



Progress report on the framework for action for the hospital sector in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Introduction

1. In 2012, the 59th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean adopted a resolution on health systems strengthening and moving towards universal health coverage through strengthening service provision (EM/RC59/R.3); the following year, a resolution on universal health coverage was adopted (EM/RC60/R.2). In May 2016, the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly adopted a resolution on strengthening integrated, people-centred health services (WHA69.24), which *inter alia* urged Member States to implement the framework on integrated, people-centred health services and make health care systems more responsive to people's needs. A renewed focus on hospital roles, functions and operations through an integrated and people-centred lens is therefore required.

2. In 2019, during the 66th session of the Regional Committee, Member States adopted resolution EM/RC66/R.4 on introducing the regional framework for action for the hospital sector in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The resolution called on Member States to: ensure political commitment to planning and implementing people-centred hospitals; develop/update a national hospital sector strategy using the regional framework for action; and monitor and evaluate hospital sector performance and progress in implementing the national strategy. It further requested the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean to provide technical support to Member States to build capacity for the development and implementation of a national hospital sector strategy, and to assist Member States in building management capacities in the hospital sector.

3. This report summarizes the progress made in implementing resolution EM/RC66/R.4 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Progress achieved since 2019

4. In November 2019, following the adoption of the resolution, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held a regional meeting in Muscat, Oman, on implementing the regional framework for action. The meeting was attended by participants representing 19 countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region to discuss the main priorities and challenges in the hospital sector in their countries and develop draft workplans for the initiation and implementation of national hospital sector strategies. Following the meeting, participants attended the 43rd World Hospital Congress, held under the theme of "People at the heart of health services in peace and crisis".

5. In March 2020, the WHO Regional Office developed a detailed, comprehensive tool on collecting information related to the various components of hospital care and management to guide countries in developing hospital sector profiles. This process can be used as the entry point and first step in developing or updating a national strategy for the hospital sector. Seven countries (Afghanistan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Sudan and Tunisia) have completed their hospital sector profiles, while three countries/territories (Bahrain, Jordan and Palestine) are in the process of undertaking this task. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a slower pace in collecting the needed information, as all countries of the Region have been focused on controlling the pandemic. The remaining countries have been requested by WHO to complete their profiles in 2021.

6. Implementation of the regional framework for action requires detailed guidance and a step-by-step approach to support countries in transforming their hospital sector. Therefore, a guide has been developed by

the WHO Regional Office and the International Hospital Federation on how to develop and implement a strategy, including undertaking a situation analysis, fostering participation and ownership, developing a vision, establishing targeted resource allocation schemes, adapting and adopting good practices, constructing viable plans, enabling and supporting change, and monitoring and adjusting the changes.

7. Sudan was the first country to adopt the regional framework for action for the hospital sector. The Sudan Federal Ministry of Health, with technical support from the WHO Regional Office, conducted a comprehensive situation analysis of the hospital sector at national and state levels. After this, with further technical support from WHO, a national task force with working sub-groups was created, the relevant stakeholders engaged, and several workshops and meetings convened, leading to the drafting of a national strategy for the hospital sector. In 2019, the national strategy's development process, including the challenges and lessons learnt, was presented at the 66th session of the Regional Committee in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, and shared with countries during the regional meeting in Oman. Although the finalization of Sudan's draft strategy was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a two-day national meeting attended by the relevant stakeholders was held to prioritize strategic interventions and develop a roadmap for implementation of the strategy. Countries of the Region can learn from Sudan's experience when developing or updating their own national hospital sector strategies within the context of the regional framework for action.

8. A plan for the adaptation of the regional framework for action and the development of a national hospital strategy has been shared by WHO with Pakistan and Palestine and initial situation analyses have been undertaken as a first step. Three other countries (Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco and Tunisia) are being approached to initiate a national strategy.

9. One strategic intervention proposed in the regional framework is the assessment of hospital performance to determine to what extent hospitals meet the proposed goals and objectives. The Regional Office is developing a set of regional indicators to support countries in assessing the performance of their hospital sector at the national level. A comprehensive desk review of hospital performance indicators, two rounds of Delphi surveys and an expert consultation have been conducted in this regard. The list of indicators is being finalized and will be shared with Member States in September 2021 for their feedback and input.

10. The regional framework emphasizes the importance of engaging communities in the hospital transformation process as an essential part of the integrated people-centred health services approach. A comprehensive desk review has been done on community needs and assets assessments, as a joint project with WHO headquarters. The study provides conceptual clarity on community health needs assessment, and outlines for what purposes and by which methods/tools it can be performed. This will serve as a guide for policy-makers and health managers.

11. As one of the strategic interventions proposed in the framework for action, and to strengthen hospitals and prepare them for emergencies, the Regional Office conducted a series of training-of-trainers courses on hospital management and leadership, hospital emergency preparedness and response, and emergency unit management in five countries (Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen) in 2019. The training had to stop due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but online training programmes are being developed and once finalized will be made available for all health staff in the Region to benefit from. A comprehensive virtual training programme on the essential components of hospital management has been developed through collaboration between the WHO Regional Office and Agha Khan University, Pakistan, to build the managerial capacity of hospital managers in the Region. The course was piloted in Pakistan in May 2021 and will be replicated in other countries in the Region. A specific training package on hospital emergency preparedness and response in outbreak emergencies has also been developed, and a virtual version is being prepared.

12. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals are facing unprecedented pressures to respond to surges in cases while maintaining essential services and protecting patients and staff from infection. In response, the Regional Office conducted a study, employing a mixed-method approach (desk review, interviews with key informants and an online survey), to explore and document the hospital sectors' experience and lessons learned regarding preparedness for and response to COVID-19 in the Region. Information was gathered from 19 countries and the study results have been presented at a number of different

regional events. The study report will be used to develop strategic interventions for countries in the Region as part of the regional framework for action, emphasizing preparedness for emergencies, including outbreak emergencies, and the establishment and strengthening of resilient hospitals.

13. In July and August 2020, a desk review of the available evidence on human resources in hospitals was conducted for the countries of the Region. The review provides an analysis of the situation in hospitals and the challenges that must be tackled to improve health workforce management. It also provides an entry point for developing and implementing strategic interventions in countries as part of the regional framework for action. The review found that in most countries, hospitals employ around two thirds of the health care workforce, although accurate and reliable data on hospital workforce are scarce. Hospitals in the Region are generally managed by medical doctors who often have no formal/informal management training and inadequate managerial skills. Moreover, many countries face major workforce shortcomings and eight face critical health workforce shortages, and the number and type of health worker per 10 000 population and their skills mix vary significantly across countries. Human resource management is centralized in most countries, and some countries have made good progress in the nationalization of their health workforce. In most countries, there are high rates of dual practice among public sector employees. Critical challenges include inequitable geographical distribution of health professionals, limitations in working conditions and environments, low motivation, absenteeism, inadequate in-service training and continuous professional development, and addressing concerns about the quality and performance of the hospital workforce.

Main challenges

14. Ministries of health have been engaged in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected the process of adopting and implementing the regional framework for action and has led to delay in the development of national hospital sector strategies.

15. The limited awareness and interest of politicians regarding hospital improvement remains a challenge in some countries. However, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to highlight the role and importance of hospitals.

16. A shortage of financial, human, technological and technical resources may affect the pace of the development and implementation of national hospital sector strategies in the Region.

Opportunities and the way forward

17. There is growing political commitment in countries of the Region to adapting the framework for action for the hospital sector and developing national strategies. The pandemic has underlined the important role of hospitals and provides an opportunity to improve the hospital sector. The recent focus on hospitals and the importance of improving them provides an opportunity for the transformation of the sector as the pandemic recedes. National workshops on the development of strategies and implementation of the regional framework for action will remain a priority for transforming the hospital sector in countries.

18. The WHO Regional Office will continue to promote collaboration among countries and provide opportunities for countries to exchange experiences. A planned regional meeting on progress made in implementing the framework for action will allow countries to learn from different experiences and assess the progress made regionally.

19. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the need to improve hospitals' preparedness and resilience for all types of disaster, especially in the Region's emergency-affected and lower-middle-income countries, and fragile health systems. Appropriate and evidence-based investment in preparedness and the evaluation of response activities, in the context of the regional framework for action, will further contribute to cost-savings and will improve hospital efficiency, effectiveness, safety and quality and access to health care services.

20. The pandemic has also highlighted the increasingly important role of telemedicine, which is one of the interventions proposed in the framework for action. The Regional Office will seize the opportunity provided to focus on the role of new technologies and telemedicine in the delivery of health services.