

WHO Policy Framework: Global and regional directions

Global challenges in health

The General Programme of Work (GPW) is the highest policy document of WHO. The Eleventh GPW (2006-2015) sets out the direction for international public health for the period of 2006 through 2015. The document notes that there have been substantial improvements in health over the last 50 years. However, significant challenges remain, as highlighted in the following four gaps:

Gaps in social justice: Clearly, poverty is a key factor that impedes access to quality health services. There are copious gaps in the levels of health of different sections of the same society. In some countries the life expectancy of the poor is 20 years lower than that of more privileged members of society. Poverty and poor health form a vicious cycle. Other factors that reduce equitable access to health services are discrimination by ethnicity or gender, and women's health, which is often not adequately addressed.

Gaps in responsibility: Health problems today are no longer merely the responsibility of those working on health but also require positive action by those outside the health sector. International conflicts and national crises often lead to the disruption of social services which include health care. Globalization and international trade has a direct impact on health, especially in pharmaceuticals and the movement of health professionals. In many countries ministries of health often do not have the capacity to adequately influence important causes of ill-health outside the health sector.

Gaps in implementation: The technology to implement cost-effective interventions to improve health is often available but not implemented because of shortage of funds, lack of human resources or the absence of an effective health system. Available resources may often be allocated to high-cost curative services and are often concentrated in urban areas, leaving inexpensive and effective interventions in rural and remote areas neglected.

Gaps in knowledge: Global advances in science and technology have improved the effectiveness and efficiency of medical services and the prevention and treatment

of diseases. However, information about the means to use these advances for health development is often not available in many countries. Also, the lack of information about health conditions and existing rigidities in many countries have in turn made it difficult to formulate and manage effective health policies and interventions. Even operational research for those most in need of health services is generally not conducted, thereby reducing the efficiency of key programmes.

Global Health Agenda

In order to reduce these gaps over the coming decade, the Eleventh GPW outlines a Global Health Agenda consisting of seven priority areas:

- (1) Investing in health to reduce poverty.
- (2) Building individual and global health security.
- (3) Promoting universal coverage, gender equality and health-related human rights.
- (4) Tackling the determinants of health.
- (5) Strengthening health systems and equitable access.
- (6) Harnessing knowledge, science and technology.
- (7) Strengthening governance, leadership and accountability.

The Global Health Agenda is relevant to everyone working in the field of health development. WHO will contribute to this agenda by concentrating on its core functions, which have been built on the comparative advantages of the Organization. In accordance with the Global Health Agenda and WHO's core functions, the Organization has set the following priorities:

- (1) Providing support to countries in moving to universal coverage with effective public health interventions.
- (2) Strengthening global health security.
- (3) Generating and sustaining action across sectors to modify the behavioural, social, economic and environmental determinants of health.
- (4) Increasing institutional capacities to deliver core public health functions under the strengthened governance of ministries of health.
- (5) Strengthening WHO's leadership at the global and regional levels and supporting the work of governments at the country level.

WHO will pursue these priorities through its Medium-term Strategic Plan (2008-2013) and the biennium budget. The Director-General of WHO has clearly placed considerable focus on the work of the Organization at the country level. The regional

offices and headquarters have been directed to emphasize support for country work and implement these priorities in Member States, especially in countries where health needs are the most pressing.

WHO's core functions

- Providing leadership on matters critical to health and engaging in partnerships where joint action is needed.
- Shaping the research agenda and stimulating the generation, translation and dissemination of valuable knowledge.
- Setting norms and standards, and promoting and monitoring their implementation.
- Articulating ethical and evidence-based policy options.
- Providing technical support, catalysing change, and building sustainable institutional capacity.
- Monitoring the health situation and assessing health trends.

Regional Policy Framework

The SEA Region has the second largest population among the six WHO Regions and the highest burden of disease. While there has been great economic development in this Region in recent years, the problems of poverty and poor health remain significant. Many Member countries here have faced health emergencies in the last decade and the threat of disease outbreaks is ever present. At the same time, NCDs have become an increasingly important cause of morbidity and mortality in countries of the SEA Region. Therefore, the Global Policy Framework of WHO is appropriate for the countries of the Region, with special attention paid to strengthening the capacity of Member States to support public health interventions.

The South-East Asia Region has always placed a strong emphasis on its work in Member States. Of the total budget provided to the Region, 75 per cent is allocated for countries, the highest for any WHO region. The Regional Director for South-East Asia has recently enhanced the degree of delegated authority to country offices to enable them to plan and implement programmes with a higher degree of independence and be more accountable for their work. At the same time, he has emphasized that the Regional Office staff should give the highest priority to support the work in these countries.