

**Summary report on the  
Meeting of the directors of  
national laboratory services  
and partners in the Eastern  
Mediterranean Region**

**Cairo, Egypt  
14–16 August 2023**



**World Health  
Organization**

Eastern Mediterranean Region

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2016, the 63rd session of WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed the regional strategic framework for strengthening health laboratory services 2016–2020. The framework guided 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 (2005). In 2020, the 67th session of the Regional Committee extended the timeframe for implementation of the framework by three years, until 2023. As this extension is now ending, there is a need to take stock of the progress made and to focus on strategic goals for the future, while building on the achievements made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To do this, WHO developed a matrix to assess progress made in implementing the regional framework for strengthening health laboratory services based on data collected through WHO country offices. The results were validated during the fourth meeting of regional laboratory directors in December 2022. In addition, participants at that meeting identified initiatives available to strengthen laboratory services.

Overall, there has been progress in strengthening health laboratory services in the Region, especially during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, challenges remain in governance and leadership and the implementation of sustainable laboratory quality management systems. These challenges are compounded by the absence of monitoring of the performance of laboratory services at the national level; laboratories are not given due priority and recognition in national health systems.

## 2. Summary of discussions

During the meeting, WHO presented on the progress made on the implementation of the regional strategic framework for strengthening health laboratory services 2016–2023, and information on different opportunities for laboratory services strengthening was provided by WHO, partners and WHO collaborating centres. Country participants were then divided into three groups to discuss progress, challenges and the available opportunities. During the last day of the meeting, all participants approved a draft framework for 2024–2029.

*Progress towards implementation of the framework to strengthening health laboratory services in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: December during 2022– August 2023*

At the fourth regional meeting of the directors of public health laboratories in Cairo, Egypt, on 5–7 December 2022, participants had reflected on the implementation of the 2016–2023 framework, the remaining gaps in countries and the imminent ending of the framework’s timeframe. They noted that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic had brought rapid growth of molecular diagnosis and sequencing facilities, including new possibilities in genetic sequencing for surveillance. However, this had not increased the attention paid to laboratory systems, and the quality of laboratory services remained a concern. Participants agreed that it was essential to capitalize on the momentum resulting from the pandemic. The Region needed a new framework that presented a way forward for laboratory strengthening, building on the lessons learned since 2016.

Participants of the fourth regional meeting also agreed that introduction of the Strengthening Laboratory Management Toward Accreditation (SLMTA) programme in the Region could improve the quality of services in countries, as it has done in Africa, the Americas and Asia. The directors agreed that a

technical working group representing all countries should formulate a new strategic framework and a way to implement SLMTA in the Region.

On 6–8 March 2023, the technical working group comprised of WHO technical officers, directors from central public health laboratories and partners met for the first time to agree on the new priorities for the next framework and on modalities to implement SLMTA. In view of the importance of policy-makers at ministry of health in advancing the laboratory agenda, the technical working group called upon national laboratory directors to update ministry of health policy-makers on the progress made and road map for strengthening health laboratory services in the Region.

#### *Implementation status*

Survey findings, conducted in 2022, were shared which highlighted the challenges in most of the framework's core areas: governance, quality management system, biosafety and biosecurity, and human resources. Participants agreed on the urgent need for laboratory services integration within cross-cutting programmes, including the sharing of equipment and training of staff. The latter will open opportunities for task shifting and sharing. Participants agreed to ensure that laboratories are given high priority at the national level by strengthening laboratory leadership and governance.

#### *Proposed priorities (next framework 2024–2029)*

Participants proposed seven strategic goals:

- Strategic goal 1: Strengthen leadership and governance of national laboratory systems
- Strategic goal 2: Strengthen laboratory quality management systems

- Strategic goal 3: Establish sustainable, sufficient and competent human resources for laboratory service delivery
- Strategic goal 4: Ensure a safe and secure laboratory environment
- Strategic goal 5: Promote effective, tiered and integrated laboratory referral networks (in-country and among countries) and enhance coordination
- Strategic goal 6: Promote rational and evidence-based use of integrated laboratory services
- Strategic goal 7: Promote research and development of, and access to, new and innovative technologies.

### **3. Conclusions**

Participants agreed that slow progress had been made since 2016 on the implementation of the regional strategic framework for strengthening laboratory services. They agreed to advocate for achieving better laboratory services by having a laboratory directorate at the ministry of health to oversee laboratory services and by having a national level technical working group to advise the director of laboratory services. The participants also agreed to having a regional laboratory technical working group comprised of laboratory directors or directors overseeing laboratory services at the ministry of health and coordinated by WHO. Priorities agreed for the next framework included:

- Strengthening laboratory leadership and governance, focusing on the laboratory structure at national level, with a laboratory directorate or unit at the ministry of health that develops and implements laboratory policies through a costed strategic plan.
- Implementing laboratory quality management systems using existing approaches such as the strengthening of laboratory management towards accreditation and coordinating regional accreditation schemes among countries.



- Training human resources for laboratory at the pre-service level to ensure the availability of competent human resources for laboratory, including biomedical engineers.
- Strengthening biosafety and biosecurity in laboratories, including by the development and implementation of waste management policies and coordinated specimen biobanking.
- Integrating public health laboratory services for multiple diseases, covering all communicable diseases.

#### **4. Recommendations**

##### *Leadership and governance*

- WHO should advocate for the creation of laboratory departments/units/technical working groups at national level as per the 2008 Maputo Declaration on Strengthening of Laboratory Systems, which called on national governments to support laboratory systems as a priority by developing a national laboratory policy within the national health development plan to guide the implementation of a national strategic laboratory plan.
- Governments should establish a department of laboratory systems within the ministry of health.
- WHO should support ministries of health to develop and formalize the technical working groups.
- Ministries of health should adopt the competence framework for leadership as per the Global Leadership Laboratory Leadership Programme (GLLP).
- WHO should create a regional laboratory technical working group through WHO country offices. The respective ministries of health should nominate members as per the terms of reference shared by WHO. They should have national level responsibility for overseeing laboratory services. The technical working groups should advise countries on the different areas of implementation of

the new regional framework on strengthening health laboratory services and update WHO on the progress made on the implementation.

- The Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO should support countries to enroll in the GLLP.
- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) and WHO should advocate for the inclusion of national laboratory directors in the Country Coordinating Mechanism.
- National laboratory directors should advocate for domestic financing for laboratories.

#### *Laboratory quality management systems*

- The quality units of ministries of health should oversee national implementation of quality management systems for sustainability and ownership; a national laboratory quality unit under the laboratory directorate of the ministry of health would be the most effective mechanism to implement this.
- National laboratory quality units should develop and oversee the implementation of a national plan for a phased approach for the implementation of quality management.
- The African Society for Laboratory Medicine (ASLM) and WHO should map accreditation bodies in the Region and coordinate horizontal collaboration on the use of accreditation bodies across the Region.
- ASLM, CDC and WHO should support countries to enroll in training on strengthening laboratory management towards accreditation through resource mobilization, coordination and provision of technical support.
- ASLM and WHO should provide technical support to countries to audit progress in quality improvement using a stepwise laboratory quality improvement process towards accreditation.

- Oman's Central Public Health Laboratory, the Islamic Republic of Iran's WHO Collaborating Centre for Medicines Quality Assurance and WHO should continue supporting countries to participate in the regional External Quality Assurance System (EQAS) for serology, bacteriology and parasitology.

*Laboratory biosafety and biosecurity*

- Ministries of health should develop and implement biosafety and biosecurity legislation, with technical support from Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), ASLM and WHO.
- Ministries of health should standardize training on biosafety and biosecurity, with technical support from Africa CDC, ASLM and WHO.
- ASLM and WHO should develop a regional standardized tool kit for risk assessment and risk management and share with Member States.
- Ministries of health should develop and implement a waste management policy with technical support from ASLM and WHO.
- Ministries of health should develop and implement a biobanking policy with technical support from ASLM and WHO.
- APHL should develop and run a regional database to monitor the regional implementation of laboratory services.

*Human resources for laboratory*

- Ministries of health should develop a workforce planning toolkit, with technical support from APHL and WHO.
- Ministries of health should advocate for building human resources for laboratory.

*Laboratory networking*

- Ministries of health should design the structure for a national laboratory system, with a tiered network and integrated referral and reporting mechanisms.
- WHO and national laboratory directors should map laboratory capacity across the Region.
- Ministries of health should ensure the sustainable procurement of diagnostics and supplies according to a tiered referral system, through advocacy and adoption of the relevant policy.

*Provision of integrated laboratory services*

- The Global Fund and WHO should develop regional multi-pathogen guidance.
- Countries should use and optimize multiplex testing platforms.
- Countries should use the molecular facilities/expertise developed during the COVID-19 pandemic for the diagnosis and surveillance of other infectious diseases.
- WHO should advocate for funds to support the strengthening of bacteriology and mycology capacities.
- Doctors Without Borders (MSF) should support countries to build antimicrobial resistance testing capacity and reporting to the Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System (GLASS).
- WHO should explore the possibility of establishing a regional laboratory procurement hub to support countries to more easily procure reagents by pooling the procurement of reagents and supplies.
- Ministries of health should develop and implement the essential diagnostics list (EDL), with technical support from WHO.
- Ministries of health should develop appropriate protocols and clinical guidelines on national test ordering.

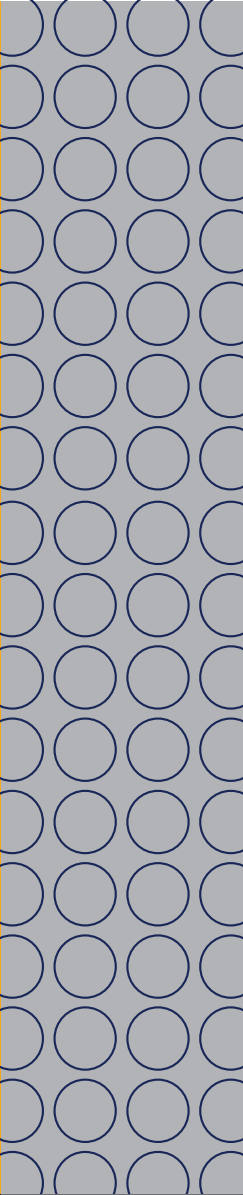
- WHO, the Islamic Republic of Iran's WHO Collaborating Centre for Quality Control and Clinical Chemistry and the Qatari Ministry of Public Health and should collaborate to strengthen diagnostic stewardship.

*Promote research and development of, and access to, new and innovative technologies*

- Ministries of health, through their laboratory departments, should drive the research agenda and advise on policy decisions.
- WHO should coordinate multi-country research, with publications.
- APHL should support WHO to develop a regional database on research conducted in countries.

## **5. Next steps**

WHO will finalize the development of the new framework (2024–2029) and submit it for approval by countries at the next session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2024.



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