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Editorial

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After nearly 3 years of increasingly successful response to the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and other stakeholders need to broaden their focus to deal with other public health challenges too. That was the message of the 69th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which took place at WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO) in Cairo, Egypt, from 10 to 13 October 2022. The Regional Committee is the WHO's main governing body in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) (1). Its 2022 annual session brought together ministers of health, other representatives of Member States, WHO experts, partner organizations, civil society groups, and other stakeholders to discuss a wide range of health policy issues, review achievements and challenges, and chart a course for the region. For the first time in 3 years, Member State delegations were able to meet in person, with many other participants joining virtually.

The session was convened under the theme “Reaching the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-COVID-19 age: accelerating universal health coverage and health security – Health for All by All”(2). Participants focused on the opportunity to build on the momentum and lessons learned from the pandemic response. Foremost among these lessons is the need to build stronger health systems that are better able to respond to emergencies (3): the huge economic and social costs of the pandemic have highlighted the value of investing in health.

The Regional Committee endorsed a regional agenda for building resilient health systems, which will guide countries in systematically addressing gaps and weaknesses exposed by COVID-19 through action in seven priority areas: (i) strengthening health emergency and disaster risk management; (ii) optimizing ministries of health and building public health institutions; (iii) establishing primary healthcare-oriented models of care; (iv) enhancing health workforce; (v) promoting equity and enhancing financial protection; (vi) improving access to medicines, vaccines and health products; and (vii) fostering an integrated approach to policy, planning and investment (4).

The pandemic also demonstrated the potential of digital technologies for improving access to health care. Member States are now stepping up efforts to harness that potential for longer-term improvements in the accessibility, quality, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of their health systems. To support such efforts, the Regional Committee endorsed a new regional strategy and action plan for fostering digital health, which has 4 objectives: (i) strengthening digital health governance, norms and standards at regional, national and subnational levels; (ii) advocating for people-centred digital health systems and networks; (iii) advancing the development, implementation and evaluation of national digital health strategies; and (iv) promoting regional and national stakeholder collaboration towards advancing digital transformation, knowledge translation and innovation (5).

Another important area for development in the coming years is health and wellbeing promotion. The Seventy-fifth World Health Assembly called for the development of a framework on achieving wellbeing, including an implementation and monitoring plan (6); and the Regional Committee requested WHO to propose a regional roadmap to guide Member States in implementing the wellbeing agenda in the region (7), based on a detailed technical paper prepared for the session (8).

Coverage of highly cost-effective HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and immunization interventions has either stagnated in recent years or been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. To

address this, the Regional Committee endorsed a strategic framework and framework for action to coordinate and integrate support from 2 of the most important global health initiatives: Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (9). Member States were requested to accelerate the prevention, control and elimination of communicable diseases through integration and optimization of the support from Gavi and the Global Fund by implementing strategic directions in six areas: governance, financing, service delivery, health workforce, access to commodities, and health information systems.

The Regional Committee endorsed actions to reduce and mitigate future health risks. Notable among these actions are the endorsement of a new regional operational framework for One Health, setting out guiding principles, strategic objectives, actions for implementation at country level, and expected deliverables (10). They requested Member States to adapt the framework to their national contexts and implement it with WHO support, prioritizing interventions on zoonotic diseases of public health concern, antimicrobial resistance, and food safety, and requested WHO to establish a regional Quadripartite One Health Coordination Mechanism (11,12).

The Regional Committee received updates on important global and regional issues, including, among others, proposals from the WHO Director-General for strengthening the global architecture of health emergency preparedness, response and resilience (13). This is a critical concern in the EMR, given the huge scale of emergencies that we face. WHO's regional team will be working hard to support Member States in engaging with several global bodies that are currently shaping reforms, in particular the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body to draft and negotiate a WHO convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (14) and the Working Group on Amendments to the International Health Regulations (2005) (15). We look forward to progressing this and other elements of the regional health agenda in the years ahead.

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