



Testing COVID-19 through RT-PCR by the Public Health Laboratory is one of the significant and ongoing achievements taking place in Saudi Arabia. Photo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean Cairo, 31 October 2021 – Strong governance and intersectoral coordination have led to evidence-based decision-making in Saudi Arabia, and there are significant and ongoing achievements taking place in laboratory diagnostics, health information management and response interventions against COVID-19.

These were some of the key findings identified by a technical mission that was conducted by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to the country from 17 to 21 October.

The COVID-19 response was recognized as a national priority from the beginning of the pandemic, with strong commitment from the highest levels of authority in the country.

Health authorities made a pivotal decision to provide free COVID-19 services, testing and treatment to everyone, including individuals with irregular residency status. This has resulted in equal access to services for everyone and minimized the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and other vulnerable groups.

Saudi Arabia has also donated over US\$ 750 million to the global COVID-19 response, including to WHO and a number of countries in the Region. It is an advocate of equal access to diagnostics, treatment and vaccines to all people and has invested in the development of these

tools at national and global levels.

Such important lessons documented during the mission will help other countries improve their response measures to COVID-19, particularly those in the Region having similar circumstances to Saudi Arabia. The mission also reflected on the challenges the country faced and the actions that were taken to overcome them. It also identified areas for improvement with regards to response strengthening.

The review and experience sharing mission was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Public Health Authority and other government institutions and partners.

Transforming towards “Vision 2030”



From left: Dr Abdinasir Abubakar, WHO Regional Incident Manager for COVID-19; Dr Richard Brennan, Regional Emergency Director; Dr Ibrahim El-Ziq, WHO Representative to Saudi Arabia; and Dr Hani Jokhdar, Deputy Minister for Public Health. Photo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
The mission covered 6 priority pillars of the COVID-19 response: partnership and coordination; laboratory diagnostics; infection prevention and control (IPC); health information management and surveillance; risk communication and community engagement (RCCE); and COVID-19 vaccination.

After conducting desk reviews of response plans, guidelines and other relevant documents, mission members met with key stakeholders, including teams from the Ministry of Health, the Public Health Authority, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, and King Saud

University.

To gain insights into work on the ground, they visited the vaccination centre in Riyadh International Convention and Exhibition Centre; the Public Health Laboratory; the Disaster and Emergency Management Collaborating Centre; and the National Guard Hospital.

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing transformation in many sectors as it works towards its national strategy for “Vision 2030”, which includes the health sector. Amid this transition it was successfully able to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, preparing services and planning supplies even before the first case was reported on 2 March 2020, while implementing public health and social measures to control the spread of the virus.

It was also able to build upon its experience with the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) which it has been tackling since 2012. It leveraged existing systems from that response, including for surveillance, laboratory diagnostics, IPC, RCCE, and clinical management.

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