



Progress report on the implementation of 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 (EM/RC59/R.3) that advocated moving towards universal health coverage through strengthening service provision; 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 hospitals' roles, functions and operations through an integrated and people-centred lens was therefore required.

2. In 2019, during the 66th session of the Regional Committee, Member States adopted resolution EM/RC66/R.4 on introducing the framework for action for the hospital sector in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The resolution called on Member States to: ensure political commitment to the planning and implementation of people-centred hospitals; develop/update a national hospital sector strategy using the regional framework; 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 enhancing management capacities in the hospital sector.

3. This report summarizes the progress made in the implementation of 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. The meeting was attended by participants representing 19 countries/territories of the Region.

5. Sudan was the first country to adopt the regional framework for the hospital sector. The Sudan Federal Ministry of Health, with technical support from WHO, developed, endorsed and was implementing a national strategic plan for the hospital sector in the context of the regional framework until fighting started in April 2023. Several prioritized strategic entry points were identified through the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Although the implementation of this strategic plan was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is an ongoing process and countries of the Region can learn from the experience of Sudan when developing or updating their national hospital sector strategies.

6. Some countries/territories in the Region, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine and Yemen, are developing and implementing their national hospital strategies with technical support from WHO under their overall national health plan and in alignment with the regional framework. The

development and implementation of these strategies are at different stages, and some strategic interventions, such as the development of an essential hospital service package as part of the universal health coverage benefits package, capacity-building of hospital managers, and clinical and bed service planning, have been implemented in some countries/territories.

7. In November 2022, following the 45th World Hospital Congress of the International Hospital Federation, on the theme of Global Learnings, Local Actions: Sustainable Healthcare, hosted by Dubai Health Authority, WHO held a subregional meeting attended by selected country/territory focal points (from Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and United Arab Emirates) to share experiences, lessons learned and future roadmaps for developing and implementing national hospital sector strategies in the context of the regional framework.

8. 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. WHO has developed a set of regional indicators, following a comprehensive desk review, a mixed-methods study and two rounds of expert consultations, to support countries in assessing the performance of their hospital sector at the national level. These indicators are categorized across eight domains: effectiveness; patient safety; responsiveness to people's needs; efficiency; timelines; resources and capacity; integration and coordination; and corporate and social responsibility (the hospital in its environment). The list of indicators has been shared with countries/territories and is being used by several, for example the Islamic Republic of Iran, Palestine and Sudan, to develop their hospital performance measurement and management systems.

9. The regional framework emphasizes the importance of engaging communities and responding to the population's health needs. A comprehensive report on community health needs and asset assessment, in response to country requests, was developed by WHO to guide policy-makers and health managers in the Region, and a related article published in a peer-reviewed journal. A comprehensive tool for community health needs and asset assessment, emphasizing the hospital sector, is being developed and piloted in two countries in the Region (the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan).

10. In 2021, primary health care-oriented models of care were initiated and are being piloted in three countries/territories – Pakistan, Palestine and Sudan – to develop a model of care specific to each country/territory and to support the development of regional guidance for implementation in other countries. The transformative role of hospitals as envisaged by the regional framework will be a critical component in how health services are organized, managed and delivered within these proposed models of care.

11. One of the strategic interventions proposed in the regional framework is building the leadership and managerial capacities of hospital managers at different levels. WHO has developed comprehensive training-of-trainers courses and staff training programmes (with in-person or blended in-person/virtual modalities) that have been conducted with WHO support in several countries/territories of the Region (Afghanistan, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, Palestine, Sudan and United Arab Emirates); more than 3000 hospital managers have been trained so far. Two training programmes, in Jordan and Yemen, have been conducted in close collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and World Bank, respectively. In addition, a comprehensive virtual programme on the essential components of hospital management has been developed and delivered in Pakistan and Sudan through a collaboration between WHO and Agha Khan University, Pakistan; this could be replicated in other countries. Furthermore, a specific training package on hospital emergency preparedness and response in outbreak emergencies has been developed, and a virtual version is available on Open WHO (an online platform for training courses). It is planned to continue building the capacity of hospital managers using the capacities and expertise of WHO collaborating centres and academic institutions to facilitate the institutionalization of these programmes and professionalization of health management in the Region.

12. Another strategic intervention in the regional framework is strengthening hospital information systems. As part of the pre-session technical meetings before the 69th session of the Regional Committee in 2022, a discussion was held to increase understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and potential of hospital information systems and develop a regional roadmap for strengthening them. The roadmap encompasses support mechanisms, including technical guidelines and related lists of indicators, and can contribute to capacity-building of the hospital workforce. Strengthening hospital information systems will enhance the efficiency, safety and quality of health care delivery, reduce inequalities in access and contribute to monitoring progress towards universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goal targets.

13. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the overwhelming pressures on hospitals and highlighted the necessity of improving hospital resilience to all types of disaster while maintaining essential services, especially in the Region's emergency, low- and middle-income countries, and fragile health systems. In response, WHO has developed a conceptual framework for hospital resilience accompanied by practical operational guidance containing specific tools to guide hospital managers on how to strengthen the resilience of their hospitals. These have been developed through a comprehensive mixed-methods study, including a desk review, online survey and interviews with hospital managers, enriched by an expert consultation meeting. The operational guide will be piloted in six countries in the Region (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen). In addition, three articles on strengthening hospital resilience have recently been published in peer-reviewed journals.

14. Effective health systems must respond to people's needs for time-sensitive emergency care and ensure access to critical care and operative services that can only be delivered safely in a hospital setting. Countries continue to stress the importance of timely access to emergency, critical and operative services. However, in many countries, emergency, critical and operative care systems function in silos with little coordination and integration between them. A comprehensive framework and related technical guidance is being developed for strengthening emergency, critical and operative care that will be piloted in selected countries in the Region. It will provide strategic interventions and recommendations at the system and facility (hospital) levels. Technical support for strengthening emergency care systems and provision has already been provided to almost half the countries in the Region.

15. Due to the recent growth in specialty hospitals, growing attention has been paid to their role, position and potential impact on neighbouring general hospitals and health care services. A comprehensive desk review of the available evidence relating to the performance of specialty hospitals compared with general hospitals against various performance domains (effectiveness, efficiency, safety, patient-centredness and staff orientation) was conducted. The study results provided information on the advantages and disadvantages of specialty hospitals. The study was complemented by an expert consultation to provide technical recommendations to health policy-makers and hospital managers.

Main challenges

16. Ministries of health have been responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected the process of adopting and implementing the regional framework and has led to delays in the development of national hospital sector strategies.

17. The limited focus of politicians on hospital improvement remains a challenge in some countries. However, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to highlight the role and importance of hospitals.

18. A shortage of financial, human, technological and technical resources and the various graded emergencies in half of the countries in the Region may affect the pace of the development and implementation of national hospital sector strategies.

Opportunities and the way forward

19. There is growing political commitment in countries of the Region to adapting the regional framework and developing national strategies. The recent focus on hospitals and the importance of improving them provides an opportunity to transform the sector as the pandemic response transitions to the long-term management phase.

20. WHO 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 regional framework will allow countries to learn from different experiences and assess the progress made in the Region.

21. Holding national advocacy workshops on the development and implementation of the regional framework remains a priority for transforming the hospital sector in countries.

22. The health care industry accounts for 4–5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing climate-related health risks and strengthening climate change-resilient health systems and health facilities (sustainable hospitals) are priorities for WHO. Over the past decade, the Region has been increasingly engaged in global action on climate change, leading to the hosting of four of the last 10 Conferences of the Parties (COPs) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – COP 18 in Qatar, COP 22 in Morocco, COP 27 in Egypt and the forthcoming COP 28 in the United Arab Emirates. Capitalizing on the regional momentum for climate change action and in preparation for COP 28, joint activities to raise awareness of the importance of climate-resilient health facilities (sustainable hospitals) and propose required actions are being undertaken, including a regional webinar on sustainable hospitals in June 2023.

23. The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the important role of hospitals and provides an opportunity to improve the hospital sector. It has also highlighted the increasingly important role of telemedicine, which is one of the interventions proposed in the regional framework. WHO will use the opportunity provided to focus on the role of new technologies and telemedicine in the delivery of health services, in line with the recent resolution on a regional strategy for fostering digital health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (2023–2027), endorsed by the Regional Committee at its 69th session in 2022.