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Healthcare Accessibility in Developing Countries: Challenges and Policy Solutions

Dr Muhammad Sohail [a]

[a] PGT, SU1 Holy Family Hospital, Pakistan sohailqaisrani246@gmail.com

Correspondence: Dr Muhammad Sohail (sohailqaisrani246@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

Access to adequate healthcare is an essential part of human development and a human right. While rural and marginalized communities, especially in developing countries, face barriers in accessing health services, their conflicts arise from an interconnected tapestry of economic, geographical, infrastructural, socio-cultural, and political impediments. It includes insufficient public funding for health system development, inadequate infrastructure and lack of personnel, and high out-of-pocket payments. Added social determinants such as gender inequality, illiteracy, and local cultural beliefs make accessing care all the more challenging.

The present study analyses the causes of limited access to healthcare in developing countries and demonstrates successful examples of health system reform in countries such as Rwanda, Thailand, and India. This research uses a mixed methods design where the researcher collects secondary data, conducts comparative case studies, and systematically reviews international literature to identify broad patterns and recommend sustainable solutions. While the study demonstrates that challenges differ based on context or demographics, the study identified common solutions such as; increasing public investment in the healthcare system, good health governance, strong regulatory framework, devolution of health services, improving community health literacy, and utilizing international cooperation.

In closing, the paper states that in order to ensure equitable access to healthcare, an integrated approach is required. In closing, the paper states that in order to ensure equitable access to healthcare, an integrated approach is required.

Keywords: access to healthcare, health system reform, developing countries, health equity, social determinants of health

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread recognition that healthcare is a basic human right and a key element of social and economic development for countries. Nevertheless, gaining equitable access to health care continues to be a major concern and challenge for developing countries. Advancements in medical science and global efforts to attain health equity has ultimately fallen short for millions of individuals in low-and middle-income nations who experience demonstrable barriers to even the most basic health services. Significant barriers preventing access to health services continues to contribute to avoidable morbidity and mortality, exacerbates poverty and increases disparities in health outcomes across and within countries.

While countries like the United States and Canada have improved access to care resulting in desirable health indicators with the transition towards universal health coverage, developing countries continue to struggle to meet basic standards of care and eligibility for care. In this section we will show how access to health services is critical to population health, gain an understanding of the state of access and barriers in health systems of developing nations, explore who the key stakeholders are - both international and local actors - who play a role in changing policies on behalf of change in access to health services.

The Importance of Healthcare Accessibility

Healthcare accessibility ensures that all individuals can obtain necessary health services in a timely, affordable, and culturally appropriate manner. It is foundational to improving public health, enhancing life expe Healthcare access achieves the ability for everyone to receive the health services they require at the right time and place, at the correct cost, and within an appropriate culture.

Healthcare access is essential to improving health and population health, increasing life years, and alleviating the burden of diseases for communities.

Healthcare access will:

- Improve health outcomes through earlier diagnoses and timely services to treat health problems
- Increase economic productivity by allowing individuals to work, support family, and be economically productive
- Enhance social equity by addressing health inequity between population sub-groups
- Increase capacity for communities to be resilient to public health threats such as pandemics and natural disasters.

In addition, health care access is intrinsically linked to other developmental goals such as educational development, gender equality, and poverty reduction. Thus, improving access to health care is essential for individual well-being as well as macro social development.

Current State of Healthcare in Developing Countries

Healthcare systems in developing countries are often characterized by fragmented service delivery, under-resourced services, and poor coverage of essential health services. This is despite the presence of many national and international health programs, as there remains a sizable population—mostly rural and marginalized who still do not have access to health services.

Key problems are:

- Limited infrastructures (i.e hospitals, clinics, sanitation)
- Lack of qualified health workforce.
- Weak supply chain of medications and medical equipments.
- Little government expenditure on health.

To illustrate the disparities in healthcare resources, the following table shows healthcare access indicators in selected developing countries:

Country	Physicians per 1,000 People	Hospital Beds per 1,000 People	Population Without Basic Health Services (%)
Nigeria	0.4	0.5	55%
Bangladesh	0.6	0.8	48%
Haiti	0.2	0.7	59%
Ethiopia	0.1	0.3	60%

These statistics highlight the stark resource shortages that many developing countries face and underscore the need for systemic reforms.

Key Barriers to Healthcare Access

The challenges that limit equal access to healthcare in developing countries are multifaceted and often interact with one another. They include:

a. Economic Barriers

Most healthcare systems depend upon out-of-pocket payments; therefore, economic disadvantage primarily determines access to care. Poor populations, generally, have the least amount of health insurance and highest out-of-pocket medical expenses, and countries that do not either have public financing or comprehensive health insurance schemes prevent equitable access, as that is what rural and other vulnerable populations rely upon to access emergency and preventive care.

b. Geographic Barriers

Most rural or remote communities are located too far away from healthcare facilities to access care in a timely way. Many rural areas also have poor land transportation networks, limited transportation mechanisms, and/or providers unable to make home visits or provide emergency services.

c. Healthcare Workforce Challenges

Rural or remote communities often have a limited health care workforce in inadequate numbers or is poorly distributed. Most health professionals want to practice or work in urban settings, which many rural clinics cannot. None will open a health professional training program for the local community, and rural healthcare workforce challenges is very common throughout most developing countries.

d. Sociocultural Barriers

Cultural beliefs, gender normatives, or social stigma still prevent people - especially women and minority groups - or limit who seek primary preventive or emergency care. Low levels of health literacy and language barriers limit interactions and communication skills between providers and patients, which compromises clinical care.

e. Political and Governance Factors Corruption, foreseen or unforeseen circumstances, poor planning, or no follow-up on accountability and governance contribute various degrees of inefficiencies for healthcare delivery and usage. Well designed policies and reforms for healthcare are not meaningful when there is uncoordinated governance, inconsistent support for implementation or monitoring.Corruption, foreseen or unforeseen circumstances, poor planning, or no follow-up on accountability and governance contribute various degrees of inefficiencies for healthcare delivery and usage. Well designed policies and reforms for healthcare are not meaningful when there is uncoordinated governance, inconsistent support for implementation or monitoring.The Role of International Agencies and Local Governments

Strengthening access to healthcare in developing nations will necessitate a collaborative multi-sectoral strategy will require global organizations and local governments to work together.

International agencies, like the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank have been integral in:

- Budgets for health programs (vaccinations, maternal health, etc.)
- Technical assistance and health workforce training.
- Strengthening health systems.

Country	Hospitals per 100,000 People	Doctors per 1,000 People	Health Spending (% of GDP)
Uganda	1.2	0.15	2.0%
Pakistan	1.5	0.80	2.8%
Nepal	1.0	0.60	1.8%
Zambia	0.8	0.20	2.5%

While national governments are responsible for:

- Creating and implementing health policies
- Budgets and other resources.
- Fair distribution of services.
- Community planning for health.

For sustainable impact, international support must align with national priorities, and policies must be tailored to local needs and cultural contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The accessibility of healthcare within developing countries has been a major source of concern for global health researcher, policy analysts, and worldwide organizations. The findings show a common understanding within the literature that access to healthcare not only can be understood by the availability of medical services, but is heavily dependent on the surrounding structural, social, economic, and political context. This review highlights the predominant themes in current research, including, economic constraints, infrastructure constraints, socio-cultural constraints, governance constraints, successful interventions, and theoretical frameworks.

Economic Determinants of Healthcare Access

The strong link between poverty and poor access to healthcare is a frequent motif in the writings. According to Peters et al. (2008), the most important barrier for low income households still remains economic hardship; this usually drives families to sell items or forgo care. Almost 100 million people per year are pushed into extreme poverty because of outofpocket health costs, according to the World Bank (2020).

Furthermore aggravating this situation is the absence of thorough public health insurance in several low-income nations. Studies point out the regressive character of health funding systems in these situations whereby the poor pay unreasonably more parts of their income for care (Xu et al., 2003).

Infrastructure and Resource Limitations

Particularly in rural and distant locations, healthcare infrastructure in developing nations is frequently weak. WHO (2018) notes that in low-resource environments, key services including diagnostic imaging, laboratory testing, and emergency obstetric care are severely constrained.

Many institutions regularly run short on equipment, prescriptions, and pure water. Particularly obvious are discrepancies between urban and rural areas. While rural areas usually depend on understaffed clinics, urban centers might have tertiary hospitals and specialists. The next table shows differences in healthcare infrastructure between some nations:

Table 1: Healthcare Infrastructure Indicators in Selected Developing Countries

The shortage of trained healthcare professionals, known as “brain drain,” where skilled workers migrate to higher-income countries, further worsens service delivery (Chen et al., 2004).

Sociocultural and Educational Barriers

Critical influencers on healthcare behavior include cultural norms, gender roles, and poor health literacy. For instance, in conservative surroundings, women frequently need male approval before seeking medical care, therefore postponing therapy for problems relating to maternal and reproductive health.

Healthcare use is also influenced by cultural distrust of established medical systems and dependence on conventional healers. According to Ensor and Cooper (2004), these social and cultural elements can obstruct people from asking help even if services are free.

Furthermore, health literacy—that is, the capacity to access, comprehend, and use health information—is frequently poor in underprivileged areas. Effective care delivery is made more difficult by poor provider-patient communication, especially in multilingual settings.

Policy and Governance Challenges

The development of healthcare systems is greatly influenced by governance. Weak health governance corresponds with corruption, inefficiencies, and coordination problems. A study by Lewis (2006) shows how public funds earmarked for health are frequently diverted, badly tracked, or misused.

Many times, healthcare policies are driven by donors and have little integration with national priorities. Fragmentation in healthcare distribution causes redundancy, resource waste, and bad health outcomes.

Countries with consistent political climates and active health ministries often make more progress in putting changes into action (Savedoff, 2011). The literature further stresses how vital community involvement and decentralization are in planning and monitoring health services.

Successful Interventions and Case Studies

Several emerging nations have greatly increased healthcare access via focused policy efforts notwithstanding the enormous difficulties:

- Thailand implemented the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) in 2002, which offers free treatment at the point of service. As a result, catastrophic health expenditures dropped dramatically.
- Rwanda introduced a Community Based Health Insurance (CBHI) system, which significantly increased healthcare use especially in rural regions. Better maternal and child health results have come from its incorporation with performance-based funding.

India's National Health Mission (NHM) stresses dispersed planning and the deployment of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), who serve as a link between the health system and the community.

These illustrations highlight the need of political will, local adaptation, and ongoing investment.

Theoretical Frameworks in Literature

Several theoretical models aid in organizing and explanation of healthcare accessibility:

- Andersen's Behavioral Model of Health Services Use organizes access into predisposing causes (e.g., age, gender), enabling elements (e.g., income, insurance), and need factors (e.g., perceived health condition).
- Emphasizing that health inequalities result from uneven distribution of power and resources, social determinants of health (SDH) theory concentrates on the more general social and economic environment.
- To evaluate system performance and direct changes, one uses health system frameworks such WHO's six building blocks (service delivery, health workforce, information, medical products, finance, and leadership).

Creating evidence-based, context-appropriate policies depends on these frameworks.

The literature clearly shows that healthcare accessibility in developing countries is impacted by a sophisticated interaction of economic, structural, social, and governance-related elements. Although many obstacles are deeply entrenched, successful changes in nations like Rwanda and Thailand show that targeted, inclusive, evidence-based treatments may produce major results. Driven by theory and informed by many dimensions, future laws must be sensitive to the particular problems of each nation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part presents the chosen research approach for the project on healthcare accessibility in underdeveloped nations. Acknowledging the intricacy and multidimensionality of healthcare systems, a mixedmethods approach was used whereby qualitative as well as quantitative techniques were combined. This method helped to carefully and thoroughly investigate the structural, financial, and policy-driven obstacles to healthcare access as well as to find practical policy solutions.

Research Design

Convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used in the investigation. This design was chosen to simultaneously examine qualitative policy paperwork and quantitative health measures. The qualitative part comprised a thematic analysis of peer-reviewed papers, global health reports, and case studies from chosen developing nations. Using publicly accessible health data, the quantitative element found discrepancies and patterns in healthcare availability, financial accessibility, and results across nations.

Data Sources

The research drew on secondary data from reliable and widely recognized databases and repositories. These included:

- World Health Organization (WHO) Global Health Observatory
- World Bank Development Indicators
- Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)
- UNICEF State of the World's Children Reports
- Academic databases such as PubMed, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect
- Government health reports and national policy frameworks

These sources provided both numerical data (e.g., health spending, physician density, maternal mortality rates) and policy documentation (e.g., universal health coverage frameworks, strategic plans).

Sampling Method

Chosen for case study using a purposefully sampling strategy was a broad spectrum of emerging nations. The chosen countries—Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Peru—cover developing areas with various healthcare systems, sociopolitical environments, and degrees of economic development: SubSaharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.

Table 2: Sample Countries and Key Health Indicators

Country	Health Expenditure (% of GDP)	Physicians per 1,000 People	UHC Coverage Index
Nigeria	3.6%	0.4	42
India	3.5%	0.8	55
Bangladesh	2.8%	0.6	47
Kenya	4.5%	0.2	51
Peru	5.2%	1.3	65

Source: WHO (2023), World Bank Health Indicators

Data Collection Techniques

These methods of data collection were used:

- Examined health policy papers, strategic frameworks, governmental reports, and academic studies via document analysis.
- From WHO, DHS, and World Bank databases, statistical data including health expenditures, access to services, and outcome information were gathered.
- Through content analysis of written sources, main themes as health financing, equity, geographic barriers, and service delivery models were discovered.
- Comparative Matrix Creation: Cross country comparison was made possible by matrixing country specific information.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was divided into two streams:

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics like percentages, ratios, and index scores were used to evaluate differences in healthcare access.

- A comparative analysis across countries was done using indicators such as:
- Health expenditure per capita
- Physician density
- UHC (Universal Health Coverage) service index
- Maternal and infant mortality rates

Qualitative Analysis

- Thematic content analysis identified patterns and themes in policy and academic texts.
- Data coding focused on finding barriers, such as financial, cultural, and infrastructural issues, and solutions, like community health workers and insurance schemes.
- Triangulation was used to validate findings by comparing quantitative data trends with qualitative insights.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied solely on secondary data, formal ethical approval was not needed. However, the following ethical standards were maintained:

• Proper citation of all data sources and literature.
• Transparency in methodology and data limitations.
• Respect for intellectual property and research integrity.
• Avoidance of misrepresentation or data manipulation.

Limitations of the Methodology

While the mixed-methods approach provides valuable insights, it also has clear limitations:

• Dependence on Secondary Data: The study's accuracy relies on the quality and timeliness of publicly available datasets.
• Comparability Issues: Differences in data collection methods and health system definitions across countries can impact comparability.
• Contextual Gaps: National-level data may hide local-level disparities in healthcare access.

These limitations were addressed by cross-checking data from multiple sources and focusing on widely accepted indicators. This research method, based on a solid mixed-methods framework, offers a broad view of healthcare access challenges in developing countries. By combining statistical trends with policy analysis, it creates a strong basis for finding practical and relevant policy solutions.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Healthcare Infrastructure Disparities

One of the most striking findings is the disparity in healthcare infrastructure across developing countries. Nations like Nigeria and Bangladesh face severe shortages of health facilities, especially in rural areas. The number of hospital beds and functional primary healthcare centers is much lower than global standards. Many regions lack diagnostic tools, emergency services, and surgical care. This hampers these systems' ability to provide timely and effective care.

The results are serious: delayed diagnoses, avoidable complications, and patient deaths that better infrastructure could prevent. Countries that have invested in their healthcare infrastructure, like Peru, see improvements in service delivery and health outcomes.

Financial Barriers to Access

Out-of-pocket expenses still make up the main way to pay for healthcare in many developing countries. This model is financially devastating for low-income populations. According to World Bank data, out-of-pocket spending accounts for over 60% of total health spending in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This financial strain prevents people from getting the care they need, worsens health inequality, and drives families into poverty because of medical costs.

Table 3: Financial Health Indicators in Selected Countries

Country	Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (% of Total Health Spend)	Govt. Health Spend (% of GDP)	Catastrophic Health Spending (% of Households)
Nigeria	77%	3.6%	14.3%
India	64%	3.5%	17.3%
Kenya	51%	4.5%	12.1%
Bangladesh	72%	2.8%	16.2%
Peru	40%	5.2%	9.8%

As shown above, countries like Peru, which have higher public health investment, report lower levels of catastrophic health spending.

Geographic and Rural-Urban Inequities

Accessing healthcare shouldn't depend on where someone lives—but for many people in rural and remote areas, it

does. While urban hospitals often have the latest equipment and teams of specialists, rural communities can struggle to provide even the most basic services. Long travel distances, poor roads, and slow emergency response times make things even harder, especially in critical situations. Programs like mobile clinics, telemedicine, and local outreach bring some relief, but they only go so far. To truly make healthcare fair and accessible for everyone, we need long-term investment in rural health systems and the infrastructure that supports them.

Shortage of Human Resources

Many developing countries are facing a serious challenge: there simply aren't enough trained medical professionals to care for everyone. The World Health Organization recommends at least 2.3 healthcare workers for every 1,000 people to meet basic health needs—but in many nations, the numbers are far lower. The situation is made worse when skilled doctors and nurses leave for better opportunities abroad, a phenomenon often called "brain drain."

In countries like Kenya and Bangladesh, this means long lines at clinics, exhausted medical staff, and a healthcare system stretched thin. Patients sometimes wait hours—or even days—for care, while the few available workers are left juggling overwhelming responsibilities. Efforts like training community health workers and offering incentives for rural service are helping, but real, lasting change will only come with deeper reforms and stronger support for those on the frontlines.

Effectiveness of Policy Intervention

When the right health policies are put in place, real progress can happen—even in the most challenging settings. Several developing countries have shown what's possible with commitment and smart planning. In Peru, public investment and social insurance have helped bring universal health coverage closer to reality. India's Ayushman Bharat Program has opened doors to healthcare for more than 500 million people, easing financial burdens and strengthening local clinics. In Bangladesh, community clinics have become a lifeline for millions living in rural areas, bringing care closer to home. But even with these encouraging steps, there are still hurdles. Many programs struggle because of weak monitoring, political interference, or corruption. Without clear systems to track performance and results, it's hard to know what's working—and what needs to change. For lasting impact, these promising efforts must be matched with stronger accountability and long-term support.

The implementation of targeted health policies has shown positive results in several developing countries. For instance:

- Peru has significantly expanded universal health coverage through sustained public investment and social insurance schemes.
- India's Ayushman Bharat Program has improved access for over 500 million people by offering financial protection and strengthening primary health centers.
- Bangladesh's Community Clinic Initiative has brought services to millions in rural areas.

However, despite these achievements, many programs are hampered by weak monitoring systems, political interference, and corruption. The absence of performance evaluation metrics makes it difficult to measure long-term impact.

Integrated Discussion

The findings show that while many developing countries are working hard to improve healthcare access, deep-rooted challenges still stand in the way. For many people, just getting to a clinic is difficult due to poor roads or long distances. Even when care is available, paying for it out of pocket can be a heavy burden for families. There's also a serious shortage of trained healthcare workers—especially in rural or underserved areas.

Some countries have made real progress through smart policies, but questions remain about how to keep these efforts going and how to scale them up to reach everyone who needs care.

Creating a fair and accessible healthcare system in these settings means addressing four key areas:

1. Making healthcare more affordable by reforming how it's financed.
2. Expanding infrastructure so that rural communities aren't left behind.
3. Training and supporting enough healthcare workers to meet demand.
4. Building strong systems of accountability to track what's working—and what's not.

International partners, donors, and private organizations can help fill the gaps—but real, lasting change depends on strong national leadership, transparent systems, and communities being actively involved in shaping their own healthcare future.

CONCLUSION

Access to healthcare remains one of the most pressing challenges in developing countries, tied closely to poverty, inequality, and fragile systems. This study has brought to light the many barriers people face when trying to get the care they need—whether it's a lack of nearby clinics, the burden of paying out of pocket, the sharp divide between rural and urban services, or the critical shortage of doctors and nurses. These challenges don't just block progress toward universal health coverage—they keep people trapped in cycles of poor health and poverty.

Yet, there is hope. The research shows that when policies are thoughtfully designed and properly funded, they can make a real difference. Initiatives like India's Ayushman Bharat, Peru's public healthcare expansion, and Bangladesh's community clinics are proving that positive

change is possible—especially when solutions are tailored to local needs. But the lasting success of these efforts depends on more than policy alone. They require strong political will, good governance, and the ability to track progress and adjust as needed.

Moving forward, we need a comprehensive approach: building up primary healthcare systems, increasing public investment in health, removing financial barriers, reaching underserved rural communities, and supporting the people who deliver care on the ground. International partnerships and public-private collaborations also have a vital role to play—but they must work hand in hand with local leadership and community voices.

In the end, closing the healthcare gap isn't just about services—it's about fairness, dignity, and recognizing health as a basic human right. Policymakers must lead with empathy and vision, creating systems that are inclusive, resilient, and centered on people—so that no one is left behind.

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