Muscat declaration
on strengthening of school health services to
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The World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held a regional consultation on Strengthening of school health services to address current and future challenges in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, from 29 to 31 May 2010 under the patronage of Her Excellency Dr Mona bint Salem al-Jardaniyah, Undersecretary for Teaching and Curricula, Ministry of Education, in the presence of His Excellency Dr Mohammed bin Saif al-Hosani, Undersecretary for Health Affairs, Ministry of Health, and His Excellency Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

The consultation aimed at reviewing the current status of health services provided to school community (children and adolescents in schools, workers, educators, managers and other employees) and development trends in the countries of the Region; identifying health needs and priorities and organizational gaps in school health services practice in their relation to emerging challenges; suggesting optimal organizational models for the delivery of health services to school community; exploring the potential role of health-promoting schools in bridging the gaps and implementing the recommended models.

During the three days of consultations regional and national experts, programme managers and school health officers from 16 countries of the Region, with participation of representatives of the United Nations Children's Fund Organization (UNICEF) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), presented the results of the intercountry questionnaire on school health services in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including: general indicators about students, schools, enrolment and drop-out; indicators related to health staff employed in health service delivery; features of the present status regarding health policies, school health services regulations, organizational and structural settings and the types of health services delivery to the school community and all its components: students, workers, educators and managers, by health teams, school health clinics, primary health care clinics or certain health insurance schemes.

The participants discussed the efforts of the countries to protect and promote the health of children and adolescents at schools and identified the main accomplishments, needs and priorities and the main health problems of the school community – the primary and secondary school students or school workers, and suggested the optimal and most efficient ways to enhance the role of school health services at the national and regional levels in addressing risk factors, confronting present and future challenges, scaling up school health services coverage and access.
to make positive impact on attainment of students and professional performance of teachers and managers, and to enhance positive health behaviours in all members of the school community, their families and communities.

Achievements
The main achievements in the countries of the Region can be summarized as follows:

- In most of the countries of the Region there is political will to pay attention to school health programmes. Most countries of the Region strive to implement school health components from a holistic perspective at different levels, adopt international initiatives (such as health-promoting schools, etc.) and make efforts to organize the delivery of these programmes and services by adopting regulations and regulatory decisions or national guidelines, and some of the countries aspire to adopt national guides for standard school health operating procedures.

- Organizational structures for school health programmes already exist in most countries of the Region in the form of directorates or departments with full- or part-time staff in the ministries of education or health. Despite small numbers and scarcity of specialists, in many countries these competent (both in terms of qualifications or accumulated experience) educational and health staff are actively engaged in the management of school health programmes, service delivery and professionally dealing with challenges and difficulties.

- The experiences of the countries of the Region show improvement of cost-effectiveness and performance of school health services whenever there is consolidation of partnership, coordination, synergy and integration between educational and health sectors on different levels, and between school health services and the diverse relevant national health programmes.

- Nearly all the countries of the Region deliver school health services as an essential component of national school health programmes and health-promoting schools, in addition to other components, such as systematic or non-systematic health education, striving to provide a healthy school environment (physical/emotional, social, administrative/organizational, teaching/learning), encourage physical activity and healthy diet, providing counselling and listening and psychological support, communicating with students' families and local community and the health promotion of school educational and management staff, despite some quantitative and qualitative variation in the form and content of these services due to variation in capacities, needs and priorities.

- School health service provision contributes to delivering Primary Health Care to a wide sector, up to 25—35% of the population, during an important and critical stage of physical and psychological growth and cognitive, cultural and social development at school, home and work, by providing a variety of health-promoting health, preventive, treatment and rehabilitation services and addressing the various common risk factors and health problems.

- School health services played a crucial role in the countries of the Region in communicable disease prevention, confronting the challenge of pandemic influenza and effectively applying the recommended preventive rules and procedures at schools by guidance and awareness-raising, encouragement of
hand-washing and general hygiene and enhancing the role of students in conveying health messages to their families.

- Some countries of the Region made **pivotal bold decisions to provide trained qualified full- or part-time health workers (school nurses)** to manage school health programmes and deliver promotional and preventive health services at school level.

- **School health services took the initiative in identifying the various risk factors that face the school community in many countries** by performing a variety of health/behavioural surveys, including the Global school-based student health survey (GSBS), full physical screening of the pupils according to the phases and regulations in each country and contributing to providing evidence and statistics about the prevalence of risk factors and health problems among school students, thus contributing to identifying health needs and setting health priorities at the school, local community and national levels.

- **School health services contributed to implementation of the objectives of several national health programmes related to child and adolescent health in many countries of the Region:**
  - immunization (vaccination) programmes, where high coverage rates in the targeted age groups are achieved;
  - detection and management of low vision, refractive errors, trachoma control and hearing impairment, and oral health promotion;
  - injury prevention, provision of first aid, treatment of common and mild disease and communicable disease prevention;
  - integration and rehabilitation of, and provision of health services to disabled school students, providing health services to those with special health needs, such as students with asthma, diabetes mellitus, epilepsy and some chronic diseases;
  - control of malnutrition by encouraging of healthy eating habits, having a breakfast, providing school feeding programmes, control of iron-deficiency anaemia and micronutrient deficiency;
  - warning about the dangers of obesity, encouragement of physical activity and physical training at schools;
  - health education about reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention and smoking and addiction control;
  - education about essential road safety and traffic accident prevention;
  - contributing to design and development of systems, preparations and procedures to deal with emergencies at schools, providing training and ensuring effective response should an emergency happen.

- Some countries in the Region applied **successful and promising systems in electronic health record usage for school health data entry** and retrieval and updating the indicators through comprehensive integrated websites in certain sectors.

- **Most countries of the Region are keen to exchange expertise and enhance coordination in school health field** with other countries, such as the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Maghreb Union and relevant international organizations to develop school health programmes. They have adopted initiatives that proved successful, such as health-promoting schools
initiative, and focusing resources on effective school health, child-friendly schools, etc.

Developments, challenges and obstacles

Numerous developments, challenges and obstacles that make the enhancement of school health services as an essential component of school health programmes compelling in the countries of the Region were discussed during the consultation. Some of the most important ones are:

- **The increasingly important role of schools and educational establishments in dissemination of health education and health-promoting behaviour** in light of development challenges, increasing prevalence of risk factors and unhealthy behavioural patterns among adolescents, emergence of diseases, risks and health hazards that may affect the school community and the importance of intervention early in the course of life, investing in prevention and health promotion in this population sector.

- **Scarce financial and human resources that are required to develop and implement school health programmes** compared to the increasing numbers of students and schools, the necessity to address health and behavioural challenges among the members of the school community, lack of qualified staff in the many areas of school health and ambiguity of roles of different sectors within and outside the national health sector.

- **Development of the national health systems, scaling-up of primary/essential health care**, the need for the relevant institutions to pay sufficient attention to the health services that target pupils and other members of the school community, the importance of developing flexible, integrated and cost-effective forms of care to provide the best opportunities for the school community to utilize the available health care facilities and programmes, and the importance of providing a permanent qualified health worker (nurse) in every school, in addition to the health supervisor teacher.

- **Increasing interest in quality assurance in education and health**, the importance of availability of data and information supported by scientific evidence, performing studies and research on user and stakeholder satisfaction by the school health services and the need to develop standard criteria for school health services performance that answer national needs and conform to international standards.

- **Weakness of teaching and training programmes** for school health staff and continuous staff turnover due to transfer, promotion, lack of incentives or restructuring.

- **The need to scale-up community participation in school health programmes and school health service delivery** and establish effective partnerships with students and the whole school community, as they are the main actors and beneficiaries of these programmes and services.

- The hard circumstances experienced by some countries of the Region, such as occupation, weak infrastructure and the poor condition of some school buildings that makes them unsuitable for work, learning and entertainment.
Recommendations

Based on the above, the Regional Consultation proposed the following principal recommendations about the necessary measures to develop school health services:

Recommendations to Member States

- It is necessary to update and activate the policies, strategies, organizational and coordinating structures, and the regulations pertaining to school health in general and school health services in particular according to the changes in educational/teaching and health systems in light of national needs and priorities and in response to current and future challenges, as follows:
  - incorporate school health programmes and services into national sustainable development plans in the countries of the Region; set and update national policies and strategies for various school health programmes and services with active participation of all stakeholders in order to unify vision and mobilize the necessary financial, human and informational resources;
  - form (or activate) national multisectoral coordinating committees or bodies relevant to school health, especially health and education sectors (ministries), setting responsibilities, powers, tasks and duties for each participant, and create suitable mechanisms and executive plans to achieve the strategic aims;
  - support, develop and enable the regulatory and administrative structures in the sectors related to school health, facilitate their tasks in planning, implementation and follow-up of comprehensive school health programmes and assessment of their performance; issue (or update) laws, regulations and national guides for standard procedures of these services according to the standards;
  - update and develop health standards and general safety principles in educational facilities and buildings and ensure compliance; continue to provide the necessary support for environmental hygiene in schools;
  - scale up implementation of school health programmes to cover all state schools, including those belonging to ministries other than the Ministry of Education (Social Affairs, Labour, Endowments, etc.), private schools, special education schools (for those with special needs/disabled), kindergartens, universities and institutes.
  - scale up implementation of health-promoting schools initiative with institutionalization within the national school health programme to ensure intersectoral partnership between related sectors, local community, families and students.

- Enhance capacity-building, infrastructure, services and human resources in the area of school health according to the national needs and national indices; increase community awareness about the importance of school health and particularities of school community as follows:
  - develop and promote school health study programmes and curricula in relevant university faculties (Medicine, Nursing, Education, Psychology, Social Sciences, Journalism, Teacher Education Institutes, etc.); institute relevant specialized research and professional degrees; facilitate the creation of multidiscipline school health staff and teams;
- create high-quality training mechanisms and opportunities in various aspects of school health services and activities to ensure the enhancement of knowledge, skills and incentives for professional promotion, experience and expertise transfer, continuous improvement of performance quality on different levels; encourage preparation, development and continuous updating of national training manuals and guide books related to various school health services and programmes;

  - provide adequate places and health facilities (school clinic/school health room) in every school, with appropriate equipment and supplies according to the adopted national standards; attract qualified and trained health workers (nurses/health assistants);

  - deliver health promotion and preventive health services, including screening tests and mental health programmes in school settings, whenever possible in cooperation and coordination with school administration, health supervisor teachers, mental health and social workers, vocational counsellors, primary/essential health care centres and other specialized health and educational centres; ensure that an effective and well-coordinated referral system is in place to make use of curative and rehabilitation services when necessary;

  - introduce the concepts of school health into the various educational levels and curricula, and printed and audio-visual mass media to elucidate the intimate relationship between education and health and to deliver health messages that encourage the adoption of health-promoting behaviours and acquisition of positive life skills.

- Provide the necessary financial, administrative, organizational and technical support to create and develop the informational base of school health data, indicators and statistics, and encourage research, studies and training in this area as follows:

  - encourage and support surveys that aim at identification of risk factors and health and behavioural problems that are common in the school community, including learning difficulties caused by them and ways to manage them; provide training for those who perform field research and studies related to the various aspects of school health services and programmes and performance assessment, especially in relation to beneficiary and stakeholder satisfaction, and school health economics;

  - develop and adopt national school health indicators compatible with regional and international indicators;

  - ensure that student health records exist and are compatible with child's health file; take action to adopt and use electronic health record systems to enhance school health services, performance of various stakeholders and the national education system in the different levels of students’ learning lives;

  - create and update school health and school health services web sites accessible to all the beneficiaries, stakeholders and researchers and providing the relevant information in an easy and accessible way to those who need it.

**Recommendations to WHO and other international stakeholders**

- Enhance coordination and cooperation between all the international organizations concerned with school health to provide maximum effectiveness
and integration of the various initiatives and activities, and avoid duplication and confusion.

- **Introduce school health as one of the main items** into the agendas of the World Health Assembly, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, coordination meetings of the regional directors of the relevant international organizations and the meetings of Arab Ministers of Health and Education.

- **Enhance technical support to develop action frameworks, standards, indicators and training guidelines in various aspects of school health, specifically the following:**
  
  o prepare the general framework for an integrated school health strategy to guide the countries of the Region;
  
  o prepare regional guidelines for standard procedures of school health services;
  
  o prepare a regional model guidance for school health legislation and regulations;
  
  o prepare regional model guidance for student electronic health records in cooperation with the countries that have successful experience;
  
  o prepare a list of minimal school health service indicators and enhance technical support for countries to aid creation of school health databases;
  
  o issue an electronic newsletter prepared with the participation of the countries of the Region.

- **Activate the Regional Health-Promoting Schools Network;** and coordinate with other relevant initiatives such as Focusing Effective Resource on School Health and child-friendly Schools, etc.

- **Support training and capacity-building** in school health; and aim to develop regional general and specialized courses to prepare trainers for various aspects of school health.

- Provide training and support for school health research, including evidence-based school health policy research.

- Encourage the exchange of experience, expertise and successful initiatives among the countries of the Region; and enhance school health programme support in the countries that suffer from difficult conditions, such as occupation or lack of appropriate infrastructure and staff.