The impact of health insurance in Africa and Asia: a systematic review
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Introduction
Health insurance is attracting more and more attention in low- and middle-income countries as a means for improving health care utilization and protecting households against impoverishment from out-of-pocket expenditures. The health financing mechanism was developed to counteract the detrimental effects of user fees introduced in the 1980s, which now appear to inhibit health care utilization, particularly for marginalized populations, and to sometimes lead to catastrophic health expenditures.1–3 The World Health Organization (WHO) considers health insurance a promising means for achieving universal health-care coverage.4

Various types of health insurance are available. National or social health insurance (SHI) is based on individuals’ mandatory enrolment. Several low- and middle-income countries, including the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, are establishing SHI. Voluntary insurance mechanisms include private health insurance (PHI), which is implemented on a large scale in countries like Brazil, Chile, Namibia and South Africa,5 and community-based health insurance (CBHI), now available in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Rwanda and Senegal.6–10 The various types of health insurance have different impacts on the populations they serve. For example, PHI is said to mainly serve the affluent segments of a population, but CBHI is often put forward as a health financing mechanism that can especially benefit the poor.7–10 Countries wishing to introduce health insurance schemes into their health systems should be aware of how their impact varies.

The impact of health insurance in low- and middle-income countries has unfortunately been documented only partially. Previous reviews have evaluated the performance of CBHI in terms of enrolment, financial management and sustainability.12–17 A recent review18 provides an overview of the scope and origin of CHI in low- and middle-income countries, with a particular focus on China, Ghana, India, Mali, Rwanda and Senegal, and also assesses CHI’s performance in terms of population coverage, range of services included and reimbursement rate. The authors concluded that the picture in Africa and Asia is very patchy, with large heterogeneity in institutional designs and organizational models and enormous variation in population coverage, services covered and costs achieved. No systematic reviews are available on the impact of SHI and PHI, which limits a direct comparison of their options and limitations. Also, health insurance is known to have effects on domains beyond those reported in existing reviews, such as social inclusion.19 Furthermore, most reviews available on the rapid development of health insurance in low- and middle-income countries are somewhat outdated.

To address the gaps described, this paper provides an up-to-date review of the impact of SHI, PHI and CBHI on a comprehensive set of domains. Following the conceptual framework by Preker & Carrin,20 we evaluate whether the different types of health insurance can: (i) mobilize resources, i.e. generate sufficient and stable resources for adequate functioning of health services; (ii) provide financial protection to clients against catastrophic health expenditures; (iii) improve utilization of health-care services by all socioeconomic groups; (iv) improve health care quality; (v) improve social inclusion, i.e. the provision of health services in alignment with the needs of various population groups, especially the poor and vulnerable; and (vi) improve community empowerment, i.e. involvement of the community in the organization of health services. Our review covers all low-
and lower-middle-income countries in Africa and Asia.

**Methods**

We carried out a systematic review of studies on the impact of SHI, PHI and CBHI in Africa and Asia that were published any year up to the end of 2011. Our search strategy is described in Box 1.

Studies were included if they: (i) were randomized controlled trials, cohort, case-control or cross-sectional studies, or qualitative descriptive case studies; (ii) studied the impact of health insurance on resource mobilization, service utilization, quality of care, financial protection, social inclusion or community empowerment; (iii) were carried out in a low- or lower-middle-income country either in 1987 or in 2007, to allow for changes in countries’ income status over time;21 (Appendix A, available at: http://www.niche1.nl/publications); and (iv) were written in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. Studies were excluded if they: (i) were policy reviews, opinion pieces, editorials, letters to the editor, commentaries or conference abstracts; (ii) originated from a country on the American continent or (iii) were duplicate references from different databases.

Two pairs of independent reviewers (ES and NT, JM and FM) screened all titles and abstracts of the initially identified studies to determine if they satisfied the inclusion criteria. Any disagreement was resolved through consensus. Full text articles were retrieved for the selected titles. Reference lists of the retrieved articles, as well as previous review articles,12,17–19 were searched for additional publications (referred to as “snowballing”).

**Data extraction**

The reviewers used a data collection form to extract the relevant information from the selected studies from Africa (ES and NT) and Asia (JM and FM). The data collection form included questions on qualitative aspects of the studies (such as date of publication, design, geographical origin and setting), health insurance scheme characteristics (such as type of scheme, starting year and target group), study characteristics (such as study design and period), and information on the reported impact domains, including reported strengths and weaknesses of schemes and main study conclusions. Reviewers graded the impact according to the following categories: positive effect (A); negative effect (B); no effect (C); inconclusive or not assessed.

**Quality evaluation**

The pairs of reviewers evaluated the quality of the included studies using a quality-grading protocol adapted from existing protocols known as the HIP study Review Protocol on Health Insurance.17,22,24 The protocol, which is available from the corresponding author on request, covers 19 indicators to assess rigour, bias, validity and generalizability of the studies, type of study (qualitative; quantitative), whether research question(s), concepts, methods, sampling, and data eliciting are adequately described, and whether the robustness of presented data and results is critically examined. For each item 0–2 points are given and these are added up to get an overall quality score (ranging from 0 to 38 points). Studies were categorized as low quality (0–14 points), medium quality (15–29) or high quality (≥ 30). One in five studies was randomly selected for assessment by a second reviewer. Any disagreements on the quality evaluation between the pairs of reviewers were resolved through consensus.

**Impact judgements**

We formulated overall judgements on the impact of SHI, PHI and CBHI on the various domains if at least 10 studies of medium or better quality were performed in those domains. We judged the evidence as strongly positive if A + (A + B + C) ≥ 60%; weakly positive if A + (A + B + C) ≥ 30% and < 60%; strongly negative if B + (A + B + C) ≥ 60%; weakly negative if B + (A + B + C) < 30% and < 60%; and inconclusive otherwise.

We adhered to PRISMA guidelines for the conduct of systematic reviews.25

**Results**

From the initial search for peer-reviewed articles based on title (8689 references), 8459 references were excluded and 230 full text references were retained for further scrutiny. Detailed inspection of abstracts and texts resulted in 159...
articles. This includes references found through screening reference lists in retrieved articles, snowballing and additional screening of organizational websites (Fig. 1).

**Characteristics of included studies**

Table 1 shows the summary characteristics of the 159 included studies – 68 from Africa and 91 from Asia (Appendix B, available at: http://www.niche1.nl/publications). Some studies stem from the same reference but are listed here individually. In Africa, most of the studies stem from only seven countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. The majority of these studies reported on CBHI and were of relative high quality. Fewer studies were on SHI and PHI, and these were of lower quality. In Asia, almost all studies originate from five countries only: China, India, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. The majority of Asian studies were on SHI and were, on average, of medium quality. Fewer studies were on CBHI and only one on PHI. Most studies used an observational design and only a few used a randomized controlled (4) or quasi-experimental design (20). The number of studies increased over time, with almost half of them published in 2005–2011.

**Impact of health insurance**

High and medium quality studies reported frequently on the impact of health insurance on financial protection (90), utilization (91) and social inclusion (65), but less often on resource mobilization (28), quality of care (21) or community empowerment (6). A full overview of the included studies and the detailed impact reported by each on the various domains is provided in Appendix B; the indicators employed in the included studies are listed in Appendix C (available at: http://www.niche1.nl/publications).

Table 2 shows that studies on the impact of CBHI on resource mobilization for health showed an overall positive effect. For example, studies in Bangladesh,

Still, other schemes in countries such as Rwanda

**Discussion**

This study is the first systematic review to broadly examine the impact of different types of health insurance schemes in low- and lower-middle-income countries in Africa and Asia on various domains. Our review points to an
Despite an incomplete evidence base, systematic reviews reveal that health insurance can be an alternative to user fees as a health financing mechanism. The strong evidence that CBHI and SHI can improve financial protection and enhance service utilization patterns is especially critical in this respect, but the weaker evidence that CBHI and SHI can foster social inclusion is also important. Although this type of impact is not unexpected in the case of CBHI because of its community orientation, it is more surprising in the case of SHI, which some claim underrepresents the informal sector.

Our findings thereby support the view of entities such as WHO that consider prepaid health financing mechanisms an important alternative capable of mitigating the detrimental effects of user fees, as well as a promising means for achieving universal coverage. The review is inconclusive concerning any impact of PHI because very few studies have been conducted. Hence, the absence of evidence of impact does not mean that PHI has no impact.

There is very little evidence on the impact of health insurance on quality of care and community empowerment and the organization of health services, and it is hoped that this will change in future years. Research is needed to explore this domain. Nonetheless, these domains are of critical importance to the performance of health insurance schemes. Many believe that health insurance schemes, through increased utilization patterns and subsequent income generation, can improve the quality of care, and community empowerment and the organization of health services. This is an important alternative financing mechanism and can foster social inclusion.

The findings of the review should be interpreted with caution and obviously should not be taken as a basis for implementing any type of health insur-

Table 1. Key characteristics of studies included in systematic review of studies on the impact of health insurance in Africa and Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study site</th>
<th>No. of observations</th>
<th>Type of article</th>
<th>Quality (% of observations)</th>
<th>Study design</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa (n = 68)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social health insurance</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private health insurance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-based health insurance</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia (n = 91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social health insurance</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private health insurance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-based health insurance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RCT, randomized controlled trial. Some articles refer to more than one study, and the number of articles can therefore be less than the number of studies.
Health insurance in Africa and Asia

Table 2. Strength of the evidence on the impact of different types of health insurance on certain domains in Africa and Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health insurance type</th>
<th>Social inclusion</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Resource mobilization</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Financial protection</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Quality of care</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Community empowerment</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social health insurance</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-based health insurance</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private health insurance</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
<td>+1/1</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
<td>O/0</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
<td>+1/0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The proportion represents net number of negative or positive studies over the total number of included studies on a certain domain.
- This proportion indicates the percentage of positive findings. While a large proportion favors a certain impact of health insurance on a certain domain, it may be biased if the proportion is small compared to the total number of studies.

The review revealed a large variation in study design and quality. Very few studies used experimental or quasi-experimental study designs, and most relied on observational analysis to compare, for example, patterns of utilization among insured individuals with those in a control group (perhaps the same individuals but formerly uninsured, or different individuals without prior insurance) – a design that can introduce a selection bias and affect results. Relatively few studies reported on resource mobilization and community empowerment, and those that did were of poor quality, which illustrates the challenges involved in measuring impact in these domains. Overall, our review shows the need to develop more rigorous study designs and impact indicators for health insurance scheme impact evaluations. It also suggests the potential usefulness of developing guidelines for appropriately measuring impact.

**Limitations of the review**

Our study has several limitations. First, we observed a large variety of study designs and indicators for assessing the impact of health insurance and their interpretation was not always straightforward. For those studies that used a control group, the use of self-selected controls in many cases may have biased the results and we carefully considered this in discussions among the pairs of reviewers. Second, we arbitrarily defined strength of the evidence on the basis of study quality, number of studies and percentage of positive findings. While this seems reasonable, the use of other parameters could have led to different review findings.

**Summary**

There is strong evidence that CBHI improves resource mobilization for health and that both CBHI and SHI improve health service utilization and provide financial protection for members in terms of reducing their out-of-pocket expenditure. There is weak evidence suggesting that both SHI and CBHI have a positive impact on the quality of care and social inclusion. Findings for both SHI and CBHI are inconclusive on community empowerment. Those for PHI are inconclusive on all domains because of insufficient studies.

**Conclusion**

CBHI and SHI hold strong potential to improve financial protection and en-
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Abstract
Health insurance in Africa and Asia: a Systematic review
Objective To assess the impact of health insurance on resource mobilisation, financial protection, service use, care quality, social inclusion and community empowerment in low-income and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia.
Method Systematic search of 20 databases, bibliographies, websites and grey literature for studies published before the end of 2011. Quality was assessed using a quality grading scheme.
Result 159 studies were included — 68 in Africa and 91 in Asia. Most African studies were on community-based health insurance (CBHI), which was of generally high quality. Social health insurance (SHI) studies were mostly from Asia, of medium quality. Only one Asian study was on private health insurance (PHI).
Conclusion Health insurance provides some protection against user fees and offers a promising way forward to universal health coverage.

Résumé
L’impact de l’assurance maladie en Afrique et en Asie: une étude systématique
Objectif Évaluer l’impact de l’assurance maladie sur la mobilisation des ressources, la protection financière, l’utilisation des services, la qualité des soins, l’inclusion sociale et l’autonomisation des communautés dans les pays à faible revenu et à revenu intermédiaire de la tranche inférieure, en Afrique et en Asie.
Méthodes Une recherche systématique d’essais contrôlés randomisés, d’études quasi expérimentales et observationnelles publiées avant la fin de l’année 2011 a été effectuée dans 20 bases de données de publications, des listes de références ou des études pertinentes, sur des sites Web et dans la littérature grise. La qualité des études a été évaluée au moyen d’un protocole de classement de la qualité.
Résultats Les critères d’inclusion ont été remplis par 159 études – 68 en Afrique et 91 en Asie. La plupart des études africaines se rapportaient à l’assurance maladie communautaire (AMC) et étaient de qualité relativement élevée ; les études de l’assurance maladie sociale (AMS) étaient pour la plupart des études asiatiques de qualité moyenne.
Seule une étude asiatique traitait d’AMP. La plupart des études étaient observationnelles, 4 d’entre elles disposaient de contrôles randomisés.

à...

Conclusion L’assurance maladie offre une certaine protection contre les effets néfastes des frais d’utilisation et une voie prometteuse vers l’accès à une couverture de soins de santé universelle.

Resumen
El impacto de los seguros médicos en África y Asia: un examen sistemático

El impacto de los seguros médicos en África y Asia: un examen sistemático

Objetivo Evaluar el impacto de los seguros médicos en la movilización de recursos, la protección financiera, el uso de los servicios, la calidad de la atención, la inclusión social y el empoderamiento de la comunidad en países de ingresos bajos y medios de África y Asia.

Métodos Se llevó a cabo una búsqueda sistemática de ensayos aleatorios controlados, estudios cuasirrelevantes y de observación publicados antes de finalizar el año 2011 en 20 bases de datos bibliográficas, listas de referencia de estudios relevantes, páginas web y literatura gris. La calidad de los estudios se evaluó por medio de un protocolo de clasificación por calidad.

Resultados De los estudios analizados, 159 reunieron los criterios de inclusión, 68 de ellos en África y 91 en Asia. La mayoría de estudios africanos informaron acerca de los seguros médicos basados en la comunidad y presentaban una calidad relativamente muy alta, los estudios acerca de seguros sociales de enfermedad fueron en su mayoría asiáticos y de calidad media. Sólo un estudio asiático se ocupó de los seguros médicos permanentes. La mayoría de estudios fueron de observación; cuatro de ellos presentaban controles aleatorios y 20 tenían un diseño de investigación cuasiexperimental. La protección financiera, el uso y la inclusión social fueron temas mucho más comunes que la movilización de recursos, la calidad de la atención o el empoderamiento de la comunidad. Existen pruebas importantes de que los seguros médicos basados en la comunidad y los seguros sociales de enfermedad mejoran el uso del servicio y ofrecen una protección financiera para los socios porque reducen sus gastos directos y que los seguros médicos basados en la comunidad también mejoran la movilización de los recursos. Por el contrario, hay pruebas poca sólidas acerca del efecto positivo sobre la calidad de la atención y la inclusión social de los seguros sociales de enfermedad y los seguros médicos basados en la comunidad. El efecto de los seguros sociales de enfermedad y los seguros médicos basados en la comunidad en el empoderamiento de la comunidad no es concluyente. Los resultados para los seguros médicos permanentes son inconclusivos en todos los campos porque los estudios son insuficientes.

Conclusión Las ofertas de los seguros médicos ofrecen cierta protección contra los efectos perjudiciales de las cuotas de usuarios y son un camino prometedor hacia la cobertura social universal.
References


