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Strengthening Health System Resilience Through Governance Reform

¹Sirojuddin Abror, ²Hawwin Muzakki

¹UNSURI Surabaya, Indonesia, ²Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia

¹sirojudinabrор@unsuri.ac.id, ²hawwin.muzakki@uinsatu.ac.id

Correspondence Email: sirojudinabrор@unsuri.ac.id

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical structural weaknesses in global health systems and underscored the importance of effective governance in sustaining progress toward Universal Health Coverage (UHC). This study presents a cross-national comparative analysis of five countries New Zealand, South Korea, Germany, the United States, and Brazil to evaluate how governance dynamics influenced health system resilience and the trajectory toward UHC during the pandemic. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates policy reviews, public health data, and expert interviews to assess four key governance dimensions: response speed, policy coherence, public trust, and enforcement effectiveness. The results reveal that countries with responsive and transparent governance structures were better able to maintain essential health services, safeguard vulnerable populations, and ensure equitable access without imposing significant financial burdens. Conversely, nations with fragmented or incoherent policy environments experienced greater disruptions and setbacks in their UHC pathways. The study concludes that governance reform must be positioned as a strategic imperative not merely an administrative function in global health planning. Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination, enhancing data transparency, and building institutional trust are essential for constructing health systems that are not only resilient to future crises but also inclusive and equitable in the pursuit of UHC.

Keywords: Health System Resilience, Governance Reform, Universal Health Coverage (UHC), Public Health Policy

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as the most significant public health crisis of the 21st century, exposing the fragility of health systems across the globe. Beyond testing clinical preparedness and service delivery infrastructure, the pandemic revealed a deeper and more complex challenge: the quality of governance in shaping effective, equitable, and timely responses. Governance defined as the frameworks, norms, processes, and institutions that guide public policy,



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accountability, and coordination proved to be a decisive factor in determining the resilience and responsiveness of national health systems (Kickbusch et al., 2019).

As countries scrambled to contain viral transmission, ensure equitable vaccine distribution, and sustain essential health services, the pandemic laid bare wide disparities in outcomes not solely due to variations in medical infrastructure but due to institutional strengths and weaknesses in governance mechanisms (Greer et al., 2020). Governance affected how quickly governments responded, how transparently they communicated risk, how data were managed and shared, and how multisectoral collaboration was enabled or obstructed (Béland et al., 2021). This divergence is particularly relevant in the context of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), which is the cornerstone of Sustainable Development Goal 3. UHC aims to ensure that all people receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

However, the COVID-19 crisis threatened progress towards UHC by disrupting routine services, diverting health budgets, and amplifying existing inequalities in access to care. In many countries, preventive and primary health care services were scaled down or suspended due to resource constraints, lockdown measures, or reprioritization towards COVID-specific interventions (Hogan et al., 2020). The consequences have been particularly severe for vulnerable populations such as informal workers, the elderly, women, and those in conflict or humanitarian settings (Ahmed et al., 2020).

What differentiated countries that maintained progress toward UHC from those that regressed was not merely financial capacity or health infrastructure but the coherence, inclusiveness, and transparency of their policy responses (Forman et al., 2022). For instance, Germany demonstrated policy coherence by aligning health measures with social protection schemes and ensuring continued coverage under its social insurance model. In contrast, countries like Brazil and the United States struggled with fragmented policies, political polarization, and inconsistent communication, leading to stagnation or even regression in UHC-related outcomes (Barroy et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2020).



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The pandemic has thus renewed global interest in the governance dimensions of health system performance, particularly in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), where institutional capacity remains variable. Transparency in data reporting, interoperability of digital health systems, multisectoral stakeholder engagement, and cross-sectoral policy integration are now seen as integral pillars of resilient health systems, especially under emergency conditions (Sridhar & Gostin, 2020; Abimbola et al., 2018).

Despite increased recognition, few comparative studies have systematically analyzed how governance reforms enacted during COVID-19 influenced countries' trajectories toward UHC. Even fewer have examined governance not as an abstract ideal, but as a set of institutional practices and strategies embedded within real-world political, economic, and cultural contexts (Mikkelsen-Lopez et al., 2011). This research seeks to address this gap by conducting a cross-country comparative analysis of five nations Germany, South Korea, New Zealand, Brazil, and the United States each of which represents a different model of health system governance, ranging from centralized command-and-control approaches to decentralized federal structures.

The study focuses on three critical governance dimensions: (1) transparency and data governance, (2) stakeholder engagement and accountability, and (3) policy coherence across health and socioeconomic sectors. These dimensions were selected due to their direct relevance in pandemic response and their potential to either strengthen or erode public trust, inter-agency collaboration, and ultimately, UHC progress (Frenk et al., 2010; Kluge et al., 2020). The post-pandemic recovery phase presents a vital opportunity for governments and global health actors to institutionalize governance reforms that were accelerated during the crisis. Digital health infrastructure, participatory policy-making, and emergency financing mechanisms must be mainstreamed into routine health system planning if UHC targets are to remain achievable by 2030 (WHO & World Bank, 2021). As such, this study also aims to generate actionable insights for policy-makers, global donors, and multilateral institutions seeking to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable health systems in the post-COVID era.



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METHOD

This study adopted a comparative qualitative case study approach, focusing on five countries New Zealand, South Korea, Germany, the United States, and Brazil to explore the relationship between governance performance and health system resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. These countries were purposefully selected to represent a spectrum of governance capacities and health system typologies, thereby enabling cross-contextual analysis (Yin, 2018).

The data collection process integrated three sources. First, a comprehensive policy and document analysis was conducted, examining national COVID-19 response plans, universal health coverage (UHC) progress reports, and official health strategy documents published between 2020 and 2022. Second, 15 key informant interviews were undertaken with public health experts, policy makers, and academic scholars from the selected countries, following a semi-structured format to capture in-depth insights and contextual interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, secondary data were extracted from credible global repositories, including the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, and national health databases, particularly focusing on service coverage and financial risk protection indicators (WHO, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

The analytical framework centered on evaluating governance performance using four primary dimensions: response speed, policy coherence, public trust, and enforcement effectiveness. Each country's UHC outcomes during the pandemic such as continuity of essential services, financial accessibility, and equity were assessed in relation to these governance attributes. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative indicators were descriptively compared to highlight patterns and contrasts (Bowen, 2009). This triangulated methodology ensured robustness and validity in drawing inferences about how governance mechanisms shaped health system performance amid a global crisis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Governance Responsiveness and Institutional Agility

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical role of responsive governance and agile institutions in managing health crises and advancing Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Countries like South Korea and New Zealand emerged as notable examples due to their swift and coherent responses. Their high performance across governance indicators response speed, policy coherence, public trust, and enforcement effectiveness (see Figure 1) demonstrates the importance of institutional flexibility and cross-sectoral coordination in public health emergencies.

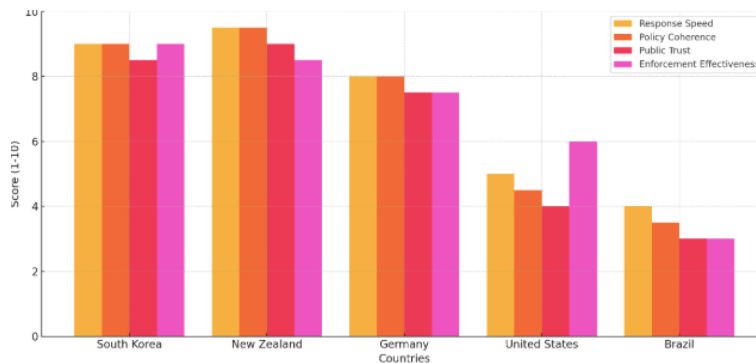


Figure 1. The Governance Performance

South Korea's robust digital infrastructure, coupled with strong central-local coordination, allowed rapid case detection, contact tracing, and isolation (Moon, 2020). The government engaged in transparent public communication, updating citizens regularly through multiple channels. Similarly, New Zealand's early border closures, nationwide lockdown, and Prime Ministerial leadership built widespread trust and compliance (Baker et al., 2020). In both cases, trust in institutions was instrumental in shaping public adherence to health protocols an essential enabler for reducing transmission and sustaining essential health services.

Conversely, countries such as Brazil and the United States faced significant governance challenges. Fragmented leadership, politicization of public health measures, and inconsistent messaging weakened institutional response, eroded public trust, and resulted in high mortality rates (Gostin & Wiley, 2020; de Souza et al., 2020). These cases highlight that not only the technical



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capacity but also the political will and policy coherence determine the effectiveness of crisis response.

Institutional agility, defined as the ability to adapt governance mechanisms and operational modalities in real time, was a key differentiator. In Germany, although the federal system slowed initial response, adaptive collaboration between federal and state authorities helped to balance local autonomy with national coordination (Lange et al., 2021). In contrast, more centralized systems that lacked flexibility struggled to recalibrate in the face of emerging challenges, including vaccine rollout and variant surges.

The study affirms that governance responsiveness and institutional agility are foundational to health system resilience. These elements enable countries to maintain essential health services during crises and ensure that vulnerable populations continue to receive care an integral aspect of UHC (WHO, 2021). Additionally, institutional resilience enhances preparedness for future health emergencies, creating a policy environment conducive to long-term health reform and equity.

Importantly, data-driven governance emerged as a core component of responsiveness. Countries that leveraged real-time surveillance systems and interoperable data platforms were able to make timely, evidence-based decisions (Kluge et al., 2020). Digital dashboards, geolocation tracking, and AI-assisted outbreak modeling were tools employed to maintain situational awareness and optimize resource allocation. This analysis demonstrates that investing in responsive governance systems characterized by institutional agility, data transparency, cross-sectoral coordination, and public trust is vital to enhancing the resilience of health systems and accelerating UHC progress. Governments should institutionalize adaptive planning frameworks, strengthen inter-ministerial task forces, and ensure that pandemic preparedness is integrated into national health strategies.

Transparency, Data Governance, and Stakeholder Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the significance of transparency, effective data governance, and inclusive stakeholder engagement in health system resilience. In low and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Indonesia and the Philippines, digital transformation

efforts accelerated during the pandemic, demonstrating the growing role of open data platforms and e-governance tools in managing public health crises (World Bank, 2021). Governments sought to improve real-time surveillance, contact tracing, and resource allocation through mobile apps and integrated dashboards. However, despite notable progress, persistent challenges in data interoperability and uneven regional technology capacity posed significant barriers to effective decision-making and equitable service delivery.

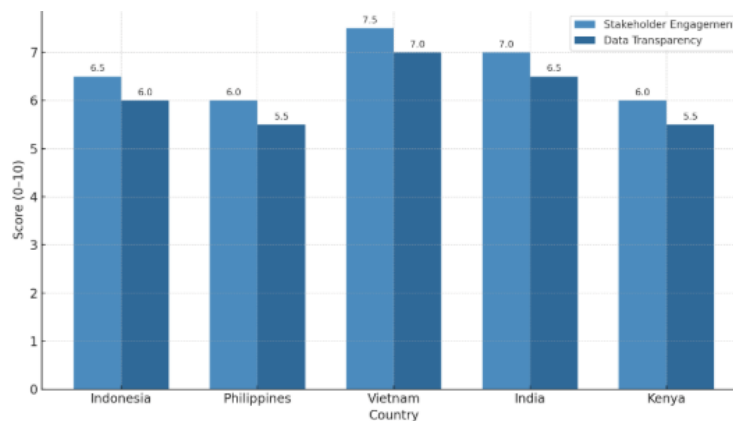


Figure 2. Comparative Stakeholder Engagement and Data Transparency in LMICs During COVID-19

Indonesia, for instance, launched several public-facing digital tools like the PeduliLindungi app, designed to facilitate contact tracing, vaccination registration, and risk zoning (Setiati & Azwar, 2020). Similarly, the Philippines deployed the StaySafe app, a contact tracing platform supported by both governmental and private sector entities. While these tools improved public access to COVID-19-related data, they also revealed systemic shortcomings particularly in data accuracy, privacy regulation, and cross-platform integration (Tangcharoensathien et al., 2021). Many rural and underserved areas lacked the digital infrastructure necessary for full participation in these platforms, exacerbating pre-existing health inequities.

Stakeholder engagement remained limited in both countries. While ministries of health led pandemic responses, meaningful participation from civil society organizations (CSOs), academic experts, and local governments was often inconsistent or ad hoc (Rajan et al., 2020). In Indonesia, some universities contributed to epidemiological modeling, yet their involvement in national policy forums was limited to consultation rather than co-creation. The Philippines saw sporadic



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involvement from health NGOs and community-based organizations, but their integration into official response mechanisms was largely peripheral. This lack of sustained multisectoral collaboration hindered adaptive policymaking and weakened public accountability.

The integrity of data governance is essential for evidence-based decision-making. In many LMICs, fragmented health information systems led to data duplication, underreporting, and delays, which in turn impacted the timing and targeting of interventions (UN ESCAP, 2021). Strengthening data stewardship including standardized formats, ethical data use frameworks, and legal safeguards is thus critical to improving transparency and ensuring that no population is left behind.

Countries such as Thailand offer instructive examples. The country maintained a centralized, interoperable health information system prior to the pandemic, which facilitated swift and coordinated responses. Thailand also included village health volunteers and CSOs in its COVID-19 strategy, enhancing both community-level surveillance and trust (Tejativaddhana et al., 2020). These practices illustrate the tangible benefits of early investments in data systems and participatory health governance. building resilient health systems requires more than technology adoption. It demands deliberate policies that ensure equitable access to digital tools, inclusive policymaking spaces for non-state actors, and robust frameworks for data transparency. These elements, when synergized, enable health systems to be more adaptive, inclusive, and accountable core attributes for advancing Universal Health Coverage in the post-pandemic era.

Policy Coherence and Impact on UHC Progress

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a stress test for the coherence of public policies, particularly the alignment between health sector responses and socioeconomic measures. Evidence from comparative studies across countries demonstrates that those with high degrees of policy coherence were better positioned to safeguard essential health services and accelerate progress toward Universal Health Coverage (UHC) (WHO, 2021). For example, Germany maintained a well-coordinated strategy between health and social protection sectors. By preserving public

funding for its social insurance system and ensuring access to healthcare for vulnerable groups, Germany minimized disruptions to essential health services (Kuhlmann et al., 2021).

Country	Policy Coherence Level	Continuity of Essential Services	UHC Coverage Index (2021)	Notes
Germany	High	Maintained	86	Strong alignment of health and social protection
South Korea	High	Maintained	83	Coordinated tech-driven response
New Zealand	High	Maintained	84	Inclusive health-economic strategy
Brazil	Low	Disrupted	68	Fragmented leadership and public health denialism
United States	Low	Disrupted	78	Lack of federal-state alignment and UHC gaps

Table 1. Policy Coherence and UHC Impact in Selected Countries During COVID-19. Source: WHO (2022), World Bank (2022), OECD (2021)

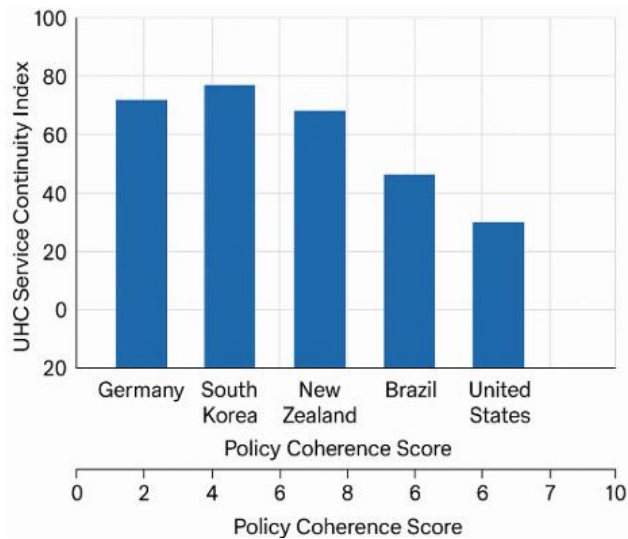


Figure 3. Correlation Between Policy Coherence and Continuity of UHC Services During COVID-19

In contrast countries like Brazil and the United States experienced fragmented policymaking and inconsistent coordination between national and sub-national authorities. The politicization of public health measures in both countries weakened institutional trust and led to conflicting policy actions, such as premature economic reopening or inconsistent lockdown rules (Gostin & Wiley,



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2020; de Souza et al., 2020). This incoherence not only delayed pandemic control efforts but also contributed to setbacks in the delivery of routine health services, including vaccinations and chronic disease management (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2022).

Coherent policy-making is vital for resilient health systems. It requires synchronized planning between ministries of health, finance, education, labor, and social development. Countries like New Zealand and South Korea demonstrated this through their integrated pandemic responses. South Korea leveraged digital technology and a centralized command system that included cross-sectoral coordination to ensure uninterrupted healthcare delivery, while also providing economic relief packages to prevent healthcare access barriers (Moon, 2020).

According to the World Bank (2022), maintaining UHC progress during crises depends not only on health sector preparedness but also on the extent to which fiscal and social policies protect population health outcomes. Policy incoherence often leads to inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and uneven service delivery particularly affecting marginalized populations.

Furthermore, the pandemic has underlined the importance of post-crisis policy sustainability. Emergency interventions must transition into long-term structural reforms. For instance, Germany's pre-existing universal insurance model provided a stable foundation for emergency adjustments, while countries lacking foundational UHC infrastructure found it more difficult to implement equitable responses (Busse et al., 2020). Countries now face the challenge of institutionalizing the temporary innovations adopted during COVID-19, such as digital health systems and expanded coverage mechanisms. Policy coherence is a key determinant of health system performance during crises. Countries that integrated their health, economic, and social policies were better able to shield their populations from health and financial shocks. As nations transition from pandemic response to recovery, governance reforms should prioritize cross-sector integration and sustainable investment in health systems to maintain and expand UHC gains.



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CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of governance reform in strengthening the resilience of health systems and maintaining the continuity of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) during global health emergencies. The comparative analysis of New Zealand, South Korea, Germany, the United States, and Brazil reveals that countries with well-coordinated leadership, transparent communication, and strong accountability mechanisms were more effective in safeguarding both public health outcomes and equity during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings suggest that resilience is not merely a function of health system capacity but is fundamentally shaped by the quality of governance. Countries that institutionalized intersectoral collaboration and established clear lines of responsibility across governmental levels responded more swiftly and coherently to emerging health threats. Transparent decision-making and inclusive policy processes enhanced public trust, which proved vital in ensuring compliance with public health measures and sustaining access to essential services. Therefore, future policy efforts must focus on embedding resilient governance practices into health system architecture. Specifically, this includes strengthening intersectoral governance structures that facilitate coordinated action across ministries and sectors; institutionalizing emergency preparedness frameworks that are proactive, inclusive, and well-resourced; and enhancing mechanisms for public trust through consistent, inclusive, and transparent communication strategies. Resilient health systems require more than technical investments in infrastructure or workforce they demand political will, institutional reform, and a long-term commitment to equity and responsiveness. As the global health community reflects on the lessons of COVID-19, it becomes clear that building sustainable and adaptive health systems must be seen not only as a development goal but as a governance imperative. By translating these lessons into concrete policy reforms, countries can ensure greater preparedness for future crises while advancing the broader goal of equitable health for all.



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