AD HOC VIRTUAL MEETING ON COVID-19
MANAGING THE EVOLVING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
AND PREPARING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE TO MEET
FUTURE HEALTH NEEDS

2 December 2021
Virtual meeting
MEETING REPORT

AD HOC VIRTUAL MEETING ON COVID-19
(MANAGING THE EVOLVING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND PREPARING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE TO MEET FUTURE HEALTH NEEDS)

Virtual meeting
2 December 2021
AD HOC VIRTUAL MEETING ON COVID-19

Managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and preparing primary health care to meet future health needs

2 December 2021

MEETING REPORT

Hosted by:

ASIA-PACIFIC PARLIAMENTARIAN FORUM ON GLOBAL HEALTH

With support from:

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

Not for sale

Printed and distributed by:
World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Western Pacific
Manila, Philippines
December 2021
AD HOC Virtual Meeting on COVID-19
Managing the Evolving COVID-19 Pandemic and Preparing Primary Health Care to Meet Future Health needs

2 December 2021
Virtual meeting
NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health Ad Hoc Virtual Meeting on COVID-19 and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the convenors.

This report has been prepared by the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific as the Secretariat of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health.
SUMMARY ................................................................................................................................. 1
1. INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 2
  1.1 Meeting organization ........................................................................................................ 3
  1.2 Meeting objectives ........................................................................................................... 3
2. PROCEEDINGS ......................................................................................................................... 3
  2.1 Block A: Opening ................................................................................................................ 3
  2.2 Block B: Managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and planning for future endemic scenarios .................................................................................................................. 4
    Parliamentarian discussion ................................................................................................... 5
    2.2.1 Country perspective: Republic of Korea ....................................................................... 5
    2.2.2 Country perspective: Philippines ................................................................................ 5
    2.2.3 Country perspective: Thailand .................................................................................... 5
    Open Parliamentary Discussion .......................................................................................... 6
  2.3 Block C: Supporting the future of primary health care in the Asia-Pacific ....................... 7
    Parliamentarian discussion ................................................................................................... 7
    2.3.1 Country perspective: Mongolia .................................................................................. 7
    2.3.2 Country perspective: Philippines ................................................................................ 8
    2.3.3 Country perspective: Japan ......................................................................................... 8
    Open Parliamentary Discussion .......................................................................................... 8
  2.4 Block D: Closing .................................................................................................................. 9
ANNEXES ................................................................................................................................. 11
  Annex 1. Programme ............................................................................................................... 11
  Annex 2. List of participants .................................................................................................. 14

Keywords: Betacoronavirus / Coronavirus Infections / COVID-19 / Disease Outbreaks / Infection Control / Primary Health
SUMMARY

On 2 December 2021, the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health (Forum) convened an ad hoc virtual meeting to enhance the role of parliamentarians in preparing for the next phase of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and investing in primary health care for the future. In all, 27 parliamentarians participated from 13 countries, with a further country sending an observer. The meeting was chaired by the Honourable Mr Kim Minseok, President of the Forum, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO).

The meeting objectives were:

1) to obtain updated information from WHO on the COVID-19 situation in the Western Pacific and South-East Asian regions;

2) to share experiences on managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, including preparing for endemic COVID-19 scenarios; and

3) to consider how parliamentarians and the Forum can support efforts to rethink and invest in primary health care to meet the future health needs of the Asia-Pacific region.

WHO provided technical presentations, including updates on the COVID-19 situation in the Asia-Pacific region and the Omicron variant. Discussions during the meeting were initiated with presentations from Japan, the Philippines, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand. Parliamentarians shared their experiences with managing the COVID-19 pandemic, preparing for future endemic scenarios, and preparing primary health care to meet the health needs of the future.

Parliamentarians encouraged each other to support national and regional efforts, including by:

- maintaining leadership for the ongoing COVID-19 response and placing primary health care at the centre of plans to manage future endemic scenarios;

- protecting health budgets and advocating for increased investment in primary health care to build health system resilience and aid the social and economic recovery;

- identifying opportunities to harness the COVID-19 pandemic to transform health systems and strengthen primary health care, including by leveraging digital technologies and innovation;

- enacting legislation to support primary health care reforms, including adjusting purchasing arrangements to prioritize preventive services, set standards and monitor quality, and support decision-making at the local level; and

- working across parliament and the community to build partnerships to advance whole-of-government and whole-of-society efforts to enhance primary health care.

Participants agreed that primary health care has been of fundamental importance to the COVID-19 response and is essential for achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring health systems meet future needs and remain financially sustainable amid rising noncommunicable disease burden and rapidly ageing populations.

Moving forward, WHO welcomed engagement and input from parliamentarians on country actions and committed to sharing technical information, providing technical guidance and facilitating communication between Forum members, particularly on legislative changes related to the COVID-19 response and preparing primary health care for the future.
1. INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health is a platform for parliamentarians to exchange ideas, build political will, strengthen capacities and foster collaboration in driving sustainable action for health. Established in 2015 with technical support from the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Western Pacific and other partners, the Forum is open to the 30 countries comprising the Member States of the WHO Western Pacific Region and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Forum is strategically positioned to help align global health mandates with regional and domestic priorities and to facilitate national implementation of international health commitments. The Forum is an important part of WHO support to Member States in the Asia-Pacific region in championing health beyond the health sector and taking a whole-of-government approach to enhance the rule of law in health governance and expand the role of law in health policy.

On 7 January 2020, authorities in China identified a novel coronavirus from a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown aetiology in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province. On 30 January 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern, then a pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of the 2 December, the date of the ad hoc virtual forum, more than 241 million confirmed cases and more than 4.9 million deaths have been reported globally. Countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region have reported more than 9 million cases and more than 125 000 deaths.

As the pandemic nears the end of its second year, vaccines are proving to be an effective tool to prevent serious illness, hospitalization and death and ease the health system burden. WHO continues to work alongside partners to develop, manufacture and deploy safe and effective vaccines, including through the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and its vaccines pillar, COVAX. Globally, more than 6.5 billion doses have been administered. The emergence of the Omicron variant of concern presents a new challenge, causing countries to adjust their strategies amid limited information and uncertainty.

COVID-19 has had wide-ranging health and socioeconomic impacts on all parts of society, with vulnerable populations disproportionately affected. It has demonstrated the need to build strong and resilient health systems and societies to support health and well-being and provide a foundation for long-term economic development. Universal health coverage through primary health care is key for strong, resilient and efficient health systems, reaching those who are vulnerable and promoting pandemic preparedness and prevention.

Primary health care supports an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic and will play an even larger role as the pandemic enters its next phase. Leadership, the strength of health systems and the public’s confidence in those systems have been determining factors in the quality of the pandemic response. Emergency response measures and services, including treatment, testing and contact tracing, rely on strong public health infrastructure and a workforce that has gained the trust of their communities. Primary health care has ensured that essential health services are maintained, preventing additional morbidity and mortality from non-COVID causes.

As countries in the region begin to look ahead to the future, to build strong systems while managing endemic COVID-19, it has become even more critical to design primary health care that will be fit for purpose. This requires building primary health care systems that provide integrated people-centred services, bring together primary care and essential public health, and move from focusing on disease treatment towards health promotion with a stronger focus on maintaining health and well-being. Finally, the future of primary health care demands that communities and individuals be empowered to participate in their health care.
As community and national leaders, parliamentarians have a unique opportunity to support the evolving COVID-19 response and strengthen primary health care to address future health needs, including advocating for solidarity and equity in vaccine allocation, planning and financing the response, financing and advocating for investments in primary health care, enacting legislation to support primary health care reforms, and collaborating with other parliamentarians and leaders on whole-of-government and whole-of-society initiatives.

1.1 Meeting organization

To enhance the role of parliamentarians in the COVID-19 response and prepare primary health care for the future, the Forum convened an ad hoc virtual meeting on 2 December 2021. The meeting was chaired by the Honourable Mr Kim Minseok, President of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health, with technical and administrative assistance provided by the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific as Secretariat to the Forum. The meeting was organized as a live videoconference through an online communications platform. The meeting programme is available in Annex 1.

The meeting was attended by parliamentarians from 13 countries: Cambodia, Japan, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Mongolia, Niue, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Tonga, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. A list of participants is available in Annex 2.

1.2 Meeting objectives

The meeting objectives were:

1) to obtain updated technical information from WHO on the COVID-19 situation in the Western Pacific Region, including the Omicron variant;
2) to share experiences on managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, including preparing for endemic COVID-19 scenarios; and
3) to consider how parliamentarians and the Forum can support efforts to rethink and invest in Primary Health Care to meet the future health needs of the region.

2. PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Block A: Opening

Dr Angela Pratt, Director of the Regional Director’s Office and Communications and External Relations, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, called the meeting to order and welcomed all the participants.

The Honourable Mr Kim Minseok, President of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health and Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, opened the meeting. Mr Kim reminded members that while the region had made considerable gains in suppressing the virus and vaccinating communities, significant challenges remain, including those flowing from the social and economic fallout, which are disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable people and threatening hard-won progress on human development. He reflected upon some of the critical choices leaders face as the pandemic evolves and moves to a new phase. He expressed hope that parliamentarians would use their leadership to foster trust and social cohesion, continue to meet and provide oversight of government actions, advance vaccine equity, and protect health budgets and provide secure health system financing while funding the response. He also asked parliamentarians to place primary health care at the centre of their health agendas in order to meet the health needs of the future, referring to its importance as one of the most striking lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic.
The Honourable Professor Keizo Takemi, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Universal Health Coverage and Member of the House of Councillors of the National Diet of Japan, provided congratulatory remarks as the former President of the Forum. Professor Takemi highlighted the significant achievements made possible through solidarity and leadership since the last meeting of the Forum. This included the Western Pacific Region reaching the milestone of having secured sufficient doses to protect all healthcare workers in early August 2021. Professor Takemi called upon parliamentarians to not relax and sustain efforts to vaccinate their populations, particularly given the risk of emerging virus variants such as Omicron. He concluded by encouraging leaders to make systematic improvements to build shared global health architecture, including through national legislation.

Dr Poonam Khretapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, delivered opening remarks via recorded video. She began by providing an update on the COVID-19 situation in the South-East Asian Region. She highlighted six priorities for the Region as it moves into 2022: 1) accelerating COVID-19 vaccine targets while sustaining childhood immunization programmes; 2) continuing to implement comprehensive public health and social measures; 3) strengthening surge capacities and ensuring all aspects of health care have reserve capacity; 4) strengthening strategic information and risk assessment to guide response decisions and operations; 5) sustaining whole-of-government and whole-of-society efforts, informed by a primary health care approach; and 6) establishing primary health care-oriented resilient health systems to strengthen health security and build back better. Dr Singh concluded by urging parliamentarians to support actions to build back better, focusing on primary health care as the most efficient and cost-effective means to reduce out-of-pocket costs and mitigate the social and economic determinants of health.

Mr Martin Taylor, Director, Health Systems and Services and Acting Director, Data, Strategy and Innovation, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, provided an overview of the programme.

2.2 Block B: Managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and planning for future endemic scenarios

Technical presentation from WHO

Dr Babatunde Olowokure, Director, Health Security and Emergencies, Regional Emergency Director, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, delivered a presentation on the COVID-19 situation in the Asia-Pacific region, the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529), and transitioning from pandemic to endemic scenarios. He reported that Viet Nam was among the top 10 countries with the highest number of new cases in the previous 24 hours and is trending upwards. Dr Olowokure provided information about the Omicron variant, including its geographic distribution, properties and possible impact. Noting that information is currently limited, he said that preliminary evidence suggests increased transmissibility and possible increased risk of reinfection. Reported cases have mainly been mild or asymptomatic, and existing vaccines, diagnostics and treatments using corticosteroids and interleukin-6 receptor blockers remain effective. Dr Olowokure presented possible response measures, advising Member States to prepare their response capacities at national, subnational and local levels using their experience from responding to Delta. He noted that travel bans may delay the arrival of the virus but are unlikely to prevent it. He then discussed strategies for countries to move from the pandemic to endemic scenarios while avoiding the "red line" – the point at which critical care needs surpass health-care capacity and protect the vulnerable. He presented a conceptual framework with five key areas: 1) vaccines, 2) public health and social measures, 3) health system capacity, 4) early detection and target response measures, and 5) international border measures, supported by three pillars: 1) surveillance, 2) contact tracing and monitoring, and 3) communication. At the foundation of the framework are capacities to address large-scale community transmission, a command system, and universal health coverage. Dr Olowokure ended by outlining how the region is learning from the COVID-19 experience to strengthen health security for the future through advancing universal health coverage and determining the elements of an effective health security framework, building on the APSED III action framework.
Parliamentarian discussion

2.2.1 Country perspective: Republic of Korea

The Honourable Hyunyoung Shin, Board Member of the Korean Parliamentarian Forum and Member of the Health and Welfare Committee, National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, shared information about the country’s response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and its preparations for the next phase, with primary health care at the centre. She described the government’s roadmap for a gradual return to normal, involving gradual easing of social distancing policies, which has been halted due to a marked increase in transmission. The government has recently begun administering booster shots and increasing hospital capacity in response. Dr Shin described public health centres at the primary level as the front line of the COVID-19 response and reported the challenges they have faced over the prolonged period of the pandemic. Human resource constraints, for example, have created a “vicious cycle”. Health workers have struggled with burnout from heavier workloads that were expanded to include public health activities such as contact tracing and vaccinations, resulting in an increase in resignations, putting further pressure on the workforce. To strengthen primary health care and break the vicious cycle, the Korean government is focusing on four policy measures: 1) investing in the public health workforce, including the portion at the primary level; 2) reorganizing services to reduce the workload on staff at the primary level, including encouraging home care for mild COVID-19 cases; 3) utilizing digital technologies and other innovations to transform primary health care services, including through telemedicine and health promotion activities; and 4) capacity-building and preparedness drills at the community level. Dr Shin concluded by urging parliamentarians to act as a catalyst to realize the potential of primary health care, recognizing its contribution to both the emergency response and the provision of essential services.

2.2.2 Country perspective: Philippines

The Honourable Dahlia A Loyola, Chairperson of the Committee on Poverty Alleviation, House of Representatives of the Philippines, shared information about the COVID-19 situation in her country and the steps being taken to combat the pandemic while balancing other health priorities. Honourable Loyola said that the COVID-19 pandemic had caught the health system “off guard”, disrupting the much-needed reforms heralded by the Universal Health Care Act of 2019. She described the immense challenges faced by the country in combating the pandemic, including the lives lost and the health, social and economic impact, highlighting efforts to accelerate the vaccine roll-out as critical to reinvigorating the economy and way of life. The government has sought to foster communal oneness and cooperation, including through the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act and the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act, which provided for social amelioration programmes and measures to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic. Parliament is currently deliberating further legislative measures, including expanding access to testing services for vulnerable persons and enhancing mandatory reporting of notifiable diseases and events of public health concern. Honourable Loyola encouraged parliamentarians to balance other health priorities while addressing COVID-19, highlighting the three leading causes of death in the Philippines – ischaemic heart disease, cerebrovascular diseases and neoplasms, which are also comorbidities for COVID-19. Strengthening primary health care will help address noncommunicable diseases, protecting populations against future public health risks similar to COVID-19.

2.2.3 Country perspective: Thailand

The Honourable Pechdau Tohmeena, Vice-Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Health, House of Representatives of Thailand, shared her country’s perspective. Thailand has had over 2 million confirmed cases with 20,000 deaths but has experienced a steady decline in daily cases in recent months. The government has placed COVID-19 vaccination at the centre of the national agenda, aiming to achieve 80% first dose and 20% second dose coverage by the end of 2021. Honourable Tohmeena
explained that the government seeks to balance measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic with the need to ease restrictions to support the tourism industry, a key economic sector. She described parliament’s role in overseeing government operations and budget implementation to ensure access to vaccines and mitigate the social, health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Parliament established an ad hoc committee to oversee the expenditure of emergency funds and the raising of loans for COVID-19 purposes.

**Open parliamentary discussion**

Dr Angela Pratt moderated a discussion among all participants of the meeting.

Honourable Kelvin Yii Lee Wuen of Malaysia described the functions performed by Parliament during the COVID-19 pandemic, including enacting legislation, approving budgets and mobilizing resources. COVID-19 was a stress test on Malaysia’s robust health-care system and exposed gaps, such as the need to strengthen public health offices and support fundamental functions like testing and contact tracing. Malaysia has taken steps to ease restrictions and safely transition to an endemic situation, but they have been put on hold due to the emergence of the Omicron variant. During this period, the government is prioritizing booster doses, especially for people who are elderly, immunocompromised and otherwise vulnerable, and establishing vaccine distribution centres to streamline the process. Genomic sequencing is critical to informing policy and decision-making and will require regional and global cooperation to scale up capacity – currently, only 0.1% of cases are being sequenced in Malaysia.

Honourable Keizo Takemi of Japan referred to recent deliberations at the special session of the World Health Assembly on strengthening global health governance. Honourable Takemi requested the WHO Secretariat to provide guidance on 1) proposed approaches to enhancing international legal instruments – for example, amendments to the International Health Regulations (2005) – and the development of a convention, agreement or other international agreement; and 2) actions to involve ministers of finance to widen the fiscal space for health emergencies.

Dr Takeshi Kasai responded to Honourable Takemi’s first request. Dr Kasai said it was important for Member States to identify lessons as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The special session of the World Health Assembly brought Member States together at an important moment to review current systems and consider appropriate actions to address gaps. He added that WHO will continue to provide Member States with updates and information as the process to draft and negotiate a convention, agreement or other instruments under the WHO Constitution proceeds.

Honourable ‘Amelia Tu’ipulotu of Tonga shared information about the COVID-19 situation in her country. Over 95% of the target population aged 12 and over have received their first vaccine dose. Honourable Tu’ipulotu highlighted the need for health and finance ministries to work together to ensure sustainable financing for health and invest in primary health care to meet future health needs, including the projected tsunami on noncommunicable diseases as well as the health impacts of climate change.

Honourable Silus Bula Melwe of Vanuatu provided an update on the vaccine roll-out in his country and asked parliamentarians and the WHO Secretariat to share their experiences and guidance on addressing vaccine hesitancy.

Dr Takeshi Kasai responded to Vanuatu’s request to the WHO Secretariat. Dr Kasai explained that different approaches to encourage vaccination would be required for different groups depending on their reasons for hesitancy, among other things. He suggested that countries focus on the “middle group” of people who have some hesitancy but are responsive to messaging and modelling from people they trust, including friends, colleagues and health workers. Dr Kasai advised that WHO is ready to provide support through its country offices and communications team and invited Member States to seek assistance. He also commended Thailand for their measures to vaccinate migrant workers, which will also benefit their neighbours.
Honourable Jetn Sirathranont of Thailand shared information about the country’s vaccination roll-out strategy, noting that it had recently secured sufficient supply after facing challenges earlier in 2021. The major challenge for the government is now encouraging people to come forward to receive their full schedule of doses, including boosters. Honourable Sirathranont urged Member States to vaccinate all people within their countries, highlighting that Thailand has taken steps to vaccinate all migrant workers irrespective of legal status.

2.3  Block C: Supporting the future of primary health care in the Asia-Pacific

Technical presentation from WHO

Mr Martin Taylor, Director, Health Systems and Services and Acting Director, Data, Strategy and Innovation, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, presented on preparing primary health care to meet the health needs of the future. In response to Honourable Takemi’s request, Mr Taylor outlined three parts to WHO’s strategy to expand fiscal space for health: 1) advocate for health as an investment, not just in health but in economic and social development; 2) improve health system efficiency, including in the allocation of resources; and 3) identify co-benefits of interventions with other sectors. He added that WHO works closely with the Asian Development Bank in the area, including convening a meeting of health and finance ministers in 2020.

Mr Taylor explained that primary health care is fundamentally important to meeting the health challenges of the present and the future and delivering on all four of the thematic priorities of the WHO For the Future vision. Maintaining the status quo is not an option. There is a need to focus on primary health care to prevent illness as well as maintain health amid a rising burden of noncommunicable diseases and rapidly ageing populations that threaten to increase the cost and financial sustainability of health systems. In this context, Mr Taylor encouraged parliamentarians to consider primary health care a smart investment – as the most cost-effective means to achieve universal health coverage, and which, if US$ 1.27 were spent per person per year, would contribute US$ 350 billion to the global economy by 2030. He outlined the key elements of primary health care, emphasizing that it is concerned with services and lifelong care to maintain health and well-being that are fundamentally part of the community, and provided suggestions for how it could be operationalized. Parliamentarians will have a key role to play, with opportunities to support through protecting health budgets and pushing for greater funding for primary health care, providing oversight of health expenditure, promoting cross-sectoral and whole-of-government approaches, establishing supportive laws and policies, and advocating and mobilizing resources in their communities and constituencies.

Parliamentarian discussion

2.3.1  Country perspective: Mongolia

Honourable Chinburen Jigjidsuren, Member of the State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia, shared information on parliamentary actions to implement reforms in the health sector. Parliament established a lobby group in 2020 to promote health and advocate and support health reforms. The group played a key role in 1) supporting legislative reforms to introduce a single purchaser system and pooled funding model that prioritized preventive strategies, and 2) almost doubling the health budget, including the proportion allocated to primary health care. New performance-based purchasing mechanisms in the social health insurance system aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of health services while deconcentrating decision-making power over financial and human resources from the central government to health service providers. Transparent, evidence-informed decision-
making processes involving multiple stakeholders are necessary to ensure efficiency in public health expenditure, particularly as decision-makers face pressure to purchase high-cost technologies. Honourable Jigjidsuren said it was also necessary to adjust accreditation requirements for public and private providers to ensure the quality of care of services purchased is based on population health needs, disease burden and performance indicators. He added that digital transformation would be key to health sector reforms in Mongolia, highlighting the potential to expand access to remote areas and better integrate levels of the system. Honourable Jigjidsuren said that a working group had been established to draft legislation on medicines and medical devices as part of efforts to ensure equal access to essential medicines – a significant challenge, particularly in remote areas of the country. He concluded by highlighting the high vaccination rates in Mongolia, with 91% of the targeted population fully vaccinated.

2.3.2 Country perspective: Philippines

The Honourable Christopher Lawrence Go, Chairperson of the Committee on Health and Demography, Senate of the Philippines, shared his country’s perspective on harnessing the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen the health system for the future. He highlighted the role of the Committee on Health and Demography in legislating and advocating for investment in sustainable, lasting health infrastructure. The Philippines has recently launched one-stop shops in public hospitals, providing efficient access to medical assistance programmes at local and national levels. Honourable Go concluded by emphasizing the need to build partnerships across sectors to generate solutions for holistic action on health.

2.3.3 Country perspective: Japan

The Honourable Hanako Jimi, Secretary-General of the Japan Parliamentarian League for the World Health Organization, House of Councillors, National Diet of Japan, shared her country’s experience of COVID-19 in the context of primary health care. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed several common lessons, including the vital importance of primary health care in managing a large-scale outbreak in a multi-phase manner. Primary health care has been key to managing the majority of infections, which have been asymptomatic or mild, substantially reducing rates of hospitalization and mortality. Honourable Jimi highlighted that primary health care services provide more than just care – they have been at the core of every aspect of the response at the community level, including surveillance, administration of vaccines, and mobilizing the community for public health and social measures while reducing discrimination against infected persons. She concluded by proposing three actions for parliamentarians to strengthen primary health care: 1) finance it sustainably and monitor budgets; 2) enact supportive legislation; and 3) work with other parliamentarians in their portfolios and areas of expertise to facilitate whole-of-government and whole-of-society collaboration.

Open parliamentary discussion

Dr Angela Pratt moderated a discussion among all participants of the meeting.

Honourable Lork Kheng of Cambodia began by highlighting the country’s three targets for universal health coverage: 1) distribution of health services close to the people; 2) affordability, including social protection; and 3) quality services with efficiency. Honourable Kheng described how Cambodia seeks to realize opportunities to transform the health system while combating the pandemic, including through investment in primary health care and digitalization. National leadership, combined with international collaboration and solidarity, have been vital to the vaccine roll-out. Cambodia is proud to have donated vaccines and equipment to neighbours in the region, including the Lao People’s Democratic Republic,
Myanmar, Nepal and Timor-Leste. Ongoing support is needed to ensure services and equipment are provided close to the people. Honourable Kheng called upon international organizations and host countries of migrant workers to support their integration within the so-called new normal, which will contribute to the economic and social recovery. She highlighted the need to continue prioritizing action on noncommunicable diseases while pursuing a primary health care approach.

Honourable John Mark Rubin of Vanuatu described the importance of a primary health care approach in lower-resource settings, such as Vanuatu, which is facing a double burden of disease. The government’s next national health sector strategy will emphasize primary health care and investment in facilities and workforce at the primary level to enhance promotive and preventive services. Parliamentarians will play a key role in building partnerships, enacting legislation and encouraging members of their community to be engaged in health. Parliament recently passed a law increasing taxation on unhealthy foods, tobacco and alcohol. Promising health-promotive activities are emerging at the local level, some with the support of development partners, which will need to be scaled up in order to reach all communities across the country.

Honourable Dahlia A Loyola of the Philippines suggested several actions for parliamentarians to support primary health care, highlighting actions taken in her country that may be instructive for others. Strengthening primary health care is an important investment in health system resilience and should be considered alongside other institutional investments in public health. The Philippines has recently enacted a law to promote the distribution of health workers throughout the country – particularly medical practitioners – establishing scholarships and returned service programmes. Other legislative proposals include developing standards for primary health care in all health-facility proposals and building capacity for primary health care networks. It will also be key to empower individuals and communities to take control of their health in order to seek care, demand quality services and promote their well-being. Honourable Loyola also highlighted the need to promote good governance, which has an impact on public programmes and policies, including primary health care.

Honourable Jetn Sirathranont of Thailand described the actions taken by the country over the previous 20 years to prioritize and strengthen primary health care. This included establishing around 10 000 health promotion hospitals that are to be served by a medical professional. Investing in primary health care will be key to providing appropriate services across the life course as populations rapidly age. Honourable Sirathranont also highlighted the need to enhance access to primary health care in urban centres, such as Bangkok, which often serve surrounding populations.

Honourable Sauni Tongatule of Niue drew attention to the challenges that parliamentarians face in securing a budget for health at the primary level amid competing priorities. He raised the idea of a grant facility to support direct investment in primary health care infrastructure, suggesting that it could be a regional initiative managed by WHO.

2.4 Block D: Closing

Dr Takeshi Kasai, Regional Director for the WHO Western Pacific provided closing remarks. He congratulated Honourable Kim on his appointment and first meeting as President. Dr Kasai expressed hope that the Forum would meet in person in the near future under Honourable Kim’s leadership. He commended the leadership of parliamentarians throughout the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, including in developing legislation, ensuring adequate budget financing, leading public health and social measures and guiding communities and constituencies. Several important decisions
will need to be made as that pandemic evolves, often without sufficient information or under uncertainty, such as in relation to the Omicron variant. He encouraged countries to be informed by their experience of responding to the Delta variant. Dr Kasai explained that primary health care is vitally important and unique in managing COVID-19 as an endemic disease and is central in achieving the health-related the Sustainable Development Goals. He advised parliamentarians that primary health care will be vital to ensure populations can stay healthy and seek the care they need amid a rising burden of noncommunicable diseases and ageing populations. Without strong primary health care, there is a real risk of health systems becoming financially unsustainable. COVID-19 has reminded us that health is central to our societies, our economies and our social development and that primary health care is a wise investment. Dr Kasai concluded by conveying that the region needs the leadership and courage of parliamentarians to create a healthier future and reaffirming that WHO stands proudly by their side in support.

Honourable Kim Minseok, President of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health, closed the meeting. He extended his thanks to fellow parliamentarians for joining at a particularly busy time for many parliaments. He also thanked the WHO Secretariat for organizing the meeting. Honourable Kim reminded parliamentarians that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over and that the region needs to prepare to respond as the pandemic evolves, including in response to the Omicron variant. Effective leadership will be crucial, particularly as populations tire and become frightened of new mutations. Honourable Kim concluded by expressing his hope that the Forum can meet in a face-to-face or hybrid format in 2022 to continue its important work in regional parliamentary leadership for health.
## Annex 1. Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>PRESENTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 11:00 –  | BLOCK A: Opening                          | *Moderated by Dr Angela Pratt*  
Director of Regional Director’s Office &  
Communications and External Relations,  
WHO WPRO                                                                                       |
| 11:00 –  | Opening Keynote Remarks (7m)               | Honourable Kim Minseok  
President, Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on  
Global Health  
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea                                                   |
| 11:00 –  | Opening Remarks (5m)                       | Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh  
WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia                                                  |
| 11:00 –  | Congratulatory Remarks from the Former President (5m) | Honourable Keizo Takemi  
House of Councillors  
National Diet of Japan                                                                      |
| 11:00 –  | Programme Overview (3m)                    | Mr Martin Taylor  
Director, Health Systems and Services  
A/g Director, Data, Strategy and Innovation  
WHO WPRO                                                                                     |
| 11:20 –  | BLOCK B: Managing the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and planning for future endemic scenarios | *Moderated by Dr Angela Pratt*  
Director of Regional Director’s Office &  
Communications and External Relations,  
WHO WPRO                                                                                       |
| 11:20 –  | COVID-19 situation in the Asia-Pacific Region and preparing for 2022 (10m) | Dr Babatunde Olowokure  
Director, Health Security and Emergencies  
Regional Emergencies Director  
WHO WPRO                                                                                     |
| 11:20 –  | Republic of Korea (5m)                     | Honourable Hyunyoung Shin  
Member  
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea                                                    |
| 11:20 –  | Philippines (5m)                           | Honourable Dahlia A. Loyola  
Chairperson – Committee on Poverty Alleviation  
House of Representatives of the Philippines  
Quezon City                                                                                  |
| 11:20 –  | Thailand (5m)                              | Honourable Pechdau Tohmeena  
Vice-Chairperson – Standing Committee on Public Health  
House of Representatives of Thailand                                                           |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Panelists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 12:20 – 13:20 | BLOCK C: Supporting the future of primary health care in the Asia-Pacific | Moderated by Dr Angela Pratt  
Director of Regional Director’s Office & Communications and External Relations, WHO WPRO |
|             | Preparing Primary Health Care for the Health Needs of the Future (7m)  | Mr Martin Taylor  
Director, Health Systems and Services  
A/g Director, Data, Strategy and Innovation  
WHO WPRO |
|             | Mongolia (5m)                                                         | Honourable Dr Chinburen Jigjidsuren  
Member  
State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia |
|             | Japan (5m)                                                           | Honourable Dr Hanako Jimi  
Director, Committee on Health, Welfare and Labour  
House of Councillors  
National Diet of Japan |
|             | Philippines (5m)                                                     | Honourable Christopher Lawrence Go  
Chairperson – Committee on Health and Demography  
Senate of the Philippines  
Pasay City |
<p>|             | Parliamentarian discussion                                           |                                                                          |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Speaker/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 13:20 – 13:30 | BLOCK D: Closing | **Moderated by Dr Angela Pratt**
Director of Regional Director’s Office & Communications and External Relations, WHO WPRO |

**Closing Remarks (5m)**
Dr Takeshi Kasai  
WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific

**Close of Meeting (5m)**
Honourable Kim Minseok  
President, Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health  
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea
## Annex 2. List of participants

### CAMBODIA

- **Chairperson** – Commission on Health, Social Affairs, Youth Rehabilitation, Veterans, Labor, Vocational Training and Women’s Affairs
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Chairperson** – Commission on Health, Social Affairs, Youth Rehabilitation, Veterans, Labor, Vocational Training and Women’s Affairs
- Senate of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh

- **Member**
- National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- Phnom Penh
National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
Phnom Penh

Honourable Mak Vansitha
Member - Commission on Health, Social Affairs, Youth Rehabilitation, Veterans, Labor, Vocational Training and Women’s Affairs
National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
Phnom Penh

Honourable Khoeng Noupheap
Member - Commission on Health, Social Affairs, Youth Rehabilitation, Veterans, Labor, Vocational Training and Women’s Affairs
National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia
Phnom Penh

JAPAN

Honourable Keizo Takemi
WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Universal Health Coverage

Japan Parliamentarian League
for the World Health Organization
Senior Advisor - Japan Parliamentarian League for the World Health Organization
House of Councillors, National Diet of Japan
Tokyo

Honourable Hanako Jimi
Secretary-General – Japan Parliamentarian League for the World Health Organization
House of Councillors, National Diet of Japan
Tokyo

KOREA, REPUBLIC OF

Honourable Kim Minseok
President – Asia-Pacific Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health

Korean Parliamentarian Forum
on Global Health
President - Korean Parliamentarian Forum on Global Health
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea
Seoul

Honourable Hyunyoung Shin
Member
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea
Seoul

VIET NAM

Honourable Le Van Kham
Member – Social Affairs Committee

Social Affairs Committee
National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam
Hanoi

LAO PEOPLE’S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Honourable Bounelome Keobouahome
Vice-Chairperson – Cultural and Social Affairs Committee
National Assembly of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic
Vientiane

MALAYSIA

Honourable Kelvin Yii Lee Wuen
Chairperson – Health, Science and Innovation Select Committee
House of Representatives of Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| MICRONESIA, FEDERATED STATES OF | Honourable Ferny Perman  
Chairperson – Committee on Health and Social Affairs  
Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia  
Palikir |
| MONGOLA          | Honourable Chinburen Jigjidsuren  
Member  
State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia  
Ulaanbaatar |
| NIUE             | Honourable Sauni Tongatule  
Minister of Social Services  
Niue Assembly  
Alofi |
| PHILIPPINES      | Honourable Dahlia A. Loyola  
Chairperson – Committee on Poverty Alleviation  
House of Representatives, Congress of the Republic of the Philippines  
Quezon City  
Honourable Christopher Lawrence Go  
Chair – Committee on Health and Demography  
Senate, Congress of the Republic of the Philippines  
Pasay City |
| THAILAND         | Honourable Jetn Sirathranont  
Chairperson – Committee on Public Health  
Senate of Thailand  
Bangkok  
Honourable Pechdau Tohmeena  
Vice-Chairperson – Standing Committee on Public Health  
House of Representatives of Thailand  
Bangkok |
| TONGA            | Honourable ‘Amelia Tu’ipulotu  
Minister of Health  
Kingdom of Tonga |
| VANUATU          | Honourable Silas Bule Melve  
Minister of Health  
Parliament of the Republic of Vanuatu  
Port Vila  
Honourable John Mark Reuben  
Vice-Chairperson – Committee on Social Affairs  
Parliament of the Republic of Vanuatu  
Port Vila |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Ms Katrina Steedman</td>
<td>Senior Policy Officer – International Strategies Branch</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Ms Sok Leakhena</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Senate of the Kingdom of Cambodia</td>
<td>Pnomh Penh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Ms Ma. Lourdes Sagmit-Mendoza</td>
<td>Committee Secretary – Committee on Poverty Alleviation</td>
<td>House of Representatives, Congress of the Republic of the Philippines</td>
<td>Quezon City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Rajini Rye</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Inter-Parliamentary Relations and Special Affairs Bureau</td>
<td>Quezon City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Marie Loraine Ayson-Inton</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Inter-Parliamentary Relations and Special Affairs Bureau</td>
<td>Quezon City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Ann Marie Santos</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Inter-Parliamentary Relations and Special Affairs Bureau</td>
<td>Quezon City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr Vicente Camilon</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Inter-Parliamentary Relations and Special Affairs Bureau</td>
<td>Quezon City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Mrs Napassorn Jintawiroj Chanpradab</td>
<td>Foreign Relations Officer</td>
<td>Bureau of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>