Advancing Social Participation for Universal Health Coverage

Building support for a resolution at the 77th World Health Assembly

This advocacy brief has been developed to guide civil society actions towards building support for a WHA resolution on social participation in the decision-making process for health in countries. The brief provides background information, key advocacy asks and identifies milestones in the lead up to the 77th World Health Assembly taking place in May 2024, including the three UN high-level meetings on health in September 2023.

Making the case for social participation and a WHA resolution

Defining social participation for universal health coverage
Social participation relates to the empowerment of people, communities and civil society to participate in - and thereby influence - decision-making processes for health. It can happen across all levels of the health system (community, district, regional, national levels etc.). Social participation is at the heart of the inclusive governance needed for countries to make progress towards universal health coverage (UHC) and be better prepared for health emergencies, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

A global movement for social participation
Since the launch of the WHO Handbook on Social Participation for UHC in 2021, there has been growing political leadership among Member States on social participation, including at the regional level through references in WHO Regional Committee resolutions. This agenda is also supported by a range of actors, in particular civil society, who engaged in dialogues with the WHO Director-General in 2021 and continue to participate in consultations. At a recent World Health Assembly (WHA) side event in May 2023, various Member States announced their intention to pursue a resolution on institutionalizing social participation at the WHO Executive Board and WHA in 2024.

Social participation has been identified as a priority action area in the Action Agenda from the UHC Movement which was developed by an inclusive, multi-stakeholder Task Force led by UHC2030, and informed by a public consultation which gathered 830 responses from over 100 countries.
Action Area 6: Move together towards universal health coverage includes the following priority actions: champion participatory, inclusive governance and coordinate a meaningful whole-of-society approach for universal health coverage and health security; institutionalize mechanisms for inclusive health governance and adopt policy frameworks that enable and resource social participation; and promote trust and transparency by strengthening accountability in health governance.
The Action Agenda has been widely shared with government officials ahead of the United Nations High-Level Meeting on UHC to be held during the 78th General Assembly on 21 September 2023. It will inform the outcome document of the meeting.

Our collective objectives
Our goal is to make social participation in health a political priority for decision makers in 2023 and to ensure its translation into a resolution at the 77th WHA in 2024. This resolution should have strong language about priority actions to ensure that the voices of vulnerable and marginalized communities are empowered to influence the decisions that are made, through institutionalizing meaningful social participation mechanisms at all levels of the health system in countries. A resolution will commit Member

States to accelerate actions toward strengthening and institutionalizing social participation in health in their countries and to monitor progress. It will also serve as a basis and critical tool for civil society to hold governments accountable.

Building on the momentum created during the recently concluded 76th World Health Assembly in May 2023, we will continue to work together to ensure that social participation remains on top of the agenda at key moments and events in 2023. In particular, we will work to secure strong references in the political declarations of the High-Level Meetings on UHC, Tuberculosis and Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response at the 78th UN General Assembly.

Our key asks for the WHA resolution

Key actions for Member States to move towards institutionalizing social participation include:

- Investing adequate, stable and predictable **financial resources** to support social participation with particular emphasis on marginalized and vulnerable groups.
- Building government **capacities** to design and implement meaningful participation and facilitating the capacity strengthening of populations, communities and civil society, which may involve legal reforms to empower civil society and communities.
- Establishing and/or strengthening spaces for **sustained regular participation**, including necessary legal and institutional arrangements.
- **Monitoring and using data routinely** to evaluate participatory processes and their impact on decisions made – request WHO to lead a consultative process to produce a monitoring framework for social participation, including civil society and communities in these processes.

Mobilizing political support for a WHA Resolution at national and global levels

At national level
- **Identify the relevant focal points** for your country:
  - Within the Ministry of Health (at capital level), including delegations attending the UNGA High-Level Meetings in September 2023, and the WHO Executive Board (EB) in January 2024, and the WHA in May 2024.
  - Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the delegations attending the UNGA High-Level Meetings in September 2023, and the WHO Executive Board (EB) in January 2024, and the WHA in May 2024, as well as the focal points for health within the country's missions in New York and Geneva.
  - Confirm whether your country is a member of the WHO Executive Board and who the representative is. If your country is on the EB, they can be instrumental in endorsing a resolution to go through to the WHA.
- **Lobby the various key actors** to convey key messages and ensure they will be included in the country positions for global moments, including the UNGA High-Level Meetings in 2023, and the EB/WHA in 2024.
  - Key processes include:

- Drafting and negotiating the political declarations of the UNGA High-Level Meetings in 2023.
- Drafting and negotiating a WHA resolution (c. September 2023-January 2024).
- Endorsing the WHA resolution at the EB in January 2024 and the WHA in May 2024.
- Building awareness and support at the national level for your country to champion social participation/community engagement in international agreements (including the political declarations of the UNGA High-Level Meetings and the WHA resolution), and to follow-up on implementation.

  o Activities for civil society include:
  - Send a letter and/or organize a meeting with key focal points to share key messages and asks on social participation.
  - Ask relevant focal points to support and possibly co-sponsor a WHA resolution on social participation.

At global level

- Mobilize international networks/coalitions to support this advocacy and convey messaging on institutionalizing social participation:
  o Send a letter to the WHO Director-General requesting him to champion social participation.
  o Include social participation in statements in health-related High-level meetings at UNGA in September 2023.
  o Make sure that members of the WHO Civil Society Commission champion this agenda in that space.
  o Include social participation in constituency statements at the WHO Executive Board meeting in 2024.
- Disseminate and feed into the global online survey to shape the social participation technical background paper (links below – NB deadline is 25th June 2023).

Reference materials

- Advocacy video on social participation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utgntj64kMI
- Technical Background Paper: https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/social-participation-for-uhc-technical-background-paper
- Survey: https://forms.microsoft.com/e/XGTc6KLnBb
- WHO Handbook: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240027794

Annex: Key messages on social participation

- Institutionalizing social participation is a **win-win** with the potential to produce more equitable and responsive health policies and programmes, fostering trust with the population, and promoting inclusion, transparency, accountability and resilience in the health system.

Primary Health Care, universal health coverage, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):
- Social participation is a core component of primary health care, as a means to empower people and communities. As per the Declaration of Alma Ata (1978), it is the right and duty of people to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care. This was reiterated in 2018 in the Astana Declaration, with a commitment to enable communities and individuals to identify their health needs and participate in the planning and delivery of services.
- UHC is a noble goal to ensure all people receive good quality health services that they need without financial hardship. As countries make steps to move towards UHC, difficult policy choices must be made and the perspectives and lived experiences of people should help to inform those decisions. Participatory processes can shape policies and plans to be more responsive to people's needs and increase population uptake of health services.
- Member states have committed to SDG 16.7: "Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels".

Equity & leave no one behind:
- To reach *all* people with the quality health services they need, the voices of the most marginalized communities must be heard. Social participation can be a way to address power imbalances and promote inclusion, empowering the voices of vulnerable communities to influence more equitable health policies and plans.

Resilience & trust:
- As the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed, population trust is an essential component of an effective response – with both more appropriate and responsive public health interventions and more compliance among the population. Establishing trust takes time, so it is crucial to establish, strengthen and institutionalize mechanisms for social participation during times of normality so that this trust can be built, and these mechanisms can be leveraged when an emergency happens.

Health system accountability:
- Social participation can empower populations and marginalized communities with information, giving them the opportunity to voice their needs and concerns and interrogate decisions made that affect their health and access to quality health services, which can make the health system more transparent and accountable.