
Progress report on the regional strategy to improve access to medicines and vaccines in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2020–2030, including lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

1. In October 2020, the 67th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean adopted resolution EM/RC67/R.2 endorsing the regional strategy to improve access to medicines and vaccines in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2020–2030, including lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To ensure that everyone in the Eastern Mediterranean Region has access to the quality essential medicines and vaccines they need, without suffering financial hardship, by 2030, implementation of the strategy has focused on eight strategic areas: national policies for medicines and vaccines; sustainable funding; availability and affordability of medicines and vaccines; efficient supply systems; regulatory systems; rational use of medicines; local production of quality medicines and vaccines; and partnerships and collaboration.
3. This report provides a progress update on implementation by Member States and WHO during the first four years of the 10-year timeframe of the strategy, as well as on the challenges and way forward.

Progress update

National policies for medicines and vaccines

4. Djibouti, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen were supported by WHO in developing national medicines policies aligned with their health development policies and intersectoral plans. In addition, support was provided to Djibouti, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic to update their essential medicines lists.
5. WHO implemented a survey to measure key aspects of the pharmaceutical sector in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic. The results will help WHO monitor progress and provide insights for future improvements. A paper on pharmaceutical regulation in Iraq was published in the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal.
6. A survey was undertaken by WHO to identify barriers to reporting substandard and falsified medical products to the global monitoring and surveillance system. The countries surveyed were Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen.
7. A survey was carried out by WHO in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic to monitor the implementation of WHO guidelines for medical products to understand the factors that hinder or support the adoption of written WHO standards or guidelines for pharmaceuticals, including vaccines, biological therapeutics and blood products.
8. WHO conducted a survey on accessing morphine for medical use with participation from most countries in the Region. A report, *Left behind in pain*, has been published that identifies enablers and barriers to safe access to morphine for medical use and proposes balanced policy actions to address them.

9. Countries from the Region were facilitated by WHO to participate in the first WHO Traditional Medicine Global Summit. The Summit was organized alongside the G20 health ministerial meeting to promote political commitment and evidence-based action on traditional medicine. The event provided a platform for sharing best practices, innovative evidence, data and insights on the contribution of traditional medicine to health and sustainable development.

Sustainable funding

10. WHO advocated for sufficient domestic public funding for essential medicines and vaccines through improved financial management and disseminated policies and best practices for equitable medicines financing using various platforms and countries support missions.

Availability and affordability of medicines and vaccines

11. The extent of medicine shortages in Tunisia was assessed by WHO, and potential short-term and mid-term interventions and solutions were identified to mitigate the impact of shortages on the health system.

12. A WHO guideline on country pharmaceutical pricing policies was issued to assist Member States in managing pharmaceutical prices, as part of WHO's policy to promote information exchange on medicine prices between countries in the Region. WHO also conducted a vaccine pricing analysis in Jordan as part of a vaccine modernization initiative to improve procurement performance and enhance access to new vaccines by ensuring effective procurement and supply management.

13. WHO held the fourth global Fair Pricing Forum in February 2024 to discuss the affordability and transparency of prices and costs of health products and to activate support for countries to achieve more affordable and accessible pharmaceutical products.

Efficient supply systems

14. WHO supported the development of policies, good practices and capacity-building activities to enhance the governance, efficiency and quality of procurement and supply chain management systems across the Region, in both normal and emergency situations. Jordan, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic have conducted comprehensive assessments of their national medical supply systems to improve the quality and effectiveness of their procurement and supply chain management practices.

15. A WHO regional consultation was held in Luxor in November 2023 to discuss the feasibility of launching a regional pooled procurement initiative, including the different models of pooled procurement, its benefits, challenges and requirements, and the types of medicines and vaccines that could be included.

Regulatory systems

16. WHO supported countries to strengthen their NRAs to ensure the quality, safety and efficacy of medicines, vaccines and other medical products. Technical support was provided to Egypt to evaluate vaccine production capacities. Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia were supported to develop NRA institutional development plans and set up a benchmarking roadmap. Technical sessions on the NRA benchmarking concept were organized for regulators of all Member States to support the strengthening of their regulatory systems.

17. The Egyptian Drug Authority reached maturity level 3 for vaccine regulation, and the Saudi Food and Drug Authority achieved maturity level 4 for medicines and vaccines regulation, the highest level of WHO's classification for regulatory authorities.

18. National pharmacovigilance training workshops were supported by WHO for Iraq, Jordan and Yemen to promote the reporting of adverse drug reactions, adverse events following immunization, medication errors and lack of therapeutic efficacy. The number of full members of the WHO Programme for International Drug Monitoring (PIDM) from the Region has increased to 17 countries. Djibouti and Somalia became associate members of the PIDM in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

19. WHO organized a series of meetings to encourage countries to participate in the Collaborative Registration Procedure (CRP). The meetings aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of CRP mechanisms, processes, requirements and available tools, as well as to provide support for the implementation of the CRP in countries. Many Member States in the Region showed interest in this initiative.

20. The performance of the Supreme Board of Drugs and Medical Appliances (SBDMA) in Yemen was evaluated by WHO, especially the procedures related to the regulation of vaccines and medicines to ensure their safety and quality. WHO also provided technical support for revising the SBDMA's national strategic plan (2022–2026), including the drafting of a comprehensive development plan.

Rational use of medicines

21. Virtual training workshops were conducted by WHO on national antimicrobial consumption surveillance and hospital antimicrobial consumption monitoring. Fifteen countries and territories, including Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen, have enrolled in the Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System (GLASS). Thirteen of these shared their national antimicrobial consumption data with GLASS.

Local production of quality medicines and vaccines

22. WHO held a regional expert consultation on key enabling factors for successful local production and supply of quality-assured medical products, a regional technical vaccine manufacturing workshop with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and an expert consultation to develop a regional vaccine production strategy, with a focus on COVID-19 vaccines.

23. A regional strategy was developed by WHO to enhance vaccine production towards universal health coverage and health security in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The strategy aims to establish a national vaccine production policy in vaccine-producing countries, facilitate regional collaboration and partnerships, and investment in research and development and production capacities, and strengthen regulatory capacities at national and regional levels.

24. Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates were able to produce COVID-19 vaccines. WHO provided support to Egypt, Pakistan and Tunisia, who were selected as partners for mRNA technology transfer to strengthen vaccine production. WHO also assisted the Islamic Republic of Iran and United Arab Emirates in evaluating their “ecosystems” for sustainable vaccine production.

Partnerships and collaboration

25. WHO organized the Eastern Mediterranean Drug Regulatory Authorities Conference in 2021 and 2023, bringing together NRAs from the Region to enhance cooperation and regulatory harmonization. Senior representatives from NRAs attended and shared their experiences and professional approaches, spanning all core regulatory functions.

Challenges

26. A major challenge in implementing the regional strategy is the overall lack of sufficient human and financial resources, compounded by a high turnover of staff at country level and the lack of long-term sustainable funding, particularly for human resources.
27. Similarly, a lack of adequate resources at the regional level has affected the provision of sustained and coordinated technical support to Member States for improving access to medicines and vaccines.
28. Inadequate attention is given to the role of access to affordable and quality-assured medicines and vaccines in achieving universal health coverage and protecting people in emergencies.
29. There is inadequate or ineffective coordination between NRAs and ministries of health in some countries.
30. The protracted conflicts and instability in some countries of the Region is an ongoing challenge to implementing the strategy.

The way forward

31. The WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean has established a flagship initiative to ensure timely and equitable access to quality assured and safe medical products by securing an efficient supply chain at national and regional levels, with a focus on strengthening procurement and supply systems, fostering local production and strengthening regulatory systems. This will help to ensure that the strategy is implemented.
32. WHO will establish a regional advisory committee to improve access to medicines and vaccines by supporting countries to implement components of the regional strategy and plans for capacity development.
33. Member States are urged to continue to take action to accelerate the implementation of the regional strategy to improve access to high-quality medicines and vaccines at the national level.
34. Member States should ensure sustained access to a priority list of medicines and health products as a basic human right and ensure that supplies of medicines and health products for priority health conditions are not abruptly halted.
35. Member States are urged to promote and support the scale-up of the production of safe, effective, quality and affordable medicines and vaccines.
36. WHO will continue to provide Member States with sustained and coordinated guidance, as well as technical support, for implementation of the regional strategy to improve access to medicines and vaccines, and will provide a report on progress at the 73rd session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2026.