

A Momentous Week for Access to Medicines

by TIM REED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This week, in New York, World leaders joined together to adopt a [UN Political Declaration](#) on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in what has been billed a landmark commitment to improve health and wellbeing of billions around the world by 2030.

There is absolutely no doubt that commitments at this level, including mechanisms to ensure no one suffers financial hardship as a result of paying out-of-pocket for healthcare, and that ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services and reproductive rights, are welcome and bode well for the achievement the Sustainable Development Goals. It doesn't come a moment too soon, as a [UN report](#) released ahead of the declaration has warned that progress is being made, but not fast enough to achieve the 2030 target.

The declaration also gives hope in its references to quality and affordable access to medicines, including through improved transparency and reaffirming TRIPS flexibilities. We will and must continue to stress that there can be no UHC without universal medicines coverage. While one third of the world's population still lack access to quality-assured and affordable essential medicines, this will remain the case. This is not just an issue of the Global South. Health systems in the North are also coming under increased pressure from ever-more expensive medicines entering the market.

Interesting in this respect is the appeal, also at the UN, from Dutch Health Minister, Bruno Bruins, who has [called on other countries](#) to participate in the International Horizon Scanning Initiative. This proposal, jointly initiated by the Netherlands and Belgium, is intended as a means to ensure affordable access by working together to identify new medicines coming to the market, looking at how effective they are, and jointly negotiating to keep prices down. This could be just one tool at the disposal of governments, but is nevertheless an interesting one to improve access to affordable medicines, and move towards the goal of UHC.

Meanwhile, in between all the political chaos in the UK, Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn made a quite extraordinary [announcement](#). He has pledged to issue compulsory licenses where the National Health Service is faced by unaffordable prices offered by pharma companies. What's more, Corbyn says the party will create a publicly owned generics manufacturer, which could go much further and finally recognise medicines manufacturing as part of the NHS. Added to this, the Labour party commits to 'actively support other countries around the world to make use of TRIPS flexibilities' and to explore alternative models of innovation based on delinkage. Two things which we too wholeheartedly support, for which we have advocated, and for which we receive credit in the [strategy](#).

However much we welcome what has come this week (and it's only Wednesday!), we must ensure that 'Health for all' and 'UHC' aren't just meaningless slogans or buzzwords. They must be transposed into real action and protected as we move towards tangible outcomes. The UN declaration and the pledges made can either sit on the shelf gathering dust, or can work to make a difference. Governments and lawmakers now have that power in their own hands. They can choose to keep talking, or they can act on their own commitments to ensure the highest attainable level of health. For everyone. Everywhere.

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