

Summary report on the

Capacity-building workshop on the role of the private sector in moving towards universal health coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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Cairo, Egypt
9–12 August 2015



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Summary of discussions.....	3
3.	Recommendations	6

1. Introduction

In their efforts to move towards universal health coverage, countries in the World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Region at various level of socioeconomic development need to mobilize more resources for health, as well as to address inequities in the access to and use of good quality health care. A multiplicity of health challenges, coupled with resources constraints in the public sector, make it imperative to engage with the private health sector to ensure that all needed health services are provided to the entire population. In most countries, the private sector is a main health service provider, yet its role is not fully understood, it is poorly regulated and existing partnerships between public and private actors are not adequately organized.

While most countries have passed regulations for the private health sector, little is known about the regulatory process or its comprehensiveness, effectiveness, institutional capacity and regulation enforcement mechanisms. Building national capacity in practical approaches to regulation based on international experience is therefore very much needed. The contracting of private providers, using several types of contractual arrangements, has been used worldwide, and identifying the most appropriate form and ensuring its adequate implementation is also needed. Countries consequently need to understand how to assess the private health sector, identify practical steps to enhance its regulation and capitalize on existing experiences within and outside the Region to promote and improve contracting initiatives. Building the capacity of policy-makers and practitioners to successfully engage with the private health sector is therefore vital.

In response to these issues, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held a regional capacity-building workshop on the role of the private sector in moving towards universal health coverage from 9 to 12 August in Cairo, Egypt. Senior staff responsible for

service provision, health care financing, and health policy and planning, from nine countries of the Region attended the workshop, along with representatives from private health care provider and health insurance organizations and other experts.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- identify the role of the private sector in moving toward universal health coverage;
- learn how to use the assessment tool adapted for the Region;
- provide step-by-step guidance for regulating health care provision in the private and public sectors; and
- illustrate different forms of public-private partnership and identify prerequisites and requirements for their successful implementation.

Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, in his opening message, noted the exponential growth of the private sector in the Region in recent decades and that it remained a key untapped partner in progress towards universal health coverage. However, challenges to this included unregulated expansion, lack of accreditation programmes, duality of workforce practice between the private and public sectors, irrational use of biomedical devices and technologies, non-prescription sale of antibiotics resulting in antimicrobial resistance, outdated regulations, inadequate regulatory control on quality and limited availability of data. In addition, the private sector had grown with little policy direction guiding its growth, he said.

Dr Alwan also noted that private sector utilization was particularly high in countries of the Region where public sector spending on health was low, demonstrating that the private sector had emerged as a consequence of insufficient or under-performing public sector services

in many countries. Essential information on private sector composition, service coverage, quality and pricing continued to be patchy. He concluded that it was a priority to formulate an evidence-based strategy to enhance the role and contribution of the private health sector in achieving public health goals in the Region. Following the workshop, he said, WHO would support Member States to establish effective national regulatory frameworks and build capacity to develop public-private partnerships through the most appropriate strategies for each country context.

2. Summary of discussions

2.1 Private sector assessment

To address the knowledge gap on the private health sector, participants learnt how to conduct a private health sector assessment using USAID's online tool, the Assessment to Action guide. It was felt by participants that conducting a private sector assessment was an effective approach to overcoming misperceptions about the sector through the use of Ministry of Health and other official data. The assessment was seen to pull together data from multiple sources, often for the first time in a country, to offer a "snap shot" that can be used as a baseline and starting point for engagement.

Private sector assessment was also viewed as a process by which to engage all stakeholders, including a wide range of government agencies beyond the Ministry of Health and multiple actors within the private health sector. Assessment can help to develop a common understanding of the problems faced, identify potential areas for a private sector role and reach agreement on policy actions and engagement strategies. The more effective private sector assessments in terms of political commitment and private sector "buy-in" have been those based on an inclusive and participatory process. The

private sector assessment team needs to identify, involve and interact with key leadership from both sectors to validate the assessment findings and foster buy-in for the recommendations.

Although the approach is called a private sector assessment, it was viewed more as an overview of key areas of the health system. It was felt difficult to understand the private health sector without examining what is happening in the public sector and the interface between the two. As a result, the assessment should explore the current status of policy, health financing, supply and demand in both public and private sectors. Private health sector assessment should be a flexible approach grounded in political realities and the current policy context in order to engage the private health sector.

2.2 Private sector regulation

In many countries of the Region, the growth of the private health sector has not been part of government's formal health sector planning processes. Concerns have been expressed by a number of countries about the quality of care offered by some private providers and also about the accountability of the private health sector to health consumers and national governments. This situation raises issues about the adequacy of current efforts to regulate the private sector in the Region. Assessments undertaken in three countries of the Region found that while many laws and regulations for regulating the private sector are enacted, some are outdated and do not address the current challenges and problems in health systems, such as the concentration of the private health workforce in urban areas, the unregulated expansion of private health services and the irrational use of biomedical devices and technologies. A weak regulatory framework coupled with poor enforcement can pose a serious challenge to health system development.

Participants felt that regulation is critical for universal health coverage and is a key governance tool for national governments wishing to move towards universal health coverage. Regulating for universal health coverage should focus on ensuring that people have access to quality health care without being exposed to catastrophic health care costs (with a particular focus on the needs of the poor and the vulnerable).

Existing laws and regulations in many countries of the Region are out of date and need to be reviewed and updated in light of the current needs and circumstances of each country. Strengthening the role of the ministry of health in making and enforcing regulation is vital. Effective regulation is also a prerequisite for effective partnership with the private sector in moving towards universal health coverage. There is also a need to build capacity in undertaking research on how to convert research into policy and practice at the country level and to develop practical tools and guidelines for countries on how to develop regulations for health.

2.3 Public-private partnership

Participants felt that in moving towards universal health coverage, engaging the private sector is inevitable. Various models and innovative options of public-private partnership are available, although alternate financing models are the focus of universal health coverage. Sustainability of public-private partnership was felt to require: creating a favourable environment by dialogue among stakeholders; generating empirical evidence on public-private partnerships in health based on existing public-private partnership projects; developing health sector-specific public-private partnership policy in concordance with national public-private partnership policy; putting an institutionalized framework and systems in place for designing and managing public-private partnerships; clarity of the role

of the ministry of health vis-à-vis the national public-private partnership unit; and developing capacity among ministry of health officials to design, manage, monitor and evaluate public-private partnerships. Other enabling conditions for public-private partnerships include: detailed information on the private sector; a regulatory and legal framework; and accreditation and quality assurance systems.

2.4 Conclusions

Countries have significant gaps in information on the private health care sector that need to be filled. Challenges for engaging with the private health sector in the move towards universal health coverage relate to all health system aspects, including health care financing, health care delivery, health workforce development, ensuring access to essential medicines and use of appropriate technology, collecting and sharing information, and governance.

During the working groups, countries emphasized the need for: engaging with the private sector to better contribute to public health goals; building ministry of health regulatory capacity; partnering with the private health sector; reducing out-of-pocket health expenditure payments incurred in the private sector; and improving the quality and safety of care.

3. Recommendations

To Member States

1. Countries should increase their commitment and improve their capacity to engage with the private health sector.

2. Country-led analyses should be undertaken covering private health sector assessment, financing, regulation, partnership contracting and quality of care.
3. Strategies should be developed that clearly identify a role for the private sector in the move towards universal health coverage.
4. Successful experiences of public-private partnership and examples of malpractice should be documented.

To WHO

5. Advocacy to secure political support for private health sector assessments should be done at the highest level.
6. Country technical teams should be encouraged, supported and monitored in carrying out private health sector assessments.
7. Targeted technical support should be provided, including tools, guides, technical experts to complement in-country expertise on assessment teams, and technical oversight for implementation.
8. The exchange of experiences and learning-by-doing should be facilitated.
9. Country teams should be supported in sharing and disseminating their findings and recommendations.



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