Supplement article

Editorial

South Sudan’s road to universal health coverage: a slow but steady journey

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Abstract

Amidst the myriad of challenges that constrain good quality health care services delivery in the World’s youngest nation, South Sudan, there is a beacon of hope. The country’s revitalized peace agreement offers a new impetus for rebuilding the country, including its health system. Key achievements in the health care sector of the country such as development and implementation of a health sector strategic and health sector stabilization and recovery plans and implementation of a Boma Health Initiative programme which aims to scale up health services delivery at the community level provide a foundation on which acceleration of universal health coverage could rest. Other key achievements include polio-free certification of the country, significant reductions in the prevalence of Guinea Worm and other neglected tropical diseases and timely detection and response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. Moving forward, attainment of universal health coverage in the country requires a strong and people-centred primary healthcare approach which will ensure that services reach the last mile. Bridging the humanitarian-development nexus is required to ensure accelerated recovery of the country’s health system. Furthermore, scaling up of community-based health initiatives such as the Boma Health Initiative as platforms for taking good quality health services to the hard-to-reach areas is imperative. This Journal Supplement highlights the key achievements and challenges on the road to universal health coverage in South Sudan and provides evidence-based information for rapidly scaling up health services provision.
Editorial

Universal Health Coverage (UHC), a flagship target of the third Sustainable Development Goal (SDG3), is a situation where all persons have access to the required quality health services as at when and where they need them without having to encounter any financial barrier in doing so [1]. Three key elements are paramount for the attainment of UHC, namely availability of essential health services, including health promotion, curative and preventive services, good quality of and financial access to the health services [1]. South Sudan, the youngest nation globally, does not meet any of the three key elements of UHC. Inheriting a rudimentary health system at independence in 2011, the country has struggled to provide access to good quality health services to its people [2]. This is due to a major dearth of health care workers, non-functional supply chain management system for essential medicines and medical supplies, weak health coordination and oversight system which limits access to basic healthcare services [3]. Furthermore, the less than 3% of its GDP which is allocated to the health sector and out of pocket spending on health of over 50% is inadequate to fund healthcare services delivery in the country [4]. Thus, most of the available health care services are primarily provided by national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which are largely funded externally [5].

The public health articles in this journal provide evidence for rapid implementation of the foregoing recommendations. The successes, challenges and recommendations for advancing the public health agenda in the country in thematic areas such as health emergency preparedness and response, immunization including polio eradication, prevention and control of neglected tropical diseases are presented and discussed. For instance, the lessons learnt from the successful implementation of essential health programmes such as the polio eradication initiative which are presented could be used to guide stabilization and recovery of the country’s health system towards achieving UHC.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions

The first draft of the editorial was conceptualized and written by O. The authors read and provided inputs into all drafts of the manuscript, agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work and approved the final draft of the editorial for publication.

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