

Summary report on the
**Technical working
group consultation
on strengthening
health laboratory
services in the Eastern
Mediterranean**

Virtual Meeting
6–8 March 2023



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

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1. Introduction

In 2016, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed the regional strategic framework for strengthening health laboratory services 2016–2023. The framework guides the development of sustainable national health laboratory systems to improve clinical and public health services in a cross-cutting manner for better preparedness for, surveillance of and response to communicable diseases, in line with the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005. In 2020, the Regional Committee extended this resolution until 2023.

At the fourth regional meeting of the directors of public health laboratories in the Eastern Mediterranean Region held in Cairo, Egypt, on 5–7 December 2022, participants reflected on the implementation of the 2016–2023 framework, the remaining gaps in several countries and the imminent ending of the framework’s timespan. They noted that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic had led to the rapid growth of molecular diagnosis and sequencing facilities. The pandemic had introduced new possibilities in the use of genetic sequencing for surveillance. This, however, had not increased the attention to laboratory systems, and the quality of laboratory services remained a concern.

Participants agreed that capitalizing on the momentum from the pandemic was a priority and that the Region needed a new framework that presents a way forward for laboratory strengthening built on the lessons learned since 2016. They also agreed that introduction of the Strengthening Laboratory Management Toward Accreditation (SLMTA) programme in the Region could bring about tangible improvements in the quality of services in countries, as it had done in Africa, the Americas and Asia. Laboratory accreditation to international standards attests to laboratories’ competence and their provision of quality testing services to support patient care and public health practices. The directors concurred that a technical working group

representing all countries and territories in the Region should work together to formulate a new strategic framework and examine how to implement SLMTA in the Region. The technical group met for the first time virtually on 6–8 March 2023.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- finalize the strategic priorities for the next regional framework to strengthen laboratory services; and
- develop a strategy to implement SLMTA in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

2. Summary of discussions

Priorities for the next regional framework to strengthen laboratory services, 2023–2028

Strategic goal 1. Strengthen leadership and governance of national laboratory systems

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Continue to advocate for the strengthening of national coordination and supervision of laboratory services and call for a central agency based in the Ministry of Health to supervise and coordinate.
- Conduct a situational analysis for laboratory service delivery in every country to develop an informed national laboratory policy.
- Keep building advocacy among senior management and administrators of the Ministry of Health for the importance of health laboratories in cohesive national health systems.
- Improve activities to develop and implement a national health laboratory policy and a national laboratory strategic plan.
- Create a national organizational structure for development of standards and guidelines and monitoring of their implementation.

- Include a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for performance of health laboratory services in their strategic plans and adopt the One Health approach and review its aspects.

Strategic goal 2. Strengthen the organization and management of national laboratory systems towards quality

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Streamline the structure and functions of national laboratory services within the health system to meet country needs and establish a quality management office and/or quality manager/officer position to oversee all quality-related activities.
- Adopt the SLMTA approach in implementing a quality management system at targeted sites.
- Ensure sustainable laboratory services through dedicated and adequate government budgets/funding.
- Improve supply chain management, equipment procurement and maintenance processes.
- Establish a regional laboratory accreditation process.

Strategic goal 3. Establish sustainable, sufficient and competent human resources for laboratory service delivery

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Develop human resources policies for sustainable, sufficient and competent staff to manage and operate laboratory services.
- Strengthen management of laboratory services.
- Establish mechanisms for registration or licensing of all categories of laboratory personnel.
- Develop a system for attraction and retention of staff in laboratory services.

- Ensure that pre-service education and training programmes teach knowledge and skills that meet the needs of country laboratory services.
- Develop a system for in-service continual professional development and competence building for all categories of laboratory personnel, including those working in private laboratories.

Strategic goal 4. Ensure a safe and secure laboratory environment

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Develop and implement national regulatory frameworks to systematically manage biosafety and biorisk in laboratory settings and ensure a safe and secure working environment and facility.
- Develop and implement a biobanking policy.
- Develop and implement a waste management policy.

Strategic goal 5. Promote effective, tiered and integrated laboratory referral networks (in-country and among countries) and enhance coordination

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Establish or strengthen tiered and integrated nationwide health laboratory networks and support regional and global networks to ensure access to testing capacity when local or domestic capacity is not available, especially for diseases or events of public health concern.
- Develop mechanisms to coordinate the One Health approach across sectors.
- Strengthen external partnerships for technical and financial assistance.

Strategic goal 6. Promote rational and evidence-based use of laboratory services

Member States and partners agreed to:

- Ensure that health care providers are familiar with evidence-based test selection and interpretation of results and have sufficient information on the proper collection, storage and shipment of specimens.
- Build the capacity of laboratory personnel to provide consultant advisory service and improve communication.

Strategy for the implementation of SLMTA in the Region

Member States were divided into two groups for a discussion on SLMTA implementation arrangements.

- Group 1: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran (Islamic Republic of), occupied Palestinian territory (Gaza), occupied Palestinian territory (West Bank), Pakistan, Somalia and Syrian Arab Republic.
- Group 2: Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

The conclusions of the group discussions included the following:

- There is a need to use a top-down approach in implementing SLMTA in the Region. An innovative and structured task-based training and mentoring programme should be developed to effect immediate, measurable improvement in laboratories using their existing resources.
- WHO and partners should coordinate the process at regional level.
- Each country should establish a technical working group to drive the process at country level.
- Member States should mobilize resources to support implementation of laboratory quality management systems.


- WHO should adapt/develop training materials that have the flexibility to enable a regional programme based on country needs.
- The programme should use a training-of-trainers approach to cascade the training at national and subnational levels.

The recommendations from the group discussions were:

- WHO and partners should support the training of two trainers per country on laboratory quality auditing.
- WHO and partners should support the training of two trainers per country on laboratory quality mentoring.
- WHO and partners should support countries to access the tools of the SLMTA package.
- WHO should map existing regional accreditation bodies.
- WHO should map existing regional biosafety certification capacity.
- Member States and WHO should adopt the existing checklist for the quality auditing of progress.
- WHO should map and engage existing partners to support the implementation of SLMTA in the Region.
- WHO should advocate the use of SLMTA with senior management and administrators of the Ministry of Health in Member States.

3. Next steps

WHO will finalize the review of the strategic objectives for the regional strategic framework for strengthening health laboratory services 2023–2028 and discuss with Ministry of Health directors of laboratory services and partners the support needed for implementation of the framework.



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