

Universal health care, healthier populations, and stronger public health: how SEARO is working with countries to strengthen disease control and preparedness through its flagship priorities

David L. Heymann

Infectious Disease Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK

Since the creation of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948, it has been a challenge to ensure that priorities across the organization are aligned, and at the same time meet the varied needs of its six culturally and ethnically different regions. The World Health Assembly (WHA) sets the WHO global agenda and the workplan—or programme of work—that is reviewed, modified and endorsed by consensus of ministers of health of all WHO member countries. The WHO Regional Committees (RC), regional subsets of the same ministers of health, review, modify and endorse the agenda and workplan for the region. Alignment is presumed, but sometimes not accomplished.

The series of articles in this edition of *The Lancet Regional Health—Southeast Asia* track flagship priorities of the WHO Regional Office for Southeast Asia (SEARO), over the last decade and provide a description of the accomplishments and challenges in these priority areas. The accomplishments are reassuring. The series demonstrates that the challenge of alignment across the Organization has not been an obstacle to successfully addressing regional priorities.

In addition to being aligned with the WHO programme of work as endorsed by the World Health Assembly, the flagship priorities and outcomes of SEARO also align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for Health, and the WHO Director General's three global targets: a billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage; a billion more enjoying better health and well-being, and a billion better protected from health emergencies.

And despite the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, for which SEARO provided overall regional guidance under its scaling up capacities for emergency risk management flagship priority area, activities in some of the flagship priority areas appear to have continued with minimal disruption and remain on target, while others are rapidly being addressed post-pandemic. The success of the END TB flagship program demonstrates how WHO leadership can drive national responses to communicable

diseases. Technical excellence at the regional level has significantly provided a successful example for stronger global actions as well.

The flagship area of work of preventing non-communicable diseases is a flagship priority that has been given special emphasis aiming at healthier populations with fewer co-morbidities and obesity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is important, as co-morbidities and obesity are the risk factors for serious and fatal outcomes after infection with endemic, epidemic and pandemic infections whether they are TB and HIV, or influenza, cholera or coronaviruses. The progress seems to be driven by factors like data monitoring and clear policies, while other risk factors have stalled due to implementation issues. The SEARO region struggles to achieve SDGs in NCDs due to a lack of local data for informed decisions and resource allocation.

In fact—universal health coverage, health promotion and scaling up capacities for emergency risk management—are the exact synergistic combination required for greater pandemic preparedness in the future: strong public health to manage risks, sustained and resilient access to healthcare, and healthy populations able to better resist serious infectious disease outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of strengthening institutions like WHO and the regional offices. The need for regional data in addition to national and subnational data to capture future disease burdens and outbreaks, resource allocation and finding out local strategies has never been more acute. A more local role of WHO may enhance data collection through strong and robust frameworks for monitoring and surveillance. Considering the wide variety of global health institutions, it's important to collaborate with regional organizations such as FAO, OIE, and UNEP in order to avoid fragmentation. Reviewing global and regional action plans of all these organisations in order to prioritize feasible interventions can make a tangible difference in the SEARO region.

Finally, WHO SEARO should realise the importance of the next five years as crucial ones to achieving the SDGs. At this moment, it is imperative to conduct a self-critical evaluation of inadequate responses, emphasizing



The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia 2023;18: 100309

Published online 29 October 2023
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100309>

E-mail address: david.heyman@lstmh.ac.uk.

© 2023 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

the need to address challenges in addition to self-congratulation on the many successes. In order to effectively tackle imperceptible threats, a daring and all-encompassing strategy is essential, surpassing gradual approaches.

No one who reads this series of articles will have any doubt about the importance of the regional focus and effective leadership that are being provided by the

political leaders and technical experts of the WHO Regional Office for Southeast Asia.

Contributor

DH conceptualised and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration of interests

The author has been an advisor on AMR to the Regional Director WHO SEARO in past. He declares no conflict of interest.