



Progress report on private sector engagement for advancing universal health coverage

Introduction

1. The private health sector plays a very active role in service provision in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region in terms of both ambulatory and hospital care. However, the sector has expanded with only limited national policy direction and is often not included in public health sector planning. The private health sector is thus an untapped resource in the context of expanding universal health coverage (UHC).
2. Several global and regional commitments have been made on advancing UHC, including resolution EM/RC60/R.2 on universal health coverage (2013), resolution WHA69.24 on strengthening integrated people-centred health services (2016) and resolution EM/RC63/R.2 on scaling up family practice: progressing towards universal health coverage (2016). EM/RC63/R.2 further emphasizes the importance of strengthening public–private partnerships in service delivery through a family practice approach.
3. These commitments were followed by the adoption of resolution EM/RC65/R.3 on private sector engagement for advancing universal health coverage at the 65th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2018. This resolution endorsed a framework for action on effective engagement with the private health sector, and the Committee urged Member States, inter alia, to incorporate effective engagement with the private sector for service delivery into their national policy, strategies and plans towards achieving UHC, and to strengthen the capacity of ministries of health to design, manage, monitor and evaluate effective engagement with the private sector for health service delivery.
4. Resolution EM/RC65/R.3 further requested the Regional Director to support assessments to identify challenges and opportunities related to the engagement of private care providers in service delivery in order to develop strategic action plans for effective partnership towards achieving UHC.
5. This report summarizes the progress made in implementing resolution EM/RC65/R.3 in the Region during the period up to June 2020.

Progress achieved since 2018

6. The Regional Office has developed an in-depth assessment tool on the private health sector that covers aspects such as financing, modes of access to services, quality control, regulatory frameworks and governance, data collection and public–private partnerships. Seventeen countries in the Region have completed their in-depth assessments: Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen.
7. To support Member States in implementing the framework for action on effective engagement with the private sector, the Regional Office, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Middle East and North Africa Regional Office and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) designed a three-day policy dialogue workshop with the objective of supporting selected countries in the development of their workplans for effective engagement with the private health sector. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, these workshops are currently on hold and will be held at a later date.
8. In a joint letter to health ministers, the regional directors of WHO and UNICEF announced the operationalization of the framework for action in eight countries during 2020: Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia and Yemen.

9. The First Regional Health Forum was held on 4 March 2020 in Cairo, Egypt, to review country experiences in implementing the *Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All* in the Region. Extensive discussions on the Action Plan's seven accelerator themes – including the accelerator for primary health care – resulted in a regional joint action plan for 2020–2021 to support Member States. WHO, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF, in their two-year joint workplan on primary health care, agreed to support the development of national workplans in 11 countries to operationalize the private health sector framework for action.

10. The Regional Office is conducting a review/analysis of the private health sector in the following eight thematic areas: immunization, child and maternal health; emergency care systems; noncommunicable diseases; nutrition; mental health; health information; use of guidelines and protocols; and communicable diseases and immunization (in Morocco and Pakistan). The resulting eight thematic reports will help Member States to identify gaps and priorities for engagement with the private health sector.

11. The Regional Office is in the process of developing three reports: (1) a review and update of the framework for action in relation to expanding service coverage for UHC; (2) health financing options for improved private health sector engagement towards UHC; and (3) an updated situation analysis of the role of the private health sector in UHC. In 2020, WHO headquarters will publish a case study mapping the eight-year journey of building evidence and developing a framework for engaging the private health sector in advancing UHC in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

12. WHO in collaboration with UNAIDS, UNFPA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF and the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA) is conducting an assessment of the potential role of the private health sector in COVID-19 responses in 11 countries of the Region.

Main challenges

13. Laws and regulations for the private health sector, and levels of enforcement, vary considerably across the Region. In low-income countries, policies and commitments to regulate the private health sector are weak or nonexistent. This lack of regulation is due either to a lack of capacity and resources or to the lack of an enforceable legal authority.

14. The importance of partnership with the private health sector is increasingly being acknowledged by ministries of health, and policies for engaging with this sector are being developed across the Region, notably in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. However, a lack of technical capacity in countries to develop policy and regulations remains a challenge to ensuring the effective contribution of the private health sector in achieving public health goals in the Region.

Opportunities and way forward

15. The results of the national in-depth assessments highlighted the essential role of the private sector in moving towards UHC by filling gaps in coverage, preventing governments from overstressing their capacities to deliver for all, and harnessing this rapidly growing sector for national policy goals. Regulation, provision of user information and the purchasing of private health services are essential for ensuring that service quality and patient safety issues are integrated into private health care delivery.

16. The assessments also show that the private sector provides reasonably adequate service quality in middle- and high-income countries but requires greater quality oversight in low-income countries. The contribution of the private sector also varies according to the context of particular countries, and locally responsive strategies are therefore required to harness their potential value. Although regulation of the private health industry is in place to some degree in all countries of the Region, the regulation of hospitals and clinics remains a grossly overlooked area.

17. Policy dialogue is based on the regional framework for action and in-depth assessments of the private health sector in countries. Despite the challenges involved, the regional framework for action will continue to be used to guide support to countries in developing their policies on expanding service coverage through effective engagement with the private health sector.

18. The eight thematic reports on the private health sector in the Region will be finalized in the last quarter of 2020 and will help countries to identify gaps and priorities for engagement with the private sector.

19. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Regional Office will produce a report on the potential role of the private health sector in the response to COVID-19 in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.