

In Japan, UN chief spotlights power of universal health coverage to unlock economic growth

14 December 2017 – Health is everyone’s right and a driver of economic development, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres stressed Thursday, expressing the UN’s readiness to help countries move towards health coverage for all.

“Our goal must be to protect and promote [physical and mental well-being](#) for all. Health is both an outcome and a driver of progress,” Mr. Guterres told the global Universal Health Coverage Forum 2017, currently taking place in Tokyo, Japan.

“It is at the centre of our vision of a more sustainable, inclusive and prosperous future [...] When we invest in health – particularly of women and adolescents – we build more inclusive and resilient societies,” he added.

Commending Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s announcement of \$2.9 billion to fund universal health coverage programmes in developing countries, the UN chief acknowledged Japan for being one of the first countries to demonstrate the power of universal health coverage, achieving it in 1961 and unlocking economic growth for the decades that followed.

Next September marks the 40th anniversary of the Alma Alta Declaration, which famously set out a goal of achieving health for all.

Mr. Guterres said that targeted investments in recent decades led to major progress on a variety of health challenges.

“More women have access to modern contraception. Vaccination levels are up. More people living with HIV have access to anti-retrovirals. More people at risk of malaria are sleeping under an insecticide-treated nets. And an end to diseases such as polio is within sight,” he said.

However, gross inequities continue to leave the most vulnerable behind. For too many, health is inaccessible, unaffordable or altogether unavailable. Out-of-pocket spending on health causes an estimated 100 million people to fall below the poverty line every year.

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UN Secretary-General Guterres

Furthermore, new threats, such as antimicrobial resistance, the impacts of climate change and the spread of non-communicable diseases, have emerged.

All of this will require more integrated health systems capable of responding effectively and equitably to the unique needs of their communities, he said.

Noting that every \$1 spent on health yields up to \$20 in full-income growth within a generation, Mr. Guterres stressed the critical importance of political commitment to unlocking these investments.

“There is of course no one-size-fits-all solution, and each country must walk its own path toward universal health coverage,” he said, pledging UN support in that regard.

“Just as peace is not simply the absence of conflict, so is health not just the lack of illness. Our goal is not only a band-aid or a single dose of medicine, important as those are. Our goal must be overall well-being, physically and mentally for everyone in all countries,” he concluded.

The Secretary-General will convene a General Assembly high-level meeting on universal health coverage in 2019.