3 December 2018, Beirut, Lebanon – The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has convened a meeting of the Regional Parliamentary Working Group on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), taking place today and tomorrow in Beirut, Lebanon. This marks an important milestone in promoting and strengthening parliamentarians’ engagement in gearing up national health and development policies toward achieving UHC in the Region.

Hosted by the Government of Lebanon, the meeting was inaugurated by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, HE Dr Ghassan Hasbani, Lebanese Minister of Public Health and HE Dr Inaya Ezzeddine, Minister of State for Administrative Reform, who in her capacity as a Member of Parliament represented HE Mr Nabih Berri, Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament.

The meeting brings together more than 30 parliamentarians from different countries and territories of the Region, along with global and regional public health experts, as well as representatives from Ministries of Health, partner organizations and parliamentary structures, within and outside the Region. The meeting aims to foster dialogue and exchange on different parliamentary experiences, challenges and lessons learned to pave the way for establishing a regional parliamentary forum for UHC, a first of its kind in the Region and beyond.

UHC has been receiving high-level political support since the momentous signing of the UHC2030 Global Compact during a ministerial meeting in Salalah, Oman, in September 2018. Multiple global and regional commitments have identified UHC as a top priority, notably including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023 (GPW 13), with its target of ensuring that 1 billion more people benefit from UHC by 2023. The WHO Regional Director’s Vision 2023: Health For All By All calls for partnership, solidarity and action by governments, professionals, nongovernmental organizations, communities, civil society, legislative bodies and individuals towards achieving the goal of UHC.

“Building partnerships with parliamentarians is crucial for advancing towards UHC as they play an essential role in public health through approving public policies and plans, enacting supportive legislation, negotiating and approving budgets, and monitoring and providing oversight to ensure government accountability and transparency, according to agreed targets and plans”, said Dr Al-Mandhari in his opening remarks. “Most importantly, parliamentarians represent people and are accountable to their constituents to promote and protect their right to health and operationalize the Constitution.”
This was further stressed in the opening ceremony by Dr Zafar Mirza, Director of Health System Development at WHO’s Regional Office: “Every country can and should move towards UHC. It is a matter of vision, political will and prioritization. In this joint endeavour, parliamentarians have a critical role in advancing UHC.”

The working group meeting builds upon the momentum generated by the recent Memorandum of Understanding signed between Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The Memorandum arises from several years of collaboration between WHO and IPU. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, WHO is used to working with parliamentarians to achieve better health outcomes. The WHO Regional Office has established partnerships for various priority health areas, including reproductive and child health, road safety and tobacco control.

Through moderated panel discussions and working groups, participants will develop clear terms of reference for an expert advisory group to support the regional parliamentary forum for UHC, the first session of which is due to be held in the first half of 2019. WHO will provide technical support to the forum and act as an interim secretariat for the first two years.

**Related links:**

[Universal health coverage](#)

[Vision 2030: Health for all by all – a call for solidarity and action](#)
Parliamentarians from the Eastern Mediterranean Region join WHO’s call for action and solidarity towards achieving universal health coverage for everyone, everywhere.