

Summary report on the

Meeting on the strategic framework for health workforce development in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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Cairo, Egypt
1–2 June 2016



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean organized a regional meeting on the strategic framework for health workforce development in the Region from 1 to 2 June 2016 in Cairo, Egypt.

The objectives of the meeting were:

- to share evidence and discuss countries' experiences in addressing health workforce challenges and actions taken to progress toward universal health coverage;
- to review and build consensus toward finalizing the draft regional health workforce strategic framework, in anticipation of its presentation at the Sixty-third session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean;
- to discuss the way forward towards implementation of the strategic framework.

The message of Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, highlighted the importance of finding solutions to key health workforce challenges faced by the Region. To respond to the challenges and priority issues in the Region, he said that a draft strategic framework for health workforce development 2016–2030 had been developed through a series of consultations that had taken place in the Region since 2014. He pointed out that it was timely as we embarked on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the World Health Assembly had just adopted a global strategy on human resources for health. Dr Alwan referred to the ongoing work of the United Nations High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth and underlined that Member States were in great need of further investments in health workforce development.

Universal health coverage – defined as all people being able to use needed health services with sufficient quality to be effective without financial hardship – is a shared vision of health system development for Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and a major element of the post-2015 development agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 3, highlights the need for substantial increase in the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries. Well planned and concerted efforts are required to ensure availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health workforce. In response to this, the Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly also asked WHO to develop the *Global strategy on human resources for health: workforce 2030*, which was adopted by the Health Assembly in May 2016.

Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are facing an overall shortage of health workers but the Region is diverse with diverse challenges. Member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Group 1) are heavily reliant on expatriate health workers, while Group 2 countries, which constitute middle-income countries with relatively well established health delivery infrastructure, face geographical and skill imbalances with increasing quality concerns. Group 3 countries face critical shortages of health workforce. Overall production and availability of health workers is suboptimal, further compounded by their imbalanced geographical distribution, inappropriate skill mix, quality concerns and high health workforce mobility.

The draft regional strategic framework on health workforce development (2016–2030) will be presented and discussed at a pre-Regional Committee technical meeting in October 2016.

2. Summary of discussions

Discussions took place on the challenges that could be faced by the countries in implementing the strategic framework and the monitoring and evaluation system to ensure effective implementation of the strategic framework.

The meeting introduced the *Global strategy on human resources for health: workforce 2030*. Then, the working document on the regional strategic framework for health workforce development was presented with an overview of the challenges faced by Member States in developing the health workforce in the Region towards achieving universal health coverage and the SDGs.

Participants reflected on the challenges faced by Member States in developing the health workforce and reviewed the working document.

Health workforce shortages continue and challenges are faced in anticipating future requirements and adjusting health professionals' education in accordance with the future needs in both quantity and quality. There is a disconnect between the health and education sectors. In addition, most countries face distribution challenges which require a review of recruitment, deployment and retention policies and strategies. Dual practice has also been raised as an issue to be followed up. Imbalances in skill mix and gender should also be taken into consideration. It was noted that almost half of the countries in the Region are in protracted crisis where instability exacerbates the health workforce situation.

Health workforce information is fragmented, incomplete and inaccurate in the Region. There should be clear emphasis on establishing/strengthening health workforce observatories in the strategic framework.

Quality concerns remain a challenge which highlights the need to transform health professional education and regulate the health workforce. The regulation of health workforce education and practice needs to receive greater attention with the increasing involvement of private sector in both education and employment.

Labour market dynamics play an increasingly important role in defining the health labour market and health workforce situation. International mobility of health workers is increasing with globalization and global shortages in the workforce. Investment in health workforce remains low in the Region, and information about financing of the health workforce is limited.

Participants expressed appreciation of the strategic framework in terms of its comprehensiveness in addressing the major issues, as well as in addressing the different aspects of the health workforce. They also provided constructive suggestions on how to enhance the working document in addressing the needs of countries aligned with other regional and global frameworks, as well as contributing towards reaching the targets of the SDGs. They highlighted the importance of avoiding “prescribing” to countries. Health workforce strategies should be strategically positioned according to the different health systems.

While policy directions, strategies and interventions were thought to be appropriate, they require fine tuning.

Monitoring and evaluation system for effective implementation of the framework

The monitoring and evaluation framework has been clearly defined although it was recognized that the availability of data and access to information in countries remains a major challenge. A well defined, well

selected set of indicators is needed to monitor the regional strategic framework. A set of indicators should be considered that can monitor and evaluate the overall performance of the framework. The indicators should be specific and clearly defined and forthcoming national health workforce account can not only guide but contribute to defining indicators.

In ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation of health workforce strategies, mechanisms need to be put in place and health workforce observatories can serve as an important mechanism. Research on the health workforce needs to be strengthened.

Implementation of the framework at country level

Implementation of the framework was extensively discussed to maximize the benefits from the strategic framework. Potential challenges in implementation include commitment, capacities for implementation, coordination and cooperation of stakeholders, the socioeconomic and political situation of countries and availability of resources, among other issues.

In taking forward the regional strategic framework, there is a need to develop context-specific national health workforce strategic plans aligned with the global and regional strategies. Development of such strategic plans requires the involvement and coordination of a number of stakeholders.

However, the Region consists of a diverse range of countries with a variety of health systems and health workforce needs. Almost half of the countries are in a conflict situation where health workforce strategic planning can be a real challenge. In such situations, identifying enablers and prioritizing actions is important.

Building capacities for health workforce governance and planning may also be required in taking forward the health workforce agenda in countries. Policy dialogues among stakeholders are critical and should be enhanced.

It is essential to learn from the experiences of other countries. WHO can establish a forum through which to ensure information and experience sharing among countries, as well as facilitating evidence building.

3. Way forward

The regional strategic framework shall be finalized in view of the suggestions from participants and a revised version shared. The draft will be presented at the pre-Regional Committee technical meeting in October 2016 for further discussion.



World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
P.O. Box 7608, Nasr City 11371
Cairo, Egypt
www.emro.who.int