

A5. Need for strong health systems with emphasis on primary health care

A comprehensive strategy to transform health systems with the primary health-care approach (25) and commitment to the principles of equity, non-discrimination and universality are crucial to achieving UHC. Primary health care is an approach to health and well-being based on the needs and circumstances of individuals, families and communities. It addresses comprehensive, interrelated physical, mental and social health and well-being. It provides whole-person care for health needs throughout life, not just treatment of specific diseases, as close as feasible to people’s everyday environment (13).

The WHO definition of primary health care (13) has three components:

1. ensuring that people’s health problems are addressed with comprehensive promotive, protective, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care throughout the life course, strategically prioritizing key system functions for individuals and families and the population as central elements of integrated service delivery at all levels of care;
2. systematically addressing the broader determinants of health (including social, economic, environmental factors, as well as people’s characteristics and behaviour) through evidence-informed public policies and actions in all sectors; and
3. empowering individuals, families and communities to optimize their health as advocates for policies to promote and protect health and well-being, as co-developers of health and social services through their participation and as self-carers and caregivers to others.

A strong primary health care system is essential for UHC and the most cost-effective way to address the population’s health needs comprehensively. It provides a platform for integrating services for communicable and noncommunicable diseases and also those for specific populations such as women and children, which are often provided in silos.

Table 1 lists the key attributes and corresponding domains for strengthening health systems towards UHC (26).

Table 1. Health system attributes and actions for achieving UHC

Health system attribute	Action domain for achieving UHC
Quality	Regulations and regulatory environment Effective, responsive individual and population-based services Individual, family and community engagement
Efficiency	System design to meet population needs

	Incentive for appropriate provision and use of services
	Managerial efficiency and effectiveness
Equity	Financial protection
	Service coverage and access
	Non-discrimination
Accountability	Government leadership and rule of law for health
	Partnerships for public policy
	Transparency, monitoring and evaluation
Sustainability and resilience	Public health preparedness
	Community capacity
	Health system adaptability and sustainability

Source: Adapted from reference 26

Globally, there has been clear commitment to the priority of primary health care (as reflected in the Astana Declaration (25)) and a clear shift to increased budgetary support for primary health care in the context of UHC as noted in the 2018 WHO report on health financing (27).