

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
Sixty-eighth Session
Cairo, Egypt, 11–14 October 2021**

**A DECADE OF ACTION ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION:
PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD**

On 12 October 2021, a virtual panel event will be held on a decade of action on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Eastern Mediterranean Region – progress, challenges and way forward.

The objectives of the event are to:

- highlight the key gaps and challenges towards progress on the health-related SDGs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, with particular focus on building back better and fairer under conflict and emergency settings;
- understand the governance structures and coordination mechanisms available at regional and country level for acceleration of progress towards the SDGs, with a focus on multisectoral action;
- highlight the way forward to accelerate action and progress on the health-related SDGs and the roles of national governments, international organizations, civil society, academia, think tanks and development partners.

Background

Six years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs and targets by the end of the decade. According to the report of the United Nations Secretary-General presented to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2021 there had been progress in reducing poverty and improving maternal and child health, among other areas, before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this progress has reversed since 2020 and the global poverty rate has been increasing for the first time in 20 years. The broad goal of reducing inequities is threatened and the advances towards sustainable development are at risk (1,2). The report of the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, presented at the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly in May 2021, showed there has been variable progress on the health-related SDG targets at global and regional level (3).

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat beyond the disease itself and has affected all aspects of life, widening inequalities and undermining decades of development. Economic, social and environmental dimensions have been affected all over the world, further emphasizing the need to progress on the SDGs using a holistic approach. During the pandemic, countries adopted multisectoral approaches to coordinate the COVID-19 response. The whole-of-government approach has provided a powerful framework to engage all stakeholders which is consistent with the SDG roadmaps. In addition, local authorities and civil society have participated in the establishment of national networks within the framework of whole-of-society engagement (4,5).

The Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All (SDG3 GAP) was launched in September 2019 bringing together 12 signatory agencies and development partners to provide an effective platform to

collectively support Member States across seven accelerators towards achieving SDG 3. In September 2019 the United Nations General Assembly declared a decade of action to deliver the SDGs, and the 66th session of the Regional Committee in October 2019 emphasized the renewed focus on SDG 3. WHO was requested to support the efforts of Member States in harnessing more capacities, data collection, cross-sectoral coordination, and universal health coverage.

To operationalize the partnership spirit under the SDG3 GAP, the Regional Office worked with all signatories and Member States to establish a Regional Health Forum and a joint workplan around the seven accelerators. These efforts resulted in the establishment of a Regional Health Alliance, launched in December 2020, with strong buy-in from United Nations/development partners and Member States. The value added by this partnership is in pursuing harmonized support, mobilizing resources and improving coordination to assist Member States in achieving the SDG 3 targets (6).

The Regional Office has stepped up its efforts on multisectoral, whole-of-government approaches. The 2021 report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region calls for building back fairer and achieving health equity through a set of recommendations which address socioeconomic challenges, including in countries affected by conflict, and the climate crisis in our Region. It highlights approaches and evidence to tackle the determinants of health in a way that allows integrated implementation across the SDGs (7).

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on progress in implementation of the SDGs have been conducted regularly by countries of the Region.¹ Broad health equity goals are expressed in terms of access to health services and coverage, in addition to reducing life expectancy gaps and other health-related indicators. Sixteen countries in the Region have conducted their VNRs over the past five years. Among the 42 VNRs presented at the United Nations HLPF in 2021, five of these countries presented their respective reviews for the second time.²

Progress towards the SDGs has been impeded by challenges that health systems in the Region have faced to expand coverage of basic health services, as well as poor preparedness for health emergencies. In the Region, where emergencies and conflict affect two thirds of countries, progress towards the SDGs requires paramount effort and strong collaboration with all stakeholders. The 2021 report by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network proposes that successful mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change rests on the successful implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement (8).

Challenges

At the regional level, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the lives of the population, posing a threat to health and well-being in all countries. The impacts of the pandemic have led to losses in market capital, losses in jobs and the shrinking of middle-income groups. The situation is even worse in conflict and emergency countries which have witnessed food shortages, an increase in the number of people in need of humanitarian aid and increased vulnerability of women (9,10).

In 2021, WHO launched a regional report of progress on the health-related SDGs and targets, which highlights the trends in 50 health-related SDG indicators and reveals gaps and weaknesses in health services and outcomes. The report identified the following key challenges to progress: a) weak governance; b) fragmented health care services; c) limited data availability; d) impact of emergencies (including the

¹ Voluntary national reviews of countries of the Region are available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/tools/vnrs>.

² VNRs conducted in the Region: Afghanistan (2017, 2021); Bahrain (2018); Egypt (2016, 2018, 2021); Iraq (2019, 2021); Jordan (2017); Kuwait (2019); Lebanon (2018); Libya (2020); Morocco (2016, 2020); Oman (2019); Pakistan (2019); Qatar (2018, 2021); Sudan (2018); Syrian Arab Republic (2020); Tunisia (2019, 2021); United Arab Emirates (2018). Countries that have not conducted VNRs: Iran (Islamic Republic of), occupied Palestinian territory, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen.

COVID-19 pandemic) and of fragile and humanitarian settings on population health; and, e) gender inequality and health disparities (11).

Panellists

H.E. Dr Mai AlKail, Ministry of Health, Palestine

Ms Maisaa Youssef-OIC of SDG Cluster, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Dr Hossam Elsharkawi, Regional Director of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Middle East and North Africa

Dr Ali Mokdad, Chief Strategy Officer, Population Health, University of Washington; Director, Middle Eastern Initiatives; Professor, Health Metrics Sciences

Dr Ammar Abdo Ahmed, IAG Executive Committee Member Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)

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