Declaration by the
Health Ministers of Member States
at the Seventy-fourth Session of
the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia
on
COVID-19 and measures to ‘build back better’
essential health services to achieve
universal health coverage
and the health-related SDGs
We, the Health Ministers of Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region, participating in the Seventy-fourth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia,

DEEPLY CONCERNED by the ongoing waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have negatively impacted health, societies and economies; disrupted the delivery of essential health services; exacerbated inequities; and exposed gaps in health systems across the Member States of the Region,

RECOGNIZING that mounting an effective public health response to health emergencies and ensuring the delivery of quality essential health services requires leadership and a whole-of-government approach,

NOTING the role and contribution of primary health care, with full engagement of communities and community health workers, in managing the pandemic, addressing misinformation, and ensuring the delivery of essential health services,

UNDERSCORING the importance of investment in human resource for health, especially at the primary health care level, and the adequate supply of affordable, effective, quality and safe medical products for the effective response to public health emergencies and to building resilient health systems,

NOTING WITH CONCERN inequities in access to COVID-19 related medical products, especially vaccines, that have a detrimental impact in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and impede economic recovery across the SEA Region,

EMPHASIZING the importance of regional and global solidarity, especially for improved production, access and distribution of medical products, as one of the measures to overcome the pandemic,

APPRCIATING Member State actions and innovations as well as regional initiatives, which have strengthened response capacity to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the South-East Asia Regional Flagship Priority Programmes on ensuring universal health coverage (UHC) and protecting against health emergencies,

RECALLING previous commitments towards ensuring public health programmes and the delivery of essential health services to all without financial barriers during periods of public health emergency, as clarified by the Seventy-third World Health Assembly resolution WHA73.1 and the Seventy-third session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia resolution SEA/RC73/R1, as well as recent primary health care-related declarations and instruments, including the 2018 Astana Declaration on Primary Health Care and the 2020 Operational Framework for Primary Health Care as requested by World Health Assembly resolution WHA72.2, and

FURTHER EMPHASIZING the imperative and the once-in-a-century opportunity to advance transformation towards resilient primary health care-oriented health systems as the means to achieve population health, well-being and prosperity in the SEA Region,

Hereby AGREE to the following:

(a) ENSURE political leadership and accountability to coordinate whole-of-government, whole-of-society, health-in-all policies-based, and effective governance and oversight over public and private sectors, as needed to advance health security and progress towards UHC and the health-related SDGs;

(b) REORIENT health systems towards comprehensive primary health care through increased public investments as the foundation for effective response to public health emergencies, strengthening of IHR core capacities, and the achievement of UHC and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals;

(c) ENSURE integration of public health emergencies and disaster risk management strategies, as well as strengthen surveillance and preparedness capacity, at the primary health care level, for effective response for the at-risk and affected communities;

(d) ACCELERATE integration of noncommunicable diseases including mental health, and other disease programmes, at the primary health care level;

(e) ESTABLISH national quality standards for primary health care services and ensure access to quality health services during the pandemic and recovery phase;

(f) COMMIT to closer engagement with, and empowerment of, communities with respect to maintaining the delivery of essential health services and public health programmes during the pandemic and recovery phase;

(g) FULLY LEVERAGE the potential of traditional systems of medicine to function alongside or, where appropriate, through integration into health systems;

(h) OPTIMIZE appropriate, sustainable, and scalable innovations in digital and disruptive health technologies;

(i) STRENGTHEN health systems and policy research, as well as equity-focused performance monitoring, to guide the improvement of health systems and IHR core capacities;
(j) STRENGTHEN and mobilize WHO’s social and intellectual capital to leverage additional resources* through the innovative Country Cooperation Strategy (CCS) and other bilateral, multilateral and public–private partnerships in order to support the development of national capacities to address national health priorities, in particular public health emergencies and the delivery of high-quality health services to all;

(k) USE COVID-19 intra-action reviews and the new Universal Health and Preparedness Review to prioritize actions aimed at strengthening health system resilience; and

(l) COMMIT to update national primary health care strategies based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Operational Framework for PHC, and the forthcoming PHC South-East Asia Regional Strategy, as well as the national roadmaps for health emergency risk management, with robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

We, the Health Ministers of the Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region, welcoming and appreciating the continued support of the WHO Director-General, the Regional Director for South-East Asia, and health partners towards strengthening primary health care, delivering universal health coverage and managing public health emergencies in the South-East Asia Region, adopt this Declaration by Member States at the Seventy-fourth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia on COVID-19 and measures to ‘build back better’ essential health services to achieve universal health coverage and the health-related SDGs.

Adopted on the Seventh day of September, Two Thousand and Twenty-One.

* WHA69(16) Strategic budget space allocation. at http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69REC1/A69_2016_REC1-en.pdf#page=27

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[Signatures of Health Ministers and officials from various countries]