
Progress report on promoting health and well-being in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: moving from theory to action to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

1. In October 2022, the 69th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed resolution EM/RC69/R.4 on Promoting health and well-being in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: moving from theory to action to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals. The resolution is based on technical paper EM/RC69/6, which identifies five priority areas for promoting health and well-being: adopting a systems approach to health promotion and well-being; adopting a settings-based approach to health promotion; increasing health literacy to promote health and well-being; enhancing community engagement and inclusion; and developing institutional capacity for health promotion.
2. This paper provides a report on the progress made in implementing resolution EM/RC69/R.4 since October 2022.

Progress update

3. A regional road map has been developed to guide Member States on the implementation of the health and well-being agenda in the Region. It proposes actions and multisectoral collaboration to promote mental and physical health and well-being, and also addresses community satisfaction regarding services, environmental factors and social participation, across different settings, such as cities, villages, communities, workplaces and educational facilities. The road map will be published after consultation with health promotion focal persons at country level for adaptation according to countries needs and contexts.
4. The audience for the roadmap includes governments, WHO and other international health agencies. It is intended to guide Member States in strengthening their capacity to accelerate progress towards healthier populations, with special consideration given to the Region's unique political, socioeconomic, cultural, humanitarian and environmental challenges. It encourages governments and WHO to improve collaboration at both national and community levels to promote better health and well-being. A communication plan for the roadmap has been developed for dissemination to key stakeholders and the wider public to support its successful implementation in countries.
5. Multiple initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen health promotion and disease prevention through effective governance and health system strengthening. These include high-level WHO missions to countries (Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia) and dialogues at ministerial level, including with ministers of health, education, social affairs, and youth and sports, to identify national priorities for health and well-being and develop national strategic plans based on local contexts and mandates to promote well-being for all throughout the life course.
6. A practical tool has been developed by WHO in consultation with the countries of the Region to guide national authorities and decision-makers in developing high-impact policies and implementing interventions involving partners and stakeholders to comprehensively address the structural, social, economic, environmental and other determinants of health by working across all sectors through a whole-of-government, whole-of-society and health-in-all policies approach.

7. A regional framework for community engagement is being developed to promote community empowerment and participation for improved health-seeking behaviours. The framework provides guidance for the countries of the Region on tailoring their approaches according to their national contexts and mandates.

8. A community health needs assessment tool has been developed by WHO and piloted in two countries of the Region (the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan). It was then finalized based on the outcomes of the piloting and is intended for use in countries to assess community health needs and guide local health authorities and organizations in systematically incorporating people's perspectives into policy- and decision-making processes for promoting the health and well-being of the community.

9. In Pakistan, WHO undertook capacity-building interventions with community and civil society organizations to enable communities to play a key role in promoting health and well-being and ensure that community resources are utilized to maximize health improvement. This had a positive impact on community-based action in the response to the flooding in the country in 2023.

10. A regional workshop will be conducted on 25–26 September 2024 to introduce a WHO health literacy measurement tool, which will be piloted in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia following the workshop. The tool supports evidence-based interventions to promote health literacy for improved health and well-being.

11. Healthy settings, including healthy cities, healthy villages, age-friendly cities, health promoting schools and healthy universities, are being promoted and scaled up across the Region to create platforms for multisectoral action and to establish environments that support healthy lifestyles and well-being.

12. The Doha Statement on Healthy Cities, a call for action on sustainable urban well-being, was endorsed by 15 Member States of the Region on 1 November 2023, concluding the Eastern Mediterranean Region Healthy Cities Conference, jointly organized by WHO and the Ministry of Public Health of Qatar. Currently, there are 115 cities in the regional Healthy Cities Network from 15 countries, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia and United Arab Emirates. Not all these cities are at the same level of progress due to changing political commitment at city level, competing priorities and emergency situations. Currently, 39 cities from Bahrain, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been awarded Healthy Cities status and two more cities are in the pipeline. Age-friendly cities have also been promoted and a regional meeting held in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, to share experiences and good practices. Furthermore, WHO supported Tunis, Tunisia, after it was selected, along with four other global cities, to take part in a Swiss Development Corporation project to promote urban governance for health and well-being, and municipality representatives and academic partners were trained to become allies for health using the Urbanlead initiative package.

13. WHO also participated in field missions to governorates in Egypt implementing the global standards for health promoting schools, and assistance was provided to Kuwait and Morocco to set national priorities for school health services. Moreover, nine universities from Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been designated Healthy Universities, with more to come.

Challenges

14. Currently, there is support for initiatives related to promoting health and well-being in only a limited number of countries in the Region, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Tunisia. This can be attributed to a greater focus on health care services rather than health promotion in countries. There is a need to highlight the importance of health promotion interventions and initiatives, such as healthy settings and promoting physical activity and health literacy, which can have a positive impact on health outcomes and decrease the burden on health systems.

15. The way forward should include re-orienting the health workforce, especially at primary health care level, on health promotion, and multisectoral action and community engagement to address the determinants of health and provide services through a health promotion and well-being lens.

16. WHO will continue to support Member States in adopting the healthy settings' approach to establish multisectoral platforms for promoting health and well-being. Other key priorities include supporting countries to adapt the regional road map to their country contexts and developing a communication tool for use at country level to gain political support for advancing the health and well-being agenda.