

Exemptions and waivers from cost sharing: ineffective safety nets in decentralized districts in Uganda

George W Kivumbi, Francis Kintu

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Abstract

The introduction of user-payment for health services is frequently followed by concern about the impact on equity of access for poor people. Decentralizing governments often try to remedy the created inequities by putting in place safety nets in the form of exemptions and waivers in the user-fee systems. However, where user payments merely operate as local government strategies for health financing, without national policy they are likely to be self-defeating, as local governments are frequently more interested in raising revenue to meet recurrent costs of devolved services than in promoting equity. Thus guidelines put in place by the central government to operationalize safety nets are seen by local governments as being contradictory to this goal, and are thus ignored or altered to suit the district revenue aims. This study was carried out to investigate the context and the constraints in implementing exemption schemes. Data were collected in two selected administrative districts of Uganda (Mbarara and Mukono). Qualitative approaches to data collection were adopted, namely focus group discussions and key informant interviews with policy-makers, health administrators, service providers and community members. These methods were combined with document review.

We found little evidence of safety-net guidelines initiated by decentralized/local governments, since district local governments had little motivation to extend exemptions, waivers or credits. The conclusion is that safety nets such as waivers and exemptions will only be effective if they are backed by a national health financing policy, they reconcile the often competing demands of local government revenue needs, and are strictly enforced and supervised by both the local and central governments. The implications of the findings for remedying the tension between the needs for cost recovery and for attainment of equity goals through exemption policies for the poor and indigent are discussed.



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