Current major event

EMR Ministerial Technical Working Group recommendation on COVID-19 response

On 10 December 2020, the Ministerial Technical Working Group (TWG) established by the Regional Director presented the outcome of their review and discussions on regional COVID-19 response. The findings consist of challenges, lessons learned and recommendations to improve the overall response strategies. The recommendations and lessons learned were presented to the Ministerial Group and the Regional Director, and these were structured based on the response pillars.

Editorial note

The Regional Director of WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region had established a Ministerial Group to review the ongoing regional COVID-19 response, identify gaps and lessons learned, and provide recommendations to improve the regional response. The Ministerial Group had in turn established a Technical Working Group (TWG) to implement the requested tasks and submit their findings and recommendations to the Ministerial Group and the Regional Director. Key best practices and recommendations by pillar to guide improvement in the COVID-19 response can be summarized as follows:

Country-level coordination, planning and monitoring: *Early planning and response; establishment of multi-sectoral committees with high-level commitment, "Whole of Government" and "Whole of Society" approach, and empowered and well-informed communities.* **Recommendations:** *Establish functional committees at all levels; document lessons learnt; coordinate with other sectors; strengthen capacities of Emergency Operations Centres and establish incident management capacity; and address needs of vulnerable populations (migrants, refugees, prisons, etc.)*
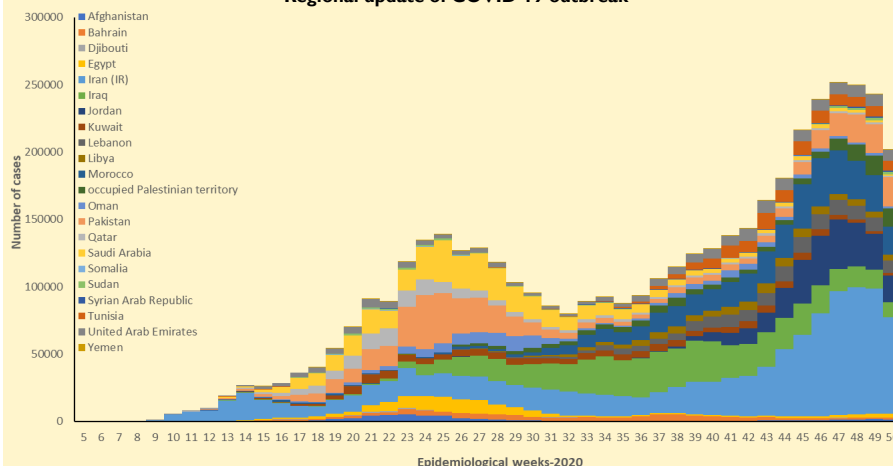
Risk Communication and community engagement (RCCE): *Innovative local interventions in hard-to-reach areas; research for behaviour change; inter-sectoral collaboration; and rumour management for social media.* **Recommendations:** *Clear messaging; national multi-sectoral RCCE strategies; behavioural research; strengthen capacities for crisis communications; and sustain RCCE beyond the pandemic.*

Surveillance, rapid response teams and case investigation: *Integrating a variety of surveillance platforms; strong prior surveillance, data management and rapid response team (RRT) capacities.* **Recommendations:** *Establish integrated surveillance (electronic) platforms; leverage existing surveillance systems; strengthen contact tracing and RRTs; and strengthen overall capacity for emergency preparedness and response.*

Points of entry (POE), international travel, and transport: *Optimizing existing procedures for scaling up of surveillance; standardized and simplified procedures; building on ongoing efforts to strengthen international health regulations (IHR).* **Recommendations:** *Ensure adequate surveillance capacity at POE using guidance from WHO; build strong capacity for PoE as part of IHR core capacities; and promote research on effective and efficient social measures.*

National diagnostic laboratories: *Local production of diagnostics; using automated tools; and involvement of private laboratories.* **Recommendations:** *Strengthen*

laboratory infrastructure; improve coordination and flow of data from laboratories; ensure quality control measures; promote new technologies such as antigen-detecting rapid diagnostic tests (Ag-RDTs); adequate resourcing and expansion of lab diagnostic capacities.*

Infection prevention and control (IPC): *Prior investment in IPC, and availability of protocols.* **Recommendations:** *Strengthen national IPC programs; institutionalize national strategies and protocols; build IPC capacity and monitor adherence at health care facilities.*

Clinical case management: *Rapid expansion of COVID-19 designated hospitals (public and private); re-purposing health workforce for rapid response; and scaled up research efforts on treatment protocols.* **Recommendations:** *Ensure early detection and treatment of cases; ensure adherence to clinical management guidelines; and contribute to regional or global databases.*

Essential health services (EHS): *Early prioritization of EHS and use of telemedicine and mobile outreach clinical services.* **Recommendations:** *Advocacy, financial and technical support to improve access to quality EHS; ensure health care workers are trained and protected, and facilities are well equipped and prepared; invest in alternative methods like e-health or telemedicine; and focus on building essential health system functions, especially primary health care.*

Finally, the ministerial TWG proposed the addition of COVID-19 vaccine as a separate area of work or pillar within the regional and national response plan, the establishment of an interactive platform to share regional experiences and the incorporation of the recommendations in the updated COVID-19 strategic preparedness and response plan (SPRP).

Regional update of COVID-19 outbreak

Selected indicators: COVID-19 monitoring framework, EMR, 2020

Indicators	Score
Country has activated/made functional their public health Emergency Operations Centre or equivalent	16
Country has a functional multi-sectoral, multi-partner coordination mechanism for COVID-19 preparedness and response	19
Country has a national preparedness and response plan (CPRP)	21
Country has assigned national and facility-level infection prevention and control (IPC) focal points	14
Countries with trained rapid response teams (RRTs)	21
IPC guidance disseminated to health care facilities at all levels	18

Update on outbreaks
in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

COVID-19 in 22 EMR countries

Current public health events of concern
[cumulative N° of cases (deaths), **CFR** %]

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): 2019-2020

Country	
Afghanistan	[49 273 (1971), 4%]
Bahrain	[88 965 (348), 0.4%]
Djibouti	[5725 (61), 1.1%]
Egypt	[121 089 (6898), 5.7%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[1 100 818 (51 959), 4.7%]
Iraq	[573 622 (12 565), 2.2%]
Jordan	[257 275 (3335), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[146 044 (911), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[145 245 (1190), 0.8%]
Libya	[90 779 (1299), 1.4%]
Morocco	[397 597 (6589), 1.7%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[123 002 (1062), 0.9%]
Oman	[125 669 (1463), 1.2%]
Pakistan	[438 313 (8796), 2%]
Qatar	[140 827 (240), 0.2%]
Saudi Arabia	[359 749 (6036), 1.7%]
Somalia	[4579 (121), 2.6%]
Sudan	[21 591 (1357), 6.3%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[9041 (506), 5.6%]
Tunisia	[111 361 (3894), 3.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[183 755 (609), 0.3%]
Yemen	[2087 (607), 29.1%]