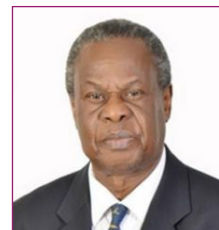


# Opportunities and Challenges for the Radical Reorientation of Primary Health Care

My take home from the UN General Assembly (UNGA 78); 21 – 26 September, 2023



World leaders gathered to engage in the annual high-level General Debate of The UN General Assembly (UNGA 78) 21 – 26 September, 2023 in New York. The theme was, “Rebuilding trust and reigniting global solidarity: Accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) towards peace, prosperity, progress and sustainability for all.” Heads of State and Government adopted a political declaration to guide action moving forward.

I participated as an invited speaker in Panel 1 during UNGA 78 which convened three High-Level Meetings on health. It was a historic opportunity for world leaders to place health back on the high-level political agenda as they recommitted to ending tuberculosis (TB), delivering Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and strengthening pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.

It was noted with concern during UNGA 78 that at the current mid-point towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world is off track to achieve the health targets by 2030. Millions of people cannot access life-saving and health-enhancing interventions. Out-of-pocket spending on health catastrophically affects over 1 billion people, pushing hundreds of millions of people into extreme poverty. The situation has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and is compounded further by multiple humanitarian and climate crises as well as political divisions and conflicts within and among countries. All these make upholding the human right to health and building sustainable health systems an uphill task.

Panel 1 which was on “Universal Health Coverage: Expanding our ambition for health and well-being in post-COVID world” brought together Member States and observers of the General Assembly, the UN system, parliamentarians, nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions and the private sector. The panel was co-chaired by the Health Ministers of Sweden and Kenya with four speakers. It focused on the importance of the Primary Health Care (PHC) approach in achieving UHC. Discussions advocated for the value of engaging with patients and communities in order to promote health access and prevent health emergencies. Innovative solutions to the integration of primary health care across the SDGs were highlighted.

It should be noted that the SDGs were adopted by UNGA in 2015 and are applicable to all UN member states following a consultative process after the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals which targeted certain countries and were handed down for implementation. In 2019 UNGA debated the health agenda and called for radical orientation of health systems to PHC and UHC. Building on these previous commitments, UNGA 78 in 2023, focused on “Why the PHC approach matters and

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how to accelerate progress”.

It has been demonstrated in multiple studies that PHC works and is the only available approach that is able to reach all people where they live and work and using available resources. PHC is also able to build links and to support the higher-level health system. It is a gross failure of the global community that the calls of UNGA 2019 for radical orientation to PHC and UHC have not received the visibility and support that it needs. It is therefore the reason for UNGA 2023 to advocate and recommit to the 2019 call for radical orientation to PHC and UHC.

Bruce Aylward, the WHO Assistant Director General stated that “What they’re really putting the emphasis on is the fundamental need for UHC to make us more resilient – as communities and societies, as countries – to threats such as pandemics going forward but as well as others.” Aylward further stated that “they’ve really been focusing on three key things to achieve that”. These are equity that gets to everyone with full participation of communities themselves, funding the community health systems and addressing the needed PHC workforce.



**Prof. Omaswa with Colleagues at UNGA**

An impediment to the radical orientation to PHC and UHC is the historical baggage when these were misunderstood and were perceived as an attack on the medical establishment and utopian. It was confused with an exclusive focus on first-level care. For some, it looked cheap; poor care for poor people, a second-rate solution for the developing world. The key message of PHC approach however, is to place particular emphasis on local ownership and community participation. In doing so, it honours the resilience and ingenuity of our humanity and the human spirit and makes space for solutions created, owned and sustained by communities themselves.

During my statement to the Panel 1, I confirmed that PHC and UHC is the only way forward to achieve health related SDGs, that health is the purpose and outcome of all other SDGs and that acceleration is possible by radical shifts to people participation, community ownership and individual responsibility and participation as a duty and a right. The whole of government and whole of society approach with compassion and humanity through Intersectoral action. Above all, I appealed to all the delegates to UNGA 78 to recommit and return home not to business as usual but to be leaders and change agents in a renewed global movement to transform health systems towards PHC and UHC and for the UN family to monitor progress and report annually.