

Press Release
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UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE PUSHED ON WORLD HEALTH DAY

On the occasion of World Health Day today, members of the Working Group on Social ASEAN pushed for the immediate realization of universal healthcare as they decried the highly insufficient state provision for healthcare and the capitalists' excessive profiting from health services and medicines.

The group composed of networks of civil society organizations, trade unions, migrant workers, and parliamentarians pointed out that healthcare is increasingly treated as a commodity instead of an individual entitlement. The members reiterated that health care is a fundamental right and governments have a responsibility to realize this right. "However, a large percentage of population in our countries are not treated of their health needs."

Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) reveal that at least half of the world's 7.3 billion people still do not have access to essential health services, such as having a skilled birth attendant, vaccinations for children or treatment for HIV. Every day, more than 800 women die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. And nearly 20 million infants, who do not receive immunizations they need, run the risk of dying from diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough) and measles.

"It is deplorable that instead of increasing national budgets for health, improving health services and facilities, and providing universal healthcare, ASEAN countries are going in the opposite direction of further liberalising healthcare and opting for public-private sector partnerships (PPP) for health services. This is unacceptable because privatizing healthcare results in people being held captive by the profit-driven schemes of corporations and companies," said the Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP).

"As hospitals and medical services, including diagnostic tests, are being privatized, a large number of the population risk the loss of their lives and their health," said Charles Santiago, a member of Parliament in Malaysia and chairperson of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR).

"The high costs of private healthcare and governments' low priority for accessible and quality health services are making ordinary people poorer," Santiago added.

According to WHO, 100 million people are pushed into poverty annually because of health spending. Around 179 million people spend more than a quarter of their household budget on health care – a level that WHO considers to be "catastrophic health spending."

Workers are clamoring for state intervention to guarantee healthcare for everyone. With low wages and temporary employment, even salaried workers cannot cope with high hospital bills and excessive price of medicines. "ASEAN member states must ensure that access to health care must be kept affordable to all especially when there is a growing army of gig economy workers in the region" said the ASEAN Services Employees Trade Union Council (ASETUC).

Meanwhile the Migrant Forum in Asia shared that many migrant workers are having serious problems in accessing health services, thus the network is also campaigning for portability of social protection which includes access to health services.

The Working Group underscored that the provisioning of essential services like healthcare must be guaranteed and financed by the state, as they are connected to the survival, dignity, and development of individuals as well as society as a whole.

“It is important for governments to ensure that 7% of GDP is allocated towards healthcare,” said Santiago as he pointed out that the average total healthcare expenditure per capita in the ASEAN is only about 4% of GDP, based on WHO estimates.

Ana Maria R. Nemenzo, lead convener of Dignidad, reiterated that "healthcare is an essential service that guarantees a person's wellness. It goes beyond merely treating diseases since health is not just about the absence of disease but the total well-being of a person."

“It is high time for our governments to act on our demand for a universal and comprehensive social protection. States should institutionalize healthcare for all — regardless of their social, economic, and cultural standing,” added Nemenzo, also a co-convener of NTSP.

Suntaree Saengging, coordinator of the NGO Coalition for Development in Thailand and HomeNet Southeast Asia, also highlighted that part of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by States is to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. "Government must therefore provide accessible and quality health care appropriate to individuals' needs based on gender, age, culture, way of life and abilities."

“Poverty and limited access to health services contribute to older people’s health conditions. This makes a policy on long-term care, as part of universal healthcare, timely and urgent to help improve the quality of health of all older people in the country,” added Emily Beredico, Executive Director of the Coalition of Services of the Elderly – a member of HelpAge.
