



Progress report on the regional framework for action to strengthen the public health response to substance use

Introduction

1. The regional framework for action to strengthen the public health response to substance use was endorsed by Member States in resolution EM/RC66/R.7 in 2019 at the 66th session of the Regional Committee. The regional framework for action proposes strategic interventions across the five domains of governance, health sector response, promotion and prevention, monitoring and surveillance, and international cooperation, and suggests indicators for monitoring the progress made in its implementation.
2. Resolution EM/RC66/R.7 also requested the Regional Director to report on progress made in implementing the regional framework for action to the 68th and 70th sessions of the Regional Committee, with a final report to the 72nd session.

Status and progress

Governance

3. Seventy per cent (70%) of the 17 countries of the Region that responded to a global survey on service coverage for substance use disorders undertaken in 2019–2020 reported having a national policy endorsed by the government for developing services for substance use disorders, 82% reported having an action plan and 65% reported having a government unit or government official at the national level responsible for substance use disorders. No data was available on having a specified budget allocation for a substance use programme.
4. An intersectoral (inter-ministerial) coordinating mechanism that reflects public health leadership in management of substance use disorders was reported to be in place in 47% of countries.
5. Seventy per cent (70%) of responding countries reported having a national law or legal regulation that protects people in treatment for substance use disorders and 53% reported having legislative or administrative provisions for offering voluntary treatment as an alternative or in addition to criminal sanctions for people with substance use disorders, compared to 40% at the time of the adoption of the regional framework for action.

Health sector response

6. About 30% of responding countries reported having screening and brief interventions for harmful and hazardous substance use available in primary health care services, up from fewer than 10% of primary health care services in only three countries at the time of the adoption of the regional framework for action.
7. Most responding countries (95%) reported having specialized treatment services for substance use disorders. However, only 57% reported providing specialized treatment for people with substance use disorders in primary health care settings and/or general health care services and settings (such as district hospitals or outpatient clinics).
8. Eighty-eight per cent (88%) of responding countries reported the availability of pharmacological treatment for people with substance use disorders. Nearly two thirds (63%) reported having at least one medication available for detoxification treatment and about two thirds (63%) reported the availability of naloxone for opioid overdose. Opioid agonist maintenance treatment was reported to be available in five countries (29%) in 2019, indicating no change since the adoption of the regional framework for action;

however, the treatment has been endorsed by the ministry of health in two more countries of the Region and is in the pipeline for implementation.

9. There has not been any progress in the provision of harm reduction services in the Region since the adoption of the regional framework for action. Nearly 35% of responding countries reported having one or more components of a harm reduction service.

10. All responding countries reported having professionals trained in the identification and management of substance use disorders, with psychiatrists and psychologists being the main professional groups for the treatment of substance use disorders. Addiction counsellors and outreach workers were reported as being available in 35.2% of responding countries and addiction medicine specialists (narcologists) were reported to be available in 29.4%.

11. Just under a quarter (23.5%) of responding countries reported having mutual aid/self-help groups for people with substance use disorders.

Prevention and promotion

12. A WHO Regional Office school mental health package, including life skills elements, is being implemented in eight countries of the Region, but information on workplace initiatives and multicomponent community prevention programmes is not currently available. Updated data on prevention and promotion will be available once the report for the substance use atlas 2021 has been finalized.

Monitoring and surveillance

13. Fifty-three per cent (53%) of countries responding to the 2019 survey reported having a national system for collecting quantitative data on service provision for the treatment of substance use disorders, an increase from the previously reported 45% at the time of the adoption of the regional framework for action.

Challenges and the way forward

Challenges

14. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to disruption in the delivery of essential services, particularly services for the most vulnerable populations such as people with substance use disorders. A rapid survey in 2020 of service delivery for mental, neurological and substance use disorders during the pandemic found that about 40% of opioid agonist maintenance treatment for opioid dependence and 41.2% of overdose prevention and management programmes had been completely disrupted in countries that had these services, while inpatient units for substance use disorders were operational in only 40% of countries in the Region. Furthermore, the pandemic has adversely affected data collection on the implementation status of the regional framework for action.

15. Existing data suggests stagnation in the development of services and implementation of interventions in most areas of the management of substance use disorders. This can be partly attributed to the strain placed upon health systems by the pandemic, aggravated by the pre-existing problem of inadequate data collection and reporting on substance use service delivery and utilization in the Region.

The way forward

16. The staffing capacity of the WHO Regional Office to support Member States in implementing the regional framework for action has been enhanced and collaboration with sister UN agencies, centres of excellence and civil society is being strengthened to allow for greater focus on strengthening community and primary health care services for the provision of prevention, early intervention, treatment and rehabilitation interventions and the development of national substance use monitoring and surveillance systems to collect and report on a core set of indicators using standard data collection tools and methodologies.