

Investing in building a resilient health workforce for the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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A vibrant health workforce is the backbone of any health system and key to advancing health care goals. However, there is a general shortage of health workforce globally, as health workers remain overstretched, underpaid and sometimes undervalued. Without immediate and sustained investment in a resilient and well-supported workforce, we risk being unprepared for the next pandemic. We will be unable to control the surge in non-communicable diseases and fall short of achieving Universal Health Coverage and the health-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) is home to 10% of the world's population and is projected to have 20% health workforce shortage by 2030 if appropriate and timely investments are not made to boost the health workforce (1). Political instability, conflict, fragile health systems, economic challenges, and chronic underfunding over the years have taken their toll on the health workforce in the region.

The economic case for investing in health workforce development in the EMR is not just strong, it is irrefutable. The High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth has already highlighted the triple impact of investing in health workforce development: job creation, improving health and boosting economic growth (2). For every US\$ 1 invested in health and in sustaining the jobs of health workers, the potential return is as much as US\$ 9 (3).

The health sector is a major contributor to employment, with health care jobs comprising up to 20% of the total employment in high-income countries and around 5–6% in low-income countries. In low-income countries, each health sector job generates an estimated 3.4 additional jobs across related sectors (4). The health sector is 1 of 5 sectors that could generate local jobs at such scale: energy and infrastructure, agribusiness, health care, tourism, and value-added manufacturing. These sectors have a high potential for job creation and may be more resilient to the broader forces reshaping the global economy (5).

Half of all economic growth globally over the past decade have resulted from improvements in health: for every added year of life expectancy, the economic growth rate is boosted by 4% (3). Although the COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to cause US\$ 47.7 trillion in global economic

loss between 2020 and 2030, more than 17 times the cost of achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (6).

Recognizing the critical role of the health workforce as an accelerator in achieving the health goals, the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean presented the flagship initiative on “investing in a resilient health workforce” to the Regional Committee in 2024 and the initiative was adopted during the 71st Session of the Committee in October (7,8).

This initiative is a comprehensive, multi-pronged, strategic effort to sustainably transform health workforce in the EMR. It will strengthen the health workforce in the EMR by unlocking domestic resources and securing sustained levels of financing required for continuous development, employment and retention of health workers. To strengthen the health workforce, we must give priority attention to the key issues influencing domestic health policy by giving health a central position in the economic and development agenda at country level (6).

Considering that majority of EMR countries are challenged by limited employment capabilities and imbalances in health workforce distribution and skill mix, efforts must be made to improve the efficiency of investments in health workforce by focusing on high-impact priority issues. Investments that optimize, reskill, retrain, retain, and protect the health workforce will help deliver quality care, improve service delivery in underserved areas, expand access to services, and strengthen the capacity to respond to health emergencies.

Returns on investment in the health workforce may take a while to realize, therefore, it is critical to invest in current as well as future health workforce, taking into consideration the demographic, epidemiologic, social and digital transformations and the demand for a more diverse and multidisciplinary workforce for resilient health systems.

Resilience today goes beyond physical infrastructure, it is also about having trained professionals who can be rapidly mobilised during crisis. Resilience must be built for the long-term through sustainable workforce planning and continuous training to empower health workers to adapt to everyday health needs and future challenges.

There is a need to transform health professions education in the EMR to ensure availability of the required competencies and skill mix for a fit-for-future health workforce. There is also a need to strengthen the regulation of education and practice of health practitioners across the region to improve service quality. To do this, we must work together collaboratively in

harnessing and strengthening the immense health expertise, experience, capacities, and resources in the EMR. Investing in the health workforce will accelerate progress towards achieving our health goals. It is critical for advancing Universal Health Coverage and health security and will help boost national economies.

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