



## EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

### BEYOND SERVICES: INSIGHTS FROM HOSPITALS

In Uganda, hospitals play a broader role than clinical care. They are key pillars for training, local access, and the protection of communities. Dr. Sam Orach, Executive Secretary at the Uganda Catholic Medical Bureau, outlines how the network is responding to the demands of Universal Health Coverage while facing underfunding, shifting priorities, and the need to balance accessibility with long-term sustainability.

JESSICA MARZARO INTERVIEWS DR. SAM ORACH / EXECUTIVE SECRETARY AT UGANDA CATHOLIC MEDICAL BUREAU

In Uganda, the hospital level holds a **pivotal** and multifaceted role within the national health system. These hospitals are not only providers of secondary care but also serve as essential referral points for lower-level health centers and remote areas, hubs for training healthcare workers, and safety nets for communities facing complex health challenges. The Uganda Catholic Medical Bureau (UCMB) manages one of the country's largest networks of faith-based health facilities, comprising 308 units including 33 hospitals and numerous health centers at different levels. To better understand the challenges and perspectives around this hospital-based model, we explore the topic together with Dr. Sam Orach, Executive Secretary of UCMB.

#### FUNCTIONING WITHOUT FUNDING

Funding these facilities involves navigating a complex landscape of financial flows. According to UCMB data, in 2023–2024 health units relied on three principal sources: user fees from patients (60%), government support (8%), and contributions from donors and international actors (22%). Uganda's health sector still faces the **burden** of catastrophic health expenditures, pushing vulnerable families deeper into poverty, along with the slow progress in establishing a comprehensive National Health Insurance scheme. "The rollout has been too slow," says Dr. Orach. This is compounded by the chronic underfunding of preventive and health promotion services, essential for reducing both disease incidence and long-term costs.

#### HEALTH OR HEALTH SERVICES?

Beyond financial matters, Dr. Orach urges a fundamental re-examination of the concept of Universal Health Coverage itself. "First, people need to properly define Universal Health Coverage," he says. "The tendency is for many to understand it as 'Universal Healthcare Coverage'.

Yet, it means the **whole continuum of health services**, including preventive services, health promotion, rehabilitative services, and healthcare."

He adds that even this broader definition still falls short. "SDG 3 is about ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages, not just about health services. Health is a state of well-being."

Current UHC metrics, such as the Health Services Coverage Index, focus on access to services but not on actual health status of the population. "Uganda's Index reportedly doubled between 2020 and 2022," he notes, "but this increase does not mean the population is healthier." There's a need, he says, for indicators that reflect how many people are free from illness or injury and have well-functioning bodies.

#### THE CATHOLIC MEDICAL BUREAU STRATEGY

To improve access and protect households from financial hardship, UCMB encourages its network of health facilities to maintain affordable fee structures, balancing cost recovery with equity. Partnerships with Joint Medical Store (JMS) ensure consistent availability and efficient use of medicines and supplies. JMS's gradual move into local pharmaceutical manufacturing could strengthen supply chains over time.

Community-based health financing mechanisms, including Community Health Insurance schemes, are promoted as key tools to reduce the risk of catastrophic expenditures. The Bureau also supports expanded preventive services and community outreach. Digital health is part of UCMB's future strategy. "We are exploring how to better use technology to increase access to healthcare services and health promotion," says Dr. Orach. UCMB also encourages regular check-ups rather than care only when illness strikes, promoting a "holistic healthcare" model that sees the person as a whole.

Despite these efforts, substantial challenges remain. Prevention and health promotion are still underprioritized. "There is an increase in non-communicable diseases that we need to pay great attention to," Dr. Orach warns, "yet communicable diseases are not decreasing". The path to genuine Universal Health Coverage will require a **broader, health-centered approach**—one that goes beyond improving access and affordability to improving actual health outcomes and well-being for all Ugandans.