World Health Organization

Tackling corruption to move towards universal health coverage and health security

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In Paragraph 22 of the 2019 Resolution on Universal Health Coverage (A/RES/74/2), the United Nations General Assembly recognized corruption as a serious barrier to resource mobilization and allocation, undermining efforts to achieve universal health coverage (UHC). In Paragraph 56, the resolution called for Member States to prioritize the fight against corruption in order to build effective, accountable, transparent and inclusive institutions that can enable health for all.

However, where efforts have been made, they are insufficient. Corruption and poor governance continue to subvert progress to UHC and prevent systems from responding to population needs, as demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. There remains an urgent need to increase technical and financial investments to fight corruption at all levels.

Key messages

- Anti-corruption, transparency and accountability (ACTA) considerations should be incorporated into health system strengthening (HSS) efforts. Commitments to work towards strengthened accountability and transparency should be considered for inclusion in the resolution of the UN High-Level Meeting on UHC.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that corruption claims 7.3% of all health spending worldwide. When considering pre-COVID-19 levels of health financing, this equates to approximately US$ 455 billion – considerably more than the estimated US$ 370 billion per annum needed to achieve UHC.

- The health of people that are already disadvantaged – including women, those living in poverty and those living with disabilities – is disproportionately affected by corruption.

- Evidence shows that in countries where there are high rates of bribery, there are also high rates of maternal and child mortality, with an estimated 140 000 child deaths annually being attributed to corruption and waste.

- Access to HIV/AIDS testing and care is undermined by corruption and the misappropriation of funds, thus preventing the achievement of SDG3.3 and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS' 95-95-95 targets.

- Corruption can undermine medical product regulation, be a product of and contribute to disruptions in supply chains, lead to overprescribing and irrational use of medical products and contribute to antimicrobial resistance.

- Corruption not only causes severe financial waste and perpetuates human suffering and health emergencies, but also undermines the trust that underpins effective, accountable and inclusive health systems and national institutions.

- Adequate and effective prevention, detection and response to health sector corruption, in a way that aligns with HSS efforts, have not been sufficiently prioritized by the international community or national governments.

Background and challenges

Corruption, the abuse of entrusted power for private gain,[i] is a public health issue. It undermines both the human right to health and efforts to strengthen health systems. It is therefore also a critical barrier to the achievement of UHC, to which governments have committed in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.8. The consequences of health sector corruption are significant. In some countries, as much as 80% of non-salary health funds never reach local primary health facilities and consequently do not benefit patients in need.

Corruption is evident across all areas of a health system. At the patient level, corruption undermines financial risk protection and access to quality health services. Bribery[ii] and out-of-pocket spending on health contribute to inequality and increase rates of poverty, which in turn negatively impact health-seeking behaviour and overall health outcomes. And gendered forms of corruption, namely sextortion, affect female patients and health workers alike, deterring them from seeking health services or employment within health systems.

The global threat of antimicrobial resistance is also perpetuated by corruption. This is because corruption can undermine medical product regulation and be a product of and contribute to disruptions in supply chains. This leads to product shortages that interrupt treatment and drive the production of falsified medical products. Furthermore, perverse incentives and conflicts of interest can lead to overprescribing and irrational use of medical products.

Public health procurement is an area that is particularly vulnerable to corruption as it can lead to massive diversions of limited, life-saving resources. For example, during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments in countries at all income levels failed to provide the necessary equipment and goods. This was often due to procurement-related corruption where, for instance, public contracts were issued to companies which held conflicts of interest.

Corruption can subsequently undermine trust and perpetuate health emergencies. Such dynamics were strongly evident throughout the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where mass misinformation and disinformation campaigns amplified existing feelings of distrust in populations towards leadership, contributing to vaccine hesitancy and failure to comply with public health advice.

To effectively address corruption, there is an urgent need for evidence-based, tailored and preventive approaches that equate with ACTA, all of which are essential parts of a stronger, more resilient and efficient health system. ACTA approaches that align with UHC, primary health care and health security goals, and have a strong focus on equity, will lead to better health outcomes and help ensure that no one is left behind.

Key actions and policy recommendations

When tackling corruption, use a public health approach

Taking a public health approach has gained acceptance across many disciplines. It aims to prevent problems before they occur by targeting key determinants and addressing these at a population-level. The starting point for a public health approach to ACTA begins with the confidence that corruption can be prevented.

Addressing corruption in a way that aligns with HSS efforts towards UHC, rather than concentrating on punitive action once it has occurred, could enable greater policy dialogue, support a stronger evidence base on effective ACTA interventions and strategies, and promote cooperation across agencies and sectors.

Mainstream ACTA in all strategies, policies, plans, programmes and projects

Mainstreaming a public health approach to ACTA centred on prevention requires contextual, evidence-based measures that align with HSS efforts from the point of design, through implementation, monitoring and revision. It also means ensuring that all health policies include clauses covering transparency and accountability measures that targeting corruption and its underlying factors.

Strengthen multistakeholder and multisectoral engagement on ACTA

Health and anti-corruption communities should partner with decision-makers, academia and civil society. The Global Network for Anti-Corruption, Transparency and Accountability in Health, hosted by the WHO, demonstrates the value of facilitating strategic alliances and thought leadership focused on ACTA issues. Further technical and financial support for this and comparable networks is needed.

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i. This definition is provided by Transparency International. A more comprehensive definition tailored to the nuances within the health sector has been put forward by colleagues at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and can be found in Hutchinson E, Balabanova D, McKee M. (2020).

ii. Also referred to as informal payments.

Increase the evidence base for which ACTA measures work and which do not

There is need for greater financial support to enable further research into existing and planned ACTA interventions within the health sector in order to be certain of their efficacy and reproducibility in other contexts.

Integrate ACTA into efforts to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health emergencies should be consolidated and used to inform tailored, effective and practicable ACTA measures and approaches that can prevent, detect, mitigate and sanction corruption during health emergencies.

Strengthen accountability systems, including whistle-blower protection

In order to understand what types of corruption are occurring and where, it is important that those who witness, and are affected by, corruption have secure and responsive reporting outlets.

Increase the digitization of public health procurement systems

As an area that is particularly vulnerable to corruption, public health procurement must be safeguarded. The digitization of public procurement, using the Open Contracting Data Standard, is a proven way to increase accountability, reduce overall spending and prevent corruption.

References and resources

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