

Summary report on the

**Regional consultation on constituting
a regional parliamentary forum on
health promotion**

Cairo, Egypt
10–11 November 2008



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) hosted the Second Regional Consultation on Constituting the Regional Parliamentary Forum on Health Promotion in Cairo, Egypt, on 10–11 November 2008. The consultation was a collaborative effort of the regional programmes for healthy lifestyle promotion and community-based initiatives. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians from five countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region: Jordan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

The consultation aimed to follow-up on the work and recommendations of the first regional parliamentary meeting, which convened in Cairo in May 2007. The main objectives of the consultation were to:

- Critically analyse and finalize the terms of reference, the mandate and the objectives of the proposed Regional Parliamentary Forum on Health Promotion drafted in the regional consultation in 2007;
- Agree on the operational issues of the Regional Parliamentary Forum on Health Promotion with regard to funding mechanisms, structural issues, etc; and
- Develop consensus on a future role of the Forum with regards to interaction with similar forums outside the Region.

The meeting was opened by Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, who highlighted the importance of engaging parliamentarians and using their influence in putting health promotion high on the political agenda across the Region to advocate translating commitment into action. The health promotion response went beyond the scope of the health sector and entailed a public health approach. He underlined the pressing need for advancing health promotion with policy-makers in all sectors and at all levels, directing them to be aware of the health consequences of their decisions and to

accept their responsibilities for health. Without health or education, development could not take place.

During the consultation, participants discussed the evolution of health promotion globally, including health promotion conventions and charters, current health promotion approaches within the context of development and the influence of social determinants of health. The findings of the Report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health and the ongoing community-based initiatives across the Region were also discussed within the overall context of health promotion. The terms of reference suggested by the 2007 meeting were reviewed and finalized, tasks for the Forum Secretariat were suggested and recommendations for next steps were proposed.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Discussions

Parliamentarians are key players for addressing social determinants of health and for promoting health through their functions in representation, oversight and legislation on behalf of their constituents. One of their major roles is to ensure that the benefits of national policies and legislation are equitably directed to everyone without any discrimination against any group or sex, to ensure that everyone has equal access to services and is not exposed to social inequalities, within a broader national movement going beyond health and going beyond parliaments. The Ministry of Health, by default, might not be the most important ministry within the cabinet. Thus there is a need to lend support to the voice of the Ministry of Health within the parliamentary bodies in order to tip the balance. Members of Parliamentary health committees are in a position to place health promotion high on the political agenda and use

their influence to expand the resource base for health promotion in their respective countries.

There is a deep conviction that health is not a service but rather an investment whose revenue benefits society as a whole. Investment in health contributes to development and thus to economic growth of the community, the society and the nation as a whole. Yet health expenditure is still modest and needs to be increased particularly at the government level. The development budget for health often goes mostly to hospitals, and there is a need for things such as electricity, safe drinking water, etc, all key to better health. Neighbouring countries should jointly work in coordination for better measures against epidemics and disease. Different experiences in countries should be shared for the benefit of other countries. Proper documentation of best practices in health promotion is needed, along with dissemination of information and guidelines on design and implementation of health and development policies and programmes aiming for sustainable development in Member States.

The issue of refugees is very important in the Region. Many countries are either in a state of conflict/complex emergency or have neighbours that are experiencing such situations. Countries hosting refugees may receive donor support, but there is lack of balance in the quality of primary health care between camps and the local population, with the quality of care within refugee camps often better than that provided by host countries to their citizens. This is the result of myriad factors, such as access and the fact that many refugee care providers, for example UNRWA, have significant resources and well-developed implementation and monitoring mechanisms. Despite donor support, however, refugees still affect the social services within the host country at large. It is important to integrate refugees into the larger society, and empower them to generate earnings and social capital. Moreover, refugees are but one group of many other vulnerable groups such as women, people with disabilities, the poor, etc.

Target groups must be prioritized and a needs assessment conducted in order to decide upon the requested type of services (health and non-health) and the ways to empower the groups.

The Regional Director suggested a field visit for the distinguished members of the parliamentary health committee to be arranged by the Ministry of Health assisted by WHO to one of the sites implementing community-based initiatives in their respective countries. This should inform parliamentarians of the impact of community leadership in health and development and expedite its institutionalization as part of national health and development plans and policies.

There was general consensus on the need for a Secretariat for inter-parliamentary collaboration across countries of the Region, with tasks and expectations clearly defined. It was agreed to establish a Secretariat for the Forum to be led by one of the parliaments of the countries of the Region on a biannual rotation basis. Pakistan volunteered to host the first secretariat for the coming two years.

In light of the linkages between health and development, participants decided that the Forum would be designated the Regional Parliamentary Forum on Health and Development. The proposed terms of reference were revised accordingly. Clear terms of reference for the Forum as well as expected tasks and responsibilities for its Secretariat were finalized, and future steps proposed to operationalize the terms of reference. It was noted that although the Forum will be supported by WHO, its ownership must rest with the countries. In this regard a Memorandum of Understanding may be signed between WHO and the Forum in order to ensure the institutionalization of the process and its continuity. WHO can facilitate training workshops for parliamentarians and other stakeholders upon the request of countries of the Region.

Terms of reference for the Regional Parliamentary Forum on Health and Development

- Encourage and promote the formation of national groups/committees of parliamentarians on health promotion and sustainable development, including poverty reduction, addressing underlying determinants of health in countries of the Region.
- Support these groups and committees to increase awareness and promote understanding among parliamentarians of the complementary relationship between health and development.
- Provide oversight to the development and implementation of health and sustainable development policies and programmes aiming at achieving MDGs taking into account country specificities and context.
- Establish, through active advocacy with governments (where applicable), parliamentarians as key stakeholders in all health promotion and development initiatives at both the policy and service delivery level to create an enabling environment supportive to intersectoral collaboration at all levels for health and development ensuring optimal utilization of resources. This will encompass raising the level of awareness and understanding to inform and mobilize integrated action at the grass-roots level.
- Ensure that all policies take into account health and development aspects for the entire population within a country.
- Review (with technical assistance from WHO) existing legislation and propose a revised set of legislation for emerging health issues, where appropriate, to provide legislative support to health and development interventions.
- Identify (with technical support from WHO) potential sources of funding at country, regional and international level to expand the resource base for health promotion and establish and augment the

financial resources needed to render the forum capable of fulfilling its functions and responsibilities.

- Act as a bridge between different parliamentary committees to ensure that health and development initiatives are collectively conceived and implemented.
- Support and strengthen coordination between different parliamentary committees to seek synergies in actions towards health and development including social determinants of health.
- Promote and facilitate collaboration and networking among parliamentarians outside their respective countries and between international nongovernmental organizations through inter-parliamentary visits and exchange programmes.
- Collect and document health and development related regional and national good practices.
- Mobilize parliaments through Parliamentarians and other mechanisms in the Region to enhance the level of participation in the forum from most of the Member States.
- Facilitate, support, sponsor and organize meetings and conferences of parliamentarians, and conduct seminars, workshops, and training programmes for health promotion and development.
- Promote and facilitate collaboration and networking among parliamentarians outside their respective countries and between international nongovernmental organizations through inter-parliamentary visits and exchange programmes.
- Put health promotion and development high on the political agenda of similar national and regional forums (e.g. Arab Parliamentarian Union, ASEAN, etc).

Structure and responsibilities of the Forum Secretariat

Structure

The Secretariat is to be hosted and chaired by a volunteer country every 2 years. The focal person within the host country to serve the full term of that country for the Secretariat (2 years)

Responsibilities

- Facilitate communication and exchange of experience related to health and development among different committees within the Parliament of the country and among different countries.
- Ensure that the Forum's terms of reference are consistently implemented within different countries.
- Initiate and pursue communication and partnership with similar national and regional forums (e.g. Arab Parliamentarian Union, ASEAN, etc).
- Ensure that health and socioeconomic interventions reach the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of the community and promote health equity across the countries and the Region.
- Ensure that the health sector receives the support needed from the Parliament.
- Ensure that legislation that has an impact on public health is reviewed on a continuing basis before being approved by Parliament. In some cases, revisiting of existing legislation may be considered.

3. NEXT STEPS

1. The current Parliamentarian group (who participated in consultative meeting on 10–11 November 2008) to serve as a core group to facilitate the future process for a period of 2 years.
2. The Regional Director to be requested to share the proposed terms of reference of the Forum with all Member States through Speakers/Chairs of the Parliaments.
3. The Regional Office to request ministries of health to include the heads and/or focal points of the Regional Forum of the Parliamentary committee on health as part of the delegation for the Regional Committee sessions.
4. Pakistan has volunteered to host the secretariat for the next two years. The Regional Director to be requested to kindly write to the Speaker of the National Assembly Pakistan for her kind concurrence, as well as to speakers/chairs of the parliament of all Member States for their endorsement.
5. WHO to provide seed money to support the working of the Secretariat.
6. Ministries of health and WHO country offices to support the efforts of the Parliamentarians in health and development.
7. WHO to engage Parliamentarians regularly in the sessions of the Regional Committee and Health Assembly.
8. WHO to ensure the participation of a select group of Parliamentarians to attend the 7th Global Conference on Health Promotion in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2009.