

# Universal Health Coverage in Nigeria: the enabling environment for private sector participation

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## Introduction

Health, the world over, has been a very fundamental factor to human existence. In defining it, the World Health Organisation (WHO) opines that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It further submits that; indeed, health should be elevated to take the position of being a free and equally available resource to support people's function in the society, rather than an end in itself.

In an attempt to key into this, Nigeria has, as far back as independence, sought to create an enabling environment to achieve health for all through many national and health-centered policies and programme, one of which is the Universal Health Coverage.

This article first considers the current state of the Nigerian health sector, examines the Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and its potentials for achieving access to affordable health for all. It then considers the participation of the private sector in the successful implementation of the UHC, lessons learnt from private sectors' participation in the health sector of foreign countries, its merits and demerits and concludes with some considerations for private entities willing to enter the industry.

## The Health Sector in Nigeria

The Nigerian health sector, like every other public institution, is fraught with age-long neglect, brain drain, personnel shortage and infrastructural decay. Though making policies to achieve better access to health, Nigeria has not recorded any landslide success in the past decade. From 2010 till date, there has been no commitment to prioritise health funding. For example, the national health budget for 2020 still stands at a meagre 4.14%, a far cry from the government's commitment of at least 15% of the national budget during the 2001 Abuja Declaration.

The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) which in 2005 when it was launched represented a promising sustainable healthcare financing strategy has also not achieved its desired result. Up till date, only about five million public workers and their families have been covered out of a population of close to two hundred million. Even at that, the 2018 Health Maintenance Organisation Report shows that at time of medical emergencies, the beneficiaries can still not vouch that the NHIS will bail them



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out. The report further shows that out-of-pocket expenditure on health is about 75% of the total spending on health, especially since the break down of the 2020 budget reveals that the federal government only deemed it fit to allocate a token of two thousand naira to each citizen as annual spending on health. These and many more are the problems facing the Nigerian Health Sector, and in an attempt to eradicate them and expand health coverage, the government has introduced the Universal Health Care Programme.

Currently, healthcare in Nigeria is administered by both the public and private sector care providers who are regulated by the Ministries of health.

## Universal Health Coverage

The Universal Health Coverage (UHC) refers to health systems providing both access to health services and financial protection which includes avoiding out-of-pocket payments that reduce the affordability of services, and ideally some compensation for productivity loss due to illness. UHC in the Nigerian context means that all individuals and communities have access to quality healthcare regardless of their financial status.

Being a member of the Universal Health Care 2030 (UHC2030) Global Compact, Nigeria has endorsed the five



key principles for collective action on UHC which are:

- Leaving no one behind
- Transparency and accountability for results
- Evidence-based national health strategies and leadership
- Making health everybody's business
- International cooperation based on mutual learning across countries

It is expected that the UHC helps Nigeria in achieving quality health for all.

### Benefits of the Universal Health Coverage

The UHC has diverse potentials beyond the visible health benefits. First of, UHC improves population health because more people get access to a range of effective health services which covers preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care. Logically, wider health coverage generally leads to better access to necessary care and improved population health, with the largest gains accruing to the poor and unprivileged.

Asides this, the UHC will benefit the economy through stimulating economic growth (more productive workforce), facilitating educational gains (healthier children learn better), empowering women and reducing poverty associated with health costs.



**It is hoped that the private sector will incorporate the five key principles of UHC which includes but not limited to the development of resistant and sustainable local health systems, develop, test and scale up innovative business models that align with UHC goals, help strengthen the health workforce, responding to local context, priorities and needs, contribute to efforts to raise the finance available for UHC achieved through and finally engage in, champion and build capacities for relevant policy dialogue and partnerships with government and other stakeholders which is important for identifying shared objectives and developing collaborations for shared outcomes.**

Lastly, if UHC reforms are implemented properly they can build peace and security in the country and deliver substantial political benefits to governments. Nigerian political leaders can implement UHC to deliver a quick win for their people as seen in Rwanda and Brazil.

### Private Sector participation in Universal Health Coverage

Although in most parts of Europe and America, many countries that have recorded success with Universal Health Coverage are those whose governments have been very committed with national spending on health, and, as such, there might not necessarily be need for private entities to venture into health care provisions since the government has already covered the field in that aspect.

However, for many countries in Africa, public resources are either limited or mismanaged. With many problems associated with governments' commitment to key developmental sectors like health, it is only expected that to address the gap created by the disparities in access to quality health, the government needs to explore the wide opportunities made available by the private sector.

With private sector's involvement in UHC, it is expected that enough room would be provided for delivery of quality medical products and services that is affordable by everyone including the poor and marginalized populations, and at the same time, sustainable.

Also, it is hoped that the private sector will incorporate the five key principles of UHC which includes but not limited to the development of resistant and sustainable local health systems, develop, test and scale up innovative business models that align with UHC goals, help strengthen the health workforce, responding to local context, priorities and needs, contribute to efforts to raise the finance available for UHC achieved through, for example, contributing to innovative finance models and tools, engaging constructively in dialogue on corporate taxation, and supporting governments to articulate the business case for investing in health and

UHC and finally engage in, champion and build capacities for relevant policy dialogue and partnerships with government and other stakeholders which is important for identifying shared objectives and developing collaborations for shared outcomes.

### **Lessons from foreign countries' partnership with the private sector in achieving Universal Health Care**

Nigeria is not the first country to have adopted a nationwide policy on Universal Health Care, neither would it be the first to consider a partnership with the private sector to achieve health for all. Before Nigeria, Bolivia and India have taken a similar path towards providing access to quality health for their citizens. The result of these are briefly discussed below.

The Bolivia and India experience have together been success stories. In Bolivia, the government embraced the private sector as a means of improving quality healthcare access. It successfully partnered with ProSalud, a primary care clinic network, to deliver public health goals in the country. The programme was able to reach half a million patients in the urban areas alone. Through this, new facilities were built and established, and strict government restrictions were eased to give room for more private entities willing to provide quality access to health.

The story of India is not in any way different from that of Bolivia. Responding to the inadequacies of the public sector in providing quality health, the government partnered with



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grown to provide more than eighty percent and sixty percent of outpatient and inpatient services respectively at affordable rates in the country.

### **Pros and Cons of private sector involvement in achieving Universal Health Care**

Given the government's failure over the years, the argument in support of private sector's involvement has been on the basis of better fulfilment of the goals of UHC. It is believed that with the private sector, Nigeria would be able to safeguard its citizens' physical and mental health, elevate health to the desired position of being a fundamental human right, ensure positive stability in the health sector and get the necessary national return on investment in the health sector.

On the other part, many have pitched the argument against private sector's involvement in the health sector on the ground that the private sector is too diverse and fragmented and, as a result, quality can not always be consistent. Besides, the health sector is one of the critical sectors of the economy and, to a large extent, has a great impact on the security of a country. Hence, involving the private sectors whose major concern is how to explore all available means to boost their profits in the provision of healthcare may be tantamount to opening up the country's health sector for plausible compromise.

While some private entities may prove trustworthy, there are many others whose pursuit of excessive profits have led them to unethical business practices such as under-servicing or over-servicing, collusion, false billing, price gouging, and unlicensed practice. These and many more have further raised the suspicion of private sector in the provision of health care.

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## Key Consideration for participants in the Private Sector

A key consideration for private sectors is trying to ascertain the scope and boundaries of the UHC. The World Health Organisation's definition merely captures UHC as a system in which all individuals and communities receive the health services, they need without suffering financial hardship. What this includes is quite uncertain. What levels or threshold, for instance, must be crossed by the depreciating health condition and system before a particular health service can be considered needed or essential? Also, achieving UHC suggests distributing health services on the basis of equity. In this instance, financial hardship of a population may determine how much service and attention they get. However, would financial hardships be determined by the amount of money spent in juxtaposition with income earned, or would it be the amount of income various households retain after spending on health, or some other unknown criteria?

Another consideration is the lack of regulatory and accreditation frameworks. Private entities that are not very deeply pocketed may find it difficult to survive in the absence of regulatory frame works providing a levelled playing ground for private entities.

Lastly, the pool of uninformed and illiterate population may slow down the progress of private sector involvement in the industry. For instance, it would take a great deal of sensitization to divert attention of rural dwellers from unorthodox medical cure to orthodox cure provided by the private entities. This may influence their profit and delay expected return on their investment in the health sector.



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## Conclusion

The Universal Health Care has proven to be very articulate and ambitious, hence, substantial investments, result-oriented partnerships and critical innovations are needed to achieve the goals of the UHC. The public sector, without doubt, has a significant role to play in fulfilling the missions of the UHC and leading actions for a sustainable development. There is, therefore, the need to partner with the private sector to harness the necessary capitals to deliver healthcare without leaving anyone behind

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