11 October 2023 – The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted once again the importance of health workers in maintaining the health of populations and providing essential health services. It has also resulted in greater recognition of the critical role of the health workforce in delivering essential public health functions and responding to health emergencies.

Countries and territories in the Eastern Mediterranean Region – a region with highly diverse and often challenging political, social, economic and demographic contexts – face ongoing health workforce shortages. Although most countries and territories have made significant progress in increasing their workforce production capacities, such increases have not kept pace with population growth.

Afghanistan, Djibouti, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen – over 25% of the Region's countries and territories – are on the WHO health workforce support and safeguards list 2023. This lists the countries with the most pressing health workforce challenges in relation to universal health coverage. Current projections imply that health workforce shortages will continue in the Region, and account for over 20% of the global shortfall of 10 million health workers that is anticipated by 2030.

These challenges can only be addressed through our collective commitment and multisectoral actions. Our health workforce is our future, and the time to act is now. A strengthened health workforce is essential for building resilient health systems and achieving universal health coverage.

Faster action needed to develop Region's health workforce

Efforts to strengthen the health workforce have not reached the desired level and pace, despite high-level global and regional commitments. WHO therefore proposes a call for action to

accelerate implementation of the Framework for action for health workforce development in the Eastern Mediterranean Region 2017–2030.

Priority areas for action are to:

increase and sustain investment in the production and employment of health workers, including better alignment with health system needs;

strengthen the health workforce at the primary care level to ensure competent delivery of essential public health functions, including emergency preparedness and response, and to address gaps exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic;

reorient and transform health professional education to address the competency needs of current and future health workers;

improve retention of health workers and respond to the increasing mobility of health professionals both within and outside the Region;

protect and safeguard the health and well-being of the health workforce; and

promote regional solidarity in support of national strategies, with emphasis given to countries on the WHO health workforce support and safeguards list.

The WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean was invited to discuss this technical paper and adopt the resolution calling for accelerated action to enhance and scale up a fit-for-purpose health workforce to advance towards the health-related Sustainable Development Goals. Investment in the health workforce also enhances economic growth, creates jobs and promotes social protection, cohesion and health security.

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