisms increasingly comes to governments' agenda as global experience proves them successful. However, there are ongoing challenges that affect negatively the health status of communities. Non-communicable diseases are on the rise globally. Ensuring sustainable mechanisms for maternal and child health are still challenging for many countries.

Access to primary health care services is a serious challenge in many OIC countries due to inadequate health infrastructure, physical inaccessibility accompanied by the high out-of-pocket spending and/or inadequate health workforce. In this context, interventions that will ensure cost-effective healthcare service are needed to be considered including encouraging skilled health personnel to provide services in rural and remote areas and enhancing community awareness and integrated primary healthcare (promotive and preventive) mechanisms. Moreover, as the key component of primary healthcare, regular screenings need to be performed.

Policy Advice 3: Promoting the engagement of private sector in the provision of safe and quality healthcare in close partnership with public authorities and with well-designed monitoring mechanisms.

Rationale:

Public financing is crucial to achieve universal health coverage sustainably. In order to ensure financial protection for all people and equitable access to quality health services, the allocation of considerable share in government budget is essential without prejudice to other national plans or priorities. However, considering the budget constraints in many countries, additional domestic resources are needed to be mobilized to achieve universal health coverage. In this manner, private initiatives can play a significant role to complement the public efforts. For example, in order to fill the gaps and shortcomings in public health service delivery (e.g. inadequate human resources and physical infrastructure), the government of Indonesia has started to actively encourage the private sector to contribute to health service delivery. In his framework, the private healthcare providers currently cover up to 60 per cent of health care in Indonesia (in particular hospital care).

On the other hand, there is a need for a well-designed monitoring mechanism. Outdated legislation, lack of enforcement of public health regulations and a widely unregulated private sector may leave consumers unprotected. Therefore, governments would need to put forward effective regulatory schemes to guide private sector and avoid the market failure in order to (i) assess whether private health care services are safe, effective and of good quality, (ii) examine to what extent patients from different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds can access these services and how barriers could be reduced, and (iii) investigate how private health providers affect the larger health system, e.g. with respect to availability of trained health workforce, the extent to which private providers work with relevant public authorities, and how positive links can be strengthened as well as negative impacts can be mitigated.

Policy Advice 4: Encouraging development and upgrade of health information management systems through designing an online-integrated health information system, allocating required resources to health IT infrastructure and strengthening multi-sectoral coordination mechanism.

Rationale:

Monitoring key health data is crucial to identify challenges and priorities in providing quality health services. Strengthening health information systems facilitates planning and allocation of resources as well as contributes to accountable and transparent public health management. Integrated health information systems would enable government officials give sound and timely decisions based on reliable data towards enhancing access to health services.

Many OIC Member Countries face challenges regarding health information management such as reporting quality and timeliness, duplication and fragmentation of data collection as well as lack of rigorous validation within different programmes. Some member countries do not have sufficient registration of births and deaths as well as reporting complete and accurate causes of death is lacking. Therefore, allocating required resources to IT infrastructure to enhance a well-designed health information management system with a special emphasis on the poor is needed to be taken into consideration. In this respect, data analysis, which is made at sub-national level to address pockets of poverty, should be ensured. Moreover, in order to ensure uniformity in aggregating data, collaborating with different stakeholders such as statistical departments, relevant ministries and organizations is crucial to achieve a strong multi-sectoral coordination mechanism.

Instruments to Realize the Policy Advices:

COMCEC Poverty Alleviation Working Group: In its subsequent meetings, the Working Group may elaborate on the above-mentioned policy areas in a more detailed manner.

COMCEC Project Funding: Under the COMCEC Project Funding, the COMCEC Coordination Office issues calls for project proposals each year. With the COMCEC Project Funding, the member countries participating in the Working Groups can submit multilateral cooperation projects to be financed through grants by the COMCEC Coordination Office. For realizing above-mentioned policy recommendations, the member countries can utilize the COMCEC Project Funding facility. These projects may include organization of seminars, training programs, study visits, exchange of experts, workshops and preparation of analytical studies, needs assessments and training materials/documents, etc.