



Progress report on strengthening the nursing workforce to advance universal health coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: a call for action

Introduction

1. In October 2019, the 66th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean adopted resolution EM/RC66/R.3 endorsing a call for action to strengthen the nursing workforce to advance universal health coverage in the Region.
2. The resolution recognized the continuing shortage and maldistribution of the nursing workforce and the urgent need to recruit, retain, educate and motivate sufficient numbers of nurses with an appropriate skills mix, including primary care nurses, without whom universal health coverage cannot be realized. It further acknowledged global and regional commitments, including the Framework for action on health workforce development in the Eastern Mediterranean Region to accelerate progress in addressing health workforce challenges towards the 2030 Agenda (EM/RC64/R.1) and the *Framework for action on strengthening nursing and midwifery in the Eastern Mediterranean Region 2016–2025*. However, the resolution also noted that progress on these frameworks was not at the desired pace and made a call for action to accelerate implementation.
3. The Regional Committee urged Member States to strengthen nursing and midwifery through a long-term vision and to utilize well-established data and monitoring systems for strategic planning. Enabling nurses and midwives through enhanced work environments and working conditions was recognized as critical. Specific attention was paid to strengthening nurses at the primary care level in line with the primary health care approach.
4. This report provides a progress update on implementation by Member States and WHO during the first three years of the call for action, as well as challenges and the way forward.

Progress update

5. Guided by the frameworks for action on health workforce development and on strengthening nursing and midwifery in the Region, the call for action has played an important role in accelerating relevant activities in countries. Technical cooperation between Member States and WHO has been enhanced to take forward the agenda for strengthening nursing.
6. A regional consultation on nursing and midwifery was held in December 2020, which brought together policy-makers, nurse and midwife leaders, other stakeholders and partners to develop an operational plan for the implementation of the call for action.
7. Member States are developing nursing and midwifery strategies and several countries have launched their strategies, including Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. A number of Member States developed their health workforce strategic plans to prioritize actions to strengthen nursing and midwifery, including Djibouti, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan and Sudan.

8. All strategies and strategic plans emphasize improving the performance of nurses and midwives through enabling better work environments and improving working conditions. The 2021 update of the *WHO guideline on health workforce development, attraction, recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas* provides guidance on potential incentives and interventions. Most countries in the Region introduced interventions to improve the working conditions of nurses, such as better remuneration and increased attention to safety and security of health workers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, interim guidance was developed for the health workforce response that covered the mobilization of surge capacity and building capacities for response, while protecting the health, safety and well-being of workers.

9. Significant improvements have been made in strengthening nursing and midwifery data. Member States, especially nursing and midwifery focal points, actively contributed to the data collection process in the development of the *State of the world's nursing 2020: investing in education, jobs and leadership* and the *State of the world's midwifery 2021* reports. National Health Workforce Accounts provided a further platform for improving nursing and midwifery data and there are focal points in all Member States who regularly report health workforce data. Last but not least, health workforce observatories are evolving as a mechanism to bring together stakeholders to improve health workforce data, such as in Palestine.

10. Health labour market analysis has provided better understanding of the labour market dynamics to improve the working environments and conditions of nurses, including in Morocco, Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. The Tri-Regional Policy Dialogue on International Mobility of Health Professionals was held in June 2021, in collaboration with the WHO regional offices for Europe and South-East Asia, to address issues related to the migration of health workers, including nurses, and to agree on joint actions to address the challenges.

11. Specific attention has been paid to primary care nurses and improving their contribution to advance universal health coverage goals. A training programme was developed with WHO collaborating centres to strengthen the capacities of primary care nurses, which has been implemented in Libya. A survey was undertaken among primary care nurses, which highlighted the significant role and wide range of functions provided by nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic. A training programme was developed to build the capacities of primary care nurses, which is offered as an asynchronous online package so that individual participants can study when and where it suits them.

12. Scaling up nursing and midwifery education has been a priority and special attention was paid to faculty capacity-building in Yemen and Pakistan. A survey was conducted that highlighted the challenges faced by health professional education institutions due to interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the basis of the findings, an online training programme was developed to build faculty capacities on introducing digital technologies and online teaching.

13. WHO designated 2020 as the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife and the theme of World Health Day was also devoted to nurses and midwives. Although the planned celebrations were partially shadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, events such as press conferences and webinars during World Health Day, International Nurses Day and the Regional Committee meetings increased advocacy to take forward the nursing agenda. The Walk the Talk event prior to the Regional Committee in 2020 was themed to recognize the tireless efforts of health workers during the pandemic and their experiences were shared and acknowledged. The Year of Health and Care Workers in 2021 further boosted actions to strengthen nursing and midwifery. The Regional Office's Health Workforce Recognition Awards also served to show acknowledgement and appreciation of health workers' efforts.

Challenges

14. The COVID-19 pandemic caused delays to planned activities for strengthening the nursing workforce, due to the competing and changing priorities of Member States. At the same time, the tireless efforts of nurses, midwives and all health personnel were well recognized and acknowledged during the pandemic, alongside greater recognition of the challenges that they face.

15. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, political instability and protracted crises in several countries of the Region as well as the economic downturns affected implementation of the call for action.

16. A major challenge is insufficient human and financial resources, both in Member States and at the Regional Office and country office levels.

The way forward

17. Member States are urged to continue taking action to implement the call for action to strengthen the nursing workforce to advance universal health coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

18. WHO will continue to provide Member States with sustained and coordinated guidance as well as technical cooperation to scale up nursing and midwifery in the Region, and will provide the next progress report at the 72nd session of the Regional Committee in 2025.