

Age International Response to the 2023 High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage

On **21 September 2023**, Heads of State, policy makers and civil society gathered together at the **United Nations** in New York for the High-Level Meeting (HLM) on **Universal Health Coverage** (UHC).

This meeting set an agenda for world governments and other stakeholders to work towards achieving health systems that meet the needs of all people. This commitment is captured in a Political Declaration that was agreed by all UN Member States.

The Meeting marks the halfway point towards implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 3.8, which aims to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030.

4.5 billion people are not covered by essential health services, according to the recent progress report on UHC.

For older people, UHC is particularly significant. Current health systems often fail to adequately address the unique and diverse needs of older people, leaving many without proper care and support. This not only infringes on the rights of older people but also affects the families and communities that rely on them.

There is also a notable increase in reference to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), with an emphasis on the continuum of care, including prevention and screening. Moreover, mental health has emerged as an integrated aspect within NCD management, with specific mentions of dementia and psychosocial disabilities.

The Declaration establishes stronger connections between UHC and the broader

SDGs. This includes the connections between food security and health, as well as heightened attention to climate change and its profound impacts on health, particularly affecting those residing in low- and middle-income countries.

During the HLM, the UK Government was represented in part by the Secretary for Health and Social Care Will Quince. He delivered comments on the importance of reorienting health systems towards primary health care. He highlighted the need to listen to communities who are asking for the basics, and for political leadership to be used to unlock partnerships with communities to deliver a multisectoral approach that is needed to radically re-orient health systems towards primary health care.

This Declaration sees steadfast recognition of healthy and active ageing while addressing the growing needs of the rapidly ageing population. Notably, it places greater emphasis on ageing and older people, and includes long-term care and support.

Additionally, it continues to highlight health across the life course, underlining the importance of the health sector's pursuit of life course approaches. This is further enriched by the recognition of hearing loss and integration of assistive technologies throughout the text.



However, it was disheartening that the UK government did not demonstrate its full political commitment to this agenda for the whole meeting. Despite the High-Level Meeting being attended by Heads of State like the Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak did not attend any of the UN events in New York and the lack of a UK ministerial intervention at the main session on Universal Health Coverage were missed opportunities for the Government to reaffirm its commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, universal health coverage and health equity.

What is important now is how governments, such as the UK, and the multilateral system implement the commitments from the High-Level Meeting. We are currently in the UN Decade of Health Ageing which is an ideal opportunity to galvanise awareness and action to ensure that healthy ageing is incorporated into development work worldwide. The UK Government recognises ageing populations as a demographic trend, including in their Health Systems Strengthening Position Paper and Disability Strategy. Including older people in their follow-up to the HLM and health systems strengthening work is key to ensuring these commitments are reached equitably.

Specifically, we welcome

- **Strong language on ageing populations and their accompanying health needs** and increased inclusion of older people throughout the text. The Declaration shows continued recognition of healthy and active ageing and recognition of the growing need of the rapidly ageing population. Older people's health needs are recognised across the full continuum, including long-term care and support and palliative care.
- **The continued emphasis on health across the life course**, and the new reference to the importance of the health sector pursuing life course approaches.
- **Increased reference to NCDs:** Reference to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are notable, with an emphasis on the continuum of care, including prevention and screening.
- **Expanded commitment to Primary Health Care (PHC) as the cornerstone for UHC:** the Declaration increases connections to PHC throughout the text and recognises the fundamental role of PHC in achieving UHC and other SDGs, for all across the life course.
- **Increased and more integrated references to mental health:** Mental health comes out stronger and is integrated within NCD management, and the inclusion of dementia and psychosocial disabilities is particularly positive.
- **Increased connections between universal health coverage and wider SDGs**, including food security, and greater reference to malnutrition in all its forms. This is important in the context of growing food insecurity, particularly among older individuals whose nutritional needs are often deeply complex and susceptible to the consequences of malnutrition.
- **The addition of assistive technologies throughout the text**, with recognition of their place in the full range of health services. This is an important step in recognising the intersecting challenges faced by many older people and people with disabilities, as well as making progress in helping older people and people with disabilities improve their independence.
- **Continued commitment to training and development of the health workforce** and ensuring training is sensitive to the specific health needs of groups including older people and people with disabilities. Currently, health worker training often excludes the unique health needs of older individuals, leading to inadequate care and interventions that fail to address age-related health challenges.
- **Significant emphasis on climate change and its impacts on health**, particularly for those living in low- and middle-income countries. The 2023 Political Framework's heightened attention to climate change and its health impacts is a

positive step, particularly in the context of ageing. The emphasis on fostering health in climate adaptation efforts and resilient, people-centred health systems is crucial for safeguarding the wellbeing of ageing populations.

- **Increased commitment to healthy and active ageing.** The Declaration highlights the Proclamation of the current Decade

Missed opportunities

- **Setting ambitious, specific financial and action-oriented commitments** for governments to invest in health. While the Declaration calls for the need to increase PHC spending by 5%, it could have gone further to specify specific targets for health investment, including for better alignment with national disease burdens such as NCDs.
- **Committing to training of health care workers** to provide quality of care across the life course. The recent Declaration has lost language linking training of health workers to the life course approach. Executing training explicitly through a life course approach is vital because it empowers healthcare professionals to address the unique health needs and challenges faced by individuals at every stage of life, ultimately enhancing health outcomes.
- **Recognising and responding to unpaid health and care workers.** While the Declaration recognises the importance of community-based health services and need to properly incentivise and compensate health workers, the Declaration could have gone further by recognising the huge burden of unpaid health and care work – by community health volunteers and carers who are disproportionately women – and commit to supporting their training and compensation.
- **Including assistive technology in addition to ‘full range of health services’** required in emergency and humanitarian situations. During humanitarian crises, older people and people with disabilities often lose access to their assistive technology, alongside other health services. Therefore, it would have been helpful to include age-friendly assistive technology in emergency response planning.
- **Removing discriminatory age-caps in health data and programming** and include older people when addressing NCD and SRHR. There is often a lack of recognition that NCDs can affect all ages, and further, that there are many opportunities across the life course to prevent and manage NCDs through the right healthcare provision and policies. Despite this commitment to all ages, we are concerned that NCD targets still discriminate against older people through their age-cap excluding those over 70 from data and programming. Similarly, older people are often excluded from sexual, reproductive health and rights (SRHR) efforts which cater to people of ‘reproductive age’, and commitment should have been made that ensures SRHR for all ages.
- **Including older people’s nutritional needs in relation to food insecurity and malnutrition.** Currently, the Declaration’s commitments regarding food insecurity refers specifically to those who are pregnant and lactating, women of reproductive age and adolescent girls. With many older people experiencing severe food insecurity and malnutrition in different forms, commitments to UHC and food insecurity could be strengthened by mentioning older people’s diverse nutrition needs.

of Healthy Ageing which reaffirms the importance of extending coverage of health services to all older people.

- **Continued importance of the role of communities in health systems**, including community health workers and community engagement, and need to scale up training of community health workers.



What the UK government should do next

The Declaration demonstrates a positive and progressive shift towards addressing the health and well-being of older persons comprehensively. What is crucial now is how the UK government intends to put their commitments from this High-Level Meeting into action. Now that governments, including the UK, have recommitted to UHC that highlights older people and the growing health needs of ageing populations, it is essential that this declaration kickstarts progress for the post-HLM phase.

Historically, the UK government played a leading role in creating the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as being a firm advocate for the principle to ‘leave no one behind’. Universal health coverage is the best way to deliver on this. In the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh the government reaffirms that progress towards the SDGs is a thematic priority, with health being noted as a key area to accelerate progress. But in order for the UK to reach SDG3’s aims for health and wellbeing for all at all ages, older people must be included.

Recommendations

- **Ensure that UK global health and UHC policy and programming explicitly includes the rights of older people** and responds to the changing health needs of ageing populations. The new Declaration makes significant progress in overall greater recognition and references to ageing and older people. Ageing populations and their accompanying health needs must also emerge as a strong contextual trend that the UK’s global health work responds to.
- **Build commitments to UHC and ageing populations into the forthcoming White Paper on international development.** The upcoming UK Government White Paper presents a key opportunity to support strengthening health systems to prepare for population ageing.

By 2050, 80% of older people will be in low and middle-income countries.

This does not just affect health but is a core contextual factor to achieving sustainable

development, like climate change, that needs to be accounted for in the Government’s future strategy.

- **Ensure that primary health care is accessible, affordable, and appropriate for older people.** The UK government has shown its commitment to UHC and Health Systems Strengthening and has embraced a strong PHC, community-based approach. Given the UK’s support of PHC, it is essential that this is delivered in a way that meets the needs of people of all ages, including older people who face numerous barriers in accessing basic and appropriate health services.
- **Scale up investment and programming to tackle NCDs,** through strengthened prevention, management and treatment across the life course. The UK Government’s approach to global health must take full account of the challenges that NCDs pose for people of all ages in low and middle-income countries. It is disconcerting that some key targets of SDG3 pertaining to NCDs and mental health have been omitted from the UK’s Global Health Framework. It is essential that the UK supports national government

partners to respond to the overwhelming health burden that NCDs represent. The UK can also challenge the discriminatory practice of setting age-capped targets in capturing data and programming of NCDs, to ensure that older people’s health needs and rights are included.

- **Invest in mental health and wellbeing, including for conditions commonly affecting older people,** and ensure it is integrated within UHC and PHC. The UK’s approach to global health and health system strengthening must explicitly include references to mental health, including dementia, psychosocial disabilities, and depression. Comprehensive, integrated mental health care that is inclusive of older people should be part of the Governments approach to PHC. The benefits of community-led care and support groups such as Older People’s Associations (OPAs) should be maximised, alongside community-level awareness of mental health and interventions to decrease stigma.
- **Invest in integrated, community-based approaches to health and social care** that recognise the interaction between achieving health outcomes and the provision of long-term care services for the individual, family and community. Adapting to the reality of

longer lifespans requires a continuum of care that includes health and social care. As recognised by both the UK’s Health Systems Strengthening Position Paper and Global Health Framework, countries need to adapt to ageing populations with greater health and social care needs. The UK should support partner governments to invest in community-based long-term care and support, such as through the World Health Organisation’s ‘Integrated Care for Older People’ (ICOPE) programme.

- **Align efforts to achieve UHC and the SDGs with the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing.** The Political Declaration notes the Proclamation of the current Decade of Healthy Ageing, which reaffirms the importance of extending health services to all older persons. In addition, the UK’s Disability Strategy commits the UK to age-inclusive health in international development and UHC that takes into account the needs of older people. With renewed commitments from governments at the SDG Summit to scale up efforts to meet the SDGs, including SDG3 for ‘health and wellbeing for all at all ages’, these all present key opportunities for the UK to lead on UHC that is inclusive of people of all ages in order to meet these commitments.

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