



Report of the fifth meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee to the Regional Director

1. Introduction

1. The Technical Advisory Committee to the Regional Director convened for its fifth meeting on 25 March 2021 at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo, Egypt. The objectives of the meeting were to solicit the advice of the Committee on:

- matters relating to the implementation and evaluation of WHO's strategic directions in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, in particular implementation of WHO's vision for public health in the Region, *Vision 2023*, and the related strategy;
- measures to strengthen the capacity of the Regional Office and country offices in support of Member States;
- policies and strategies for the development of technical cooperation among and between countries of the Region;
- means to engage key stakeholders from the health and non-health sectors in order to promote the concept of "health in all policies";
- any other topics referred by the Regional Director.

2. Ten members of the Committee attended the meeting, along with relevant staff of the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. The meeting was chaired by the Regional Director.

3. During the meeting, participants were requested to discuss a number of key questions introduced through a series of presentations by senior members of WHO staff in the Region. The discussions included identification of additional challenges that existed and advice on how WHO could best respond within the current context of COVID-19 pandemic in the Region and the post-pandemic period.

2. Recommendations

4. The Technical Advisory Committee made the following recommendations for WHO's work in the Region.

General

- Continue working to identify lessons from the COVID-19 response and integrate successful innovations such as digital medicine within health systems.
- Consider embedding experts and researchers within ministries of health as a possible model to facilitate effective evidence-based transformation in the health sector.
- Support countries to expand and enhance health education, from community and school education through to medical and public health faculties. The pandemic has highlighted critical gaps in the Region, for example the relatively poor contribution of local research institutions to vaccine development efforts.
- Investigate the emerging concept of the learning health system and consider the Eastern Mediterranean Region as such a system, meaning data is gathered systematically from various sources, analysed and fed back to drive systematic adaptation and improvement.

Tackling COVID-19 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

- Step up efforts to combat misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, including very high rates of vaccine hesitancy among health care workforce. Communities should be educated and engaged to help combat misinformation.
- Identify and promote strategies to reinforce positive social norms and effective behavioural change.

- Support the use of data modelling in countries, accepting that different countries may use different models and that current models should be improved.
- Encourage and support reopening of schools as a priority to protect students' physical and mental health and development and benefit society more generally.
- Reconsider WHO's opposition to vaccine passports – countries may insist on them, and there are strong public health benefits in supporting careful reopening of societies and economies, so there is an argument for WHO to focus on ensuring that vaccine passport systems are effective and equitable rather than opposing them completely on principle.
- Position the Region to advocate and prepare for universal provision of COVID-19 vaccines to the whole world's population as a shared global endeavour. COVAX is insufficient at 20% global population coverage.
- Recognize the role of successful leadership at all levels in successful pandemic response, and seek to support such leadership.

Strengthening health systems for universal health coverage and health security

- Identify those health system functions that truly strengthen health security. A systems approach is the right way to move towards universal health coverage and health security, but critical thinking is required. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown globally, high investment in health systems and services does not necessarily equate with high health security, since some countries with very well resourced health systems have been badly affected.
- Review the emerging scholarly literature on health system strengthening specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic – there is a manageable but significant body of work on this which should be mined for insights.
- Encourage countries to invest in pooled procurement of essential medicines and vaccines. This already works in some other regions – the key missing ingredient in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is political will.
- Strengthen WHO country offices and give them a larger role in providing technical support for health system strengthening.
- Improve links between health systems and academia as part of efforts to strengthen the evidence base for health policy-making.
- Capitalize on increased use of primary care centres during the pandemic as part of efforts to permanently raise the profile and status of primary health care.

Improving emergency preparedness

- Ensure that the Region's perspective is well reflected in the upcoming report of the IHR Review Committee and that countries are enabled and supported to review and respond to the report.
- Improve community engagement for more effective emergency preparedness and response. This emerged as a weak spot in the COVID-19 response. The proposed presentation of a technical paper at the next session of the Regional Committee is a welcome step, but not sufficient.
- Encourage investment in vaccine production capacity in the Region.
- Encourage investment in standardized genomic testing capacity across the Region. Research suggests that early and widescale application of testing across populations has been a crucial factor in enabling some countries around the world to control the pandemic far more effectively than their peers.
- Collaborate with the World Bank and other multilateral development financing institutions to improve contingent financing mechanisms.
- Ensure that medical students are trained in health security and resilience as part of their role as future public health leaders.
- Develop a mechanism to mobilize skilled personnel – including potentially both faculty and students – from public health schools during health emergencies.
- Support the deployment of new digital technology for surveillance, monitoring and modelling.

Annex 1
List of participants

Members of the Technical Advisory Committee

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Other relevant staff according to agenda item.