

Challenges for Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in Africa

—What does it take to ensure equitable access and financial protection at the same time?—



On June 1, JICA organized a side event focusing on universal health coverage (UHC) in Africa, at the Intercontinental Yokohama Grand Hotel. The opportunities and challenges of promoting UHC in Africa were discussed. Kiyoshi Kodera, the vice president of JICA, chaired the session.

Although many African countries have witnessed an accelerated reduction of maternal and child mortality in the last decade, most of them still face a challenge in reaching the health-related MDGs. The inter- and intra-country disparity in access to essential health care is emerging as an equity problem. In addition, ensuring financial protection from catastrophic medical bills, especially for the poor, is a challenge not only for Sub-Saharan Africa but also for North African countries. Under these circumstances, UHC is being highlighted as an instrument to ensure human security by protecting people from impoverishment due to medical expenses, which will be a foundation for political stability and sustained economic development. UHC is highly relevant for many African countries that have started remarkable economic growth.

The event started with learning from actual country experiences from Senegal and Ghana, in particular, decentralization of health governance, promotion of new health service delivery models and expansion of health insurance coverage. The presentations were made by Awa Marie Coll Seck, minister of Health and Social Action and Frank Nyonator, former director general of the Ghana Health Service, respectively. Following the country experiences, Prof. Germano Mwabu, from the University of Nairobi, provided an overview of the progress toward UHC in Africa. Feng Zhao, director of the Health Division of the African Development Bank, provided financial policy options for African countries and emphasized the importance of mobilizing financial resources and improvement of financial accountability for UHC. Tomohiko Sugishita, senior advisor for JICA, emphasized the importance of strengthening health systems management through capacity development of health officers, as increases in financial resources alone will not be sufficient. The participants in the seminar commented actively during the discussion session, which included: the necessity of integration of preventive and promotion activities in UHC, the necessity of quality improvement of health service along with the expansion of health insurance coverage, and the importance of mobilizing financial resources by African governments, avoiding excessive reliance on the development partners. In the conclusion of the seminar, three prominent global health leaders, namely, Margaret Chan, director general of the World Health Organization (WHO),

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Babatunde Osotimehin, executive director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Keizo Takemi, Japanese Upper House parliamentarian, provided their remarks, stressing the critical role of national leaders and the catalytic role of development partners. While emphasizing the need for context-specific approaches, it was pointed out that the experiences of Japan in the past 50 years should have relevant lessons to African countries. Finally, Yuko Obuchi, senior vice minister of Finance in Japan, expressed her personal focus on the health of mothers and children and her determination that Japan will continuously and more proactively work with the African countries and other development partners for the creation of a healthy and safe society in Africa. Announcement was made that health is now a new priority sector for JICA's ODA loan, for which more concessional lending terms can be applied.

Throughout the event, the importance of strong political leadership in African countries was emphasized. JICA will continue to work with visionary African leaders and other partners for the achievement of UHC in Africa.

Keynote:

- Awa Marie Coll SECK, Minister of Health and Social Action, Senegal
- Frank NYONATOR, former Director General of the Ghana Health Service, Ghana

Presentations:

- Germano MWABU, School of Economics, University of Nairobi, Kenya
- Feng ZHAO, Manager, Health Division, Human Development Department, African Development Bank
- Tomohiko SUGISHITA, Senior Advisor (Health), JICA

Conclusion:

- Margaret CHAN, Director General, World Health Organization
- Babatunde OSOTIMEHIN, Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund
- Keizo TAKEMI, Japanese Upper House Parliamentarian

Closing remarks:

- Yuko OBUCHI, Senior Vice Minister of Finance, Government of Japan

Chair:

- Kiyoshi KODERA, Vice President, JICA