Reviewer’s report

Title: Is universal health coverage the practical expression of the right to health?

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Reviewer: Benjamin Meier

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This is a timely human rights contribution to ongoing development debates on the post-2015 agenda and ongoing public health debates on universal health coverage. In revising this manuscript for rapid publication, I would recommend that the authors consider the following minor changes:

* Abstract - Given a multidisciplinary audience, it would be helpful to provide an initial (if necessarily general) definition of universal health coverage in the abstract.

* Background - In stating that human rights law and the MDGs are competing visions, the authors should explain (and draw on the literature explaining) what human rights would add to the post-2015 health agenda beyond international obligations (shift in health focus, focus on most marginalized, legal accountability, etc.).

* Methods - This research depends upon disaggregating the norms of UHC, drawing upon authoritative sources in defining the norms of UHC; however, given that the authors begin by stating that "authoritative sources are less easy to identify," it would be helpful to explain further why the authors chose the sources that they did.

* Results

Right to Health Care - The authors’ reasoning depends entirely on accepting that the right to health entails international obligations, but this section seems comparatively underdeveloped and underreferenced (focusing almost entirely on a "plain language" reading of General Comment 14). With Health & Human Rights publishing a 2010 Special Issue devoted to international obligations, it would be helpful to look to this scholarship in both developing support for the analysis in this article and contributing to the larger academic literature on international obligations.

Universal Health Coverage - The authors conclude that UHC is ambiguous as to at least four attributes of the right to health, but the authors focus their discussion on only one. I would recommend expanding the last paragraph to delineate how UHC meets (or does not meet) each attribute of the right to health. (Note: there is a typo in "discrimination that is cause by direct payments").

* Discussion
Equity - Given that the discussion begins with a focus on equity, it would be helpful to analyze the difference between the human rights concept of "equality and non-discrimination" and the social justice concept of "equity".

International Obligation - The authors are rightfully concerned that the health obligations in the post-2015 agenda are on the state (as they were in the MDGs) rather than the international community, but this concern is not unique to the post-2015 health agenda. As other issues are having these same debates (see, e.g., JMP END Working Group on water and sanitation), it would be helpful to consider how this analysis applies across the post-2015 agenda.

Moving forward from this research, which provides an excellent initial contribution, it appears that there are two major rights-based flaws in framing health in the post-2015 agenda under universal health coverage:

(1) in developing norms, UHC only covers a right to health care, and
(2) in implementing rights, UHC does not cover international obligations.

Given that the authors have now focused on the implementation side of human rights, my hope is that the authors will consider a follow-up article on this larger normative flaw in defining post-2015 health obligations solely under universal health coverage.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests