



The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean Region serves 22

countries and territories. WHO now has a presence on the ground in all countries except United Arab Emirates. In July 2021, the Bahrain Country Office became the 20th to open in the Region. So an obvious question is: how do you see the establishment of a WHO Country Office in Bahrain contributing to the advancement of the health and well-being of the country's population?

Dr Atatrah: The diverse challenges facing countries to improve the health and well-being of their populations are highlighting now more than ever the need to establish an adequate WHO presence at the country level. This serves to gear WHO's operations toward countries' needs and priorities and to support them towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such an approach is especially pertinent at the current time as the world is living through the unprecedented health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted the key role a country office can play in strengthening health emergency responses, even of the most advanced health systems, protecting vulnerable populations, and saving lives. Also, what outlived the pandemic crisis is the perpetual need for building more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive health systems- a need that a WHO country office can support national efforts to achieve.

When the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, we saw countries sharing best practices to develop the know-how and the capacity needed for bridging public health knowledge gaps. This is an especially important approach for countries to enhance their national health capacities and with that, the establishment of a WHO Country Office in Bahrain provides the optimal space to facilitate mutual learning and promote knowledge synthesis, translation, and exchange.

What are the high-level goals for the Bahrain Country Office?

Dr Atatrah: With the tools and knowledge of WHO experience at our back, the goal of the Country Office in Bahrain is first and foremost to establish a flagship destination for advancing health and well-being opportunities to benefit the people of Bahrain. Exciting opportunities are also developing to explore ways in which to share guidance and exchange of best practices in Bahrain, as an incubator for success, as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, and globally.

More than this, our goal for this office is to build and expand on WHO's longstanding partnership with the Government of Bahrain to achieve national and global health goals through the provision of strategic, technical, and policy support.

The Bahrain Country Office has been open for only a year. Have you been able to take any concrete steps towards achieving its goals?

Dr Atatrah: We have organized a joint country mission of representatives of the United Nations Interagency Task Force for NCDs and colleagues from our headquarters and regional offices to scale up the implementation of NCD prevention and management strategies and document best practices. The mission's recommendations – including the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, investment in food systems, and development of NCD research platforms – are now being implemented.

The Country Office also supported the introduction of the WHO Acceleration Plan to Stop Obesity in Bahrain, recognising the country's selection as the first in the Gulf Cooperation Council, and one of 25 countries at global level to implement the plan. We have also taken steps to advance mental health and well-being in the country, such as conducting "The School Mental Health Package Workshop". In close collaboration with the Regional Office, the workshop built the capacity of 32 in-country trainers from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education and provided them with the knowledge and skills to scale up the implementation of the School Mental Health Programme in Bahrain; testament to the country's commitment to achieving the WHO strategic priority on promoting healthier populations.

We facilitated a mission to support the evaluation of two cities in-line with the WHO Healthy Cities criteria, joining Um AlHassam's previous accreditation as a Healthy City in Bahrain, and Manama as the first Healthy Capital City in the Region. We also introduced the Health Promoting Universities initiative, recognising the efforts Bahrain has accomplished in furthering sustainable health and well-being opportunities within the fabric of society.

The Country Office regularly facilitates knowledge sharing and provision of access to expertise to improve public health systems' performance, supporting a number of capacity strengthening activities, facilitated by WHO at regional and global levels. And, while delivering on the SDGs' commitment to leave no one behind, we have supported the development of a national action plan to improve access to assistive health technology – the first of its kind in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Partnerships are critical to WHO's ability to effectively implement programmes and improve health and well-being. They are essential to raise visibility of an unmet need, support coordination and provide common platforms for working together. How far is Bahrain Country Office leveraging partnerships to achieve common health goals?

Dr Atatrah: Working with partners to bring better health to all is crucial. We must be willing to take on challenges together and create opportunities together. This is why we have been fostering public health collaboration and engaging in partnerships with national authorities, United Nations agencies, and other stakeholders to realize our commitment to promoting universal health coverage, global health security, and ensuring that all people receive all support needed to lead healthy lives.

The WHO Country Office in Bahrain also facilitated a 3-level mission, resulting in the launch of a report to document Bahrain's strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while showcasing how the country managed to overcome the challenge brought by the pandemic. This pioneering report seeks to increase opportunities for communication and exchange of lessons among those working in the field of health emergency, setting foundations for the sharing of best practice and partnerships in health emergency documentation and response.

Moving beyond the pandemic response toward driving progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, much can be said about the Country Office's efforts to forge partnerships and collaborations to promote and protect people's health and well-being in Bahrain. From collaborating with the Government of Bahrain and national experts from the national tobacco control programme to develop a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) action plan to reduce tobacco use; to working on the ground with other UN agencies to promote disability inclusion and ensure that people with disability can achieve the highest level of health possible – these are just some examples.

On a more personal note, we would like to ask you have you been able to apply your previous experience with WHO to your work as WHO Representative in Bahrain?

Dr Atatrah: Having worked in 2 WHO regions, I have learned a lot about the need to be “agile”, a term often now used in project management. For me, it means being ready to reassess and adapt approaches and plans as a situation evolves, as new information or data emerges, or following a shift in perspective, be it my own or the team I am working with. Given the complexity and fast-paced changes that define the world of public health today, agility is a critical capability. This is not to say that stability is no longer needed. Rather, that dynamism has to be added to the mix.

And what has particularly struck you while serving as WHO Representative in Bahrain?

Dr Atatrah: Health diplomacy is an important means of promoting health for all by all, and I really am proud to be WHO.

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