

Statement on Universal Health Coverage from MENA Community

Introduction

Universal Health Coverage (UHC), which is a key component of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, aims to ensure that all individuals and communities have access to quality health services without suffering financial hardship.

Following a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional workshop on UHC co-led by MENA Community and the Global Network of People living with HIV (GNP+), we note the following factors influencing UHC efforts in the region:

- **Diverse Healthcare Systems:** The MENA region is diverse in terms of its economic development, healthcare infrastructure, and government policies. Some countries have well-established healthcare systems, while others face challenges related to healthcare access, quality, and affordability.
- **Government Initiatives:** A number of governments in the region have taken steps to improve healthcare access and quality. These initiatives include expanding health insurance coverage, enhancing primary healthcare services, and investing in healthcare infrastructure.
- **Private Sector Involvement:** The role of the private sector in healthcare varies across the region. In some countries, the private sector plays a significant role in service provision, while in others, it is more limited.
- **Health Inequalities:** Socioeconomic disparities can lead to unequal access to healthcare services. Vulnerable and marginalized populations, including refugees, internally displaced persons and people living with HIV, often face greater challenges in accessing adequate healthcare.
- **Regional Organizations:** Regional organizations, such as the World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (WHO EMRO), are providing technical assistance and support to countries in the region to strengthen their healthcare systems and work towards UHC.

Overcoming the challenges to UHC in MENA region

We bring to the attention of government representatives, civil society, and other national and international stakeholders, that the implementation of UHC in MENA region requires the following issues and concerns to be addressed:

- **Inequitable Access:** Access to healthcare services is often unequal, with disparities between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, and different demographic groups.
- **Fragmented Healthcare Systems:** Many countries in the MENA region have fragmented healthcare systems with varying levels of public and private sector involvement. This leads to inefficiencies, duplication of services, and unequal distribution of resources.
- **Financial Barriers:** High out-of-pocket payments for healthcare lead to financial hardship for individuals and families. Limited public funding and lack of comprehensive insurance coverage contribute to this problem.
- **Quality of Care:** There are significant variations in the quality of healthcare services provided, ranging from inadequate infrastructure to a shortage of skilled healthcare professionals.

- **Health Workforce Challenges:** Shortages of qualified healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and allied health workers, lead to inadequate coverage, longer waiting times, and increased workload for existing staff.
- **Non-Communicable Diseases:** The prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer is rising in the region. Managing these chronic conditions requires sustained access to healthcare services.
- **Conflict and Instability:** Several countries in the MENA region have faced – and continue to face – conflict and political instability, which disrupt healthcare infrastructure and delivery, leading to decreased access to care for vulnerable populations.
- **Migration and Refugee Crisis:** The region has seen significant migration and refugee flows due to conflicts. Ensuring access to healthcare for these displaced populations is challenging.
- **Healthcare Infrastructure:** Inadequate healthcare infrastructure in certain areas limits access to essential services, especially in remote and underserved regions.
- **Health Information Systems:** Limited or outdated health information systems hinder effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation of healthcare services.
- **Cultural and Societal Factors:** Societal norms, cultural beliefs, and gender disparities affect healthcare-seeking behavior and limit access, particularly for certain groups, such as women, the LGBT community, and all marginalized communities, including people living with HIV.
- **Lack of Political Will and Investment:** Achieving UHC requires strong political commitment and sustained investment in healthcare systems. Some countries currently lack the necessary prioritization and resources.

Collaboration to move forward

Despite these challenges, in different parts of the MENA region there are some positive steps to improve healthcare access and quality. Efforts include health system reforms, expanding insurance coverage, investing in healthcare infrastructure, and addressing social determinants of health. Nevertheless, to date these efforts are still very modest in the face of the pressing healthcare needs of people throughout the MENA region. We therefore urge governments, civil society, and international organizations to strengthen and deepen their collaboration to overcome these obstacles and work towards the goal of UHC in the Middle East and North Africa.

MENA COMMUNITY