

Universal health coverage in “One ASEAN”: are migrants included?

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As the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is getting ready towards full economic integration by 2015, the cross-border flow of skilled labor in particular and of citizens in general is expected to further intensify in the coming years. While the regional bloc's ten member countries signed in 2007 the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, the health rights of migrants still need to be highlighted and addressed, especially with ongoing reforms towards achieving universal health coverage (UHC) in most ASEAN countries. This paper seeks to examine the inclusion of migrants in the UHC schemes of three ASEAN countries – Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand – which exhibit diverse migration profiles and currently undergo varying stages of UHC development. Current migration trends, UHC design, and migrant coverage, as well as each country's adoption and implementation of the World Health Assembly Resolution 61.17 on the health of migrants, were reviewed. In general, it was noted that the level of attention given to the health of migrants is proportional to the maturity of the country's UHC scheme – for example, Thailand allows membership in social security and compulsory migrant health insurance schemes for registered non-Thai workers, while the Philippines developed a program for overseas Filipinos but none for foreign immigrants. Furthermore, migration trends – for instance, being a major sending or receiving country – hugely dictate the country's approach to migrant health. Political decisions outside the health sector will also be required in order to include vulnerable and marginalized migrant categories such as undocumented persons and refugees. In conclusion, ensuring that migrants are included in national UHC schemes is critical in order to make these systems truly 'universal.' It is in ASEAN's best interest to protect the health of migrants as it pursues the regional path towards collective economic prosperity and social progress.

Key words: migrant health, ASEAN, universal health coverage