Bangladesh workshop strengthens roots for innovative health financing schemes in Asia

The growing reach and lifesaving potential of innovative financing schemes to protect the health of Asia’s poorest communities came under the spotlight at a groundbreaking workshop in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, on April 3rd and 4th 2013.

The workshop on Innovative financing for social protection in health in low-income settings in Asia drew 22 participants from some of the region’s most visionary health finance organisations, together with international researchers, development partners and health officials from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Singapore, Canada and the United States.

For Myanmar, only recently emerging from 20 years of political isolation and very limited health funding, the forum offered a rare opportunity to share experiences on social health protection, and to report the progress of the country’s new Hospital Equity Fund and maternal and child health voucher scheme – both introduced in 2012.

In a uniquely collaborative spirit, the workshop’s hosts – The Center of Excellence for Universal Health Coverage at the James P Grant School of Public Health, and ICDDR,B (the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh) – had requested the Nossal Institute for Global Health and the Health Policy and Health Finance (HPHF) Hub to invite some of their key partners from across Asia.

The two-day workshop saw intensive sharing of experiences and research findings by, among others, Cambodia’s National Institute of Public Health, the Department of Planning in Myanmar’s Ministry of Health, Pakistan’s Heartfile program, the Impact Investment Exchange (Asia IIX) in Singapore, the US-based Results for Development Institute, the SAJIDA Foundation, the WHO Country Office in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s Institute of Microfinance and Concordia University in Canada.

Representing the Nossal Institute and the HPHF Hub, Dr Peter Annear and Dr Shakil Ahmed took part in detailed discussions on the practical lessons learned during the implementation of social health financing mechanisms in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

The workshop generated a strong consensus on the need for innovative programs in low-income Asian countries, which have limited short-term opportunities for tax-based, employer-based or community-based health insurance schemes. With the recent decline in traditional donor funding, innovative health finance structures are seen as critical to promote more efficient and equitable service delivery, to support the work of major multilateral initiatives such as the Global Fund and the GAVI Alliance, and to alleviate the financial impact of health shocks in low-income communities.

The discussions took as their starting point recent efforts to break from traditional Bismarck or Beveridge models that may provide more realistic opportunities for affording financial protection to poorer populations in accessing health services.

Perhaps the most compelling example came from Cambodia, where the country’s pioneering Health Equity Funds now cover more than three-quarters of all citizens living below the poverty line. As well as Myanmar’s Hospital Equity Fund, newer examples included
Bangladesh’s Buffer Fund, which issues low-interest loans to protect the poor from catastrophic health expenditures, and the unique IT-supported health financing model being developed by Heartfile in Pakistan.

Cambodia and Pakistan also provided practical examples of how financing mechanisms can be modified to tackle particular challenges – such as governance in remote areas – while countries with newer financing models were reminded of the importance of collecting rigorous baseline data to assist them with future evaluations.

The participants reiterated the importance of close and transparent collaboration between ministries of health and finance, and with national regulatory authorities, in establishing and accelerating the development of new health financing programs.

As well as stimulating a broad range of discussions on innovative approaches to health financing, the Dhaka workshop presented a rare opportunity for participants to share contacts and build networks for ongoing collaboration and learning. Among the many productive outcomes was a commitment to explore opportunities for establishing a formal Asia-wide network to inform and promote innovative health financing mechanisms.