

Progress report on health system strengthening: challenges, priorities and options for future action

1. Health system strengthening is among the five strategic priorities identified in 2012 by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean for its work with Member States over the next five years. A paper (EM/RC59/Tech.Disc.1) presented to the 59th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2012 identified challenges, gaps and priorities to improve health system performance in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region to move towards universal health coverage. The paper proposed seven priorities and multiple options for policy-makers to consider in reforming the health systems in their respective countries. The Regional Committee in resolution EM/RC59/R.3 requested the Regional Director to provide Member States with the strategic and technical guidance needed to support this endeavour.

2. This report describes actions taken by the Regional Office to implement the resolution, acknowledging that it constitutes a long-term agenda for WHO's collaboration with Member States. The report also lists the challenges encountered and the next steps for strengthening the health systems in the Region to move towards universal health coverage.

3. Progress in implementing the operative paragraphs in resolution EM/RC59/R.3 addressed to the Regional Director is summarized in the table below.

Operative paragraph	Action taken
2.1 Provide Member States with the strategic and technical guidance necessary to establish multisectoral mechanisms in support of universal health coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strategic paper on the role of multisectoral mechanisms in expediting progress towards universal health coverage will be finalized by mid-August 2013. The paper distils lessons learned from the experiences of countries. • Multisectorality will also be discussed in a regional meeting on universal health coverage to develop guidance for Member States by proposing practical approaches to involving different stakeholders.
2.2 Support Member States in building capacity in the area of health systems strengthening, including leadership development, health care financing, human resources development and health system performance assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building efforts have included: organizing a high-level seminar on health care financing and universal health coverage; assessing health care financing using the OASIS* tool; costing national strategic health plans using the OneHealth tool; conducting health system strengthening workshops supported by the GAVI Alliance; and organizing a consultation on health information systems and civil registration and vital statistics. • A health system capacity development course on universal health coverage will be conducted on 8–12 September 2013. The course will focus on multisectorality and is tailored to the needs of policy- and decision-makers.

Operative paragraph	Action taken
2.3 Set up mechanisms to share experience among countries in health system strengthening and support sub-regional cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Regional Office is harnessing existing sub-regional mechanisms to promote collaboration among countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council in the area of health care financing, and among “G5” countries (Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq and Pakistan) in the area of health systems strengthening. • The Regional Office is spearheading a public health leadership initiative for the Region. Mechanisms being explored for this and other regional health initiatives include twinning with global health institutions and teaming with WHO collaborating centres.
2.4 Establish networks of health systems experts to support health system strengthening in the Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A network of experts was established based on clear terms of reference and selection criteria with the aim of providing strategic advice to the Regional Director on strengthening the health systems in the Region. It includes 12 experts from within and outside the Region with expertise in various areas of health systems. The network will have its first meeting before the end of 2013.
2.5 Work closely with Member States to support the development, monitoring and evaluation of national health strategies and plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical support to enhance policy dialogue around national health policies, strategies and plans was initiated in Tunisia and Sudan as part of an EU-funded project, and plans have been made for a similar initiative in South Sudan and Yemen. • Four other Member States, Iraq, Libya, Morocco and Pakistan, were provided with technical assistance to assess the performance of their health systems and address country-specific challenges. • The Regional Office assisted several countries to assess the performance of their health financing system by undertaking diagnostic work and facilitating policy dialogue around health financing arrangements.
2.6 Submit a progress report on health systems performance to the 60th Session of the Regional Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary health system profiles for all Member States have been developed and validated by countries. The profiles provide an overview of the health system strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges and identify a list of priorities for health system strengthening. The profiles will be distributed to Member States at the 60th Session of the Regional Committee. • A framework for assessing health system performance and monitoring and evaluating progress is being developed. A regional consultation in May 2013 identified a set of health system performance indicators.

*Organizational Assessment for Improving and Strengthening Health Financing

4. The main challenge remains to establish a clear vision and strategy for countries to move towards universal health coverage, recognizing that universal health coverage will involve reforming all health system components including: enhancing access to essential medicines and technologies;

improving the quality and safety of provided care; strengthening the performance of the health workforce; developing comprehensive health information systems; establishing equitable health financing mechanisms; and devising coherent health system policies and strategies. Continued commitment and intensified efforts are needed to facilitate progress.

Next steps in strengthening health systems are as follows.

- Continue with implementing the agenda presented in the Regional Committee paper EM/RC59/Tech.Disc.1.
- Pursue the analytical work initiated in the areas of mapping of health care financing, hospitals, private sector and regulation.
- Follow up the implementation of recommendations of the regional meeting on universal health coverage held in August 2013.
- Intensify efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Regional Office to respond to country needs in the area of health systems.