Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting

Outcome of the Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting

Virtual meeting hosted by Tuvalu

22–24 March 2022
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Introduction

On behalf of our respective agencies – the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Gender Affairs of Tuvalu, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pacific Community (SPC) – we are pleased to share the outcomes of the Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting.

The First Pacific Health Ministers Meeting was convened in March 1995 and established the Healthy Islands vision. Since that first meeting, each of the subsequent biennial meetings has proven to be an opportunity for health ministers to come together to review progress, share best practices and commit to collective action to achieve better health outcomes for the people of the Pacific.

The Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting continued this trend. The virtual event, which was hosted by Tuvalu with support from WHO and SPC, took place during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and included discussion and commitments on three agenda items:

- Leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to build sustainable systems and advance universal health coverage
- Putting health at the centre of the climate change discussion
- Accelerating action on noncommunicable diseases.

The three topics were chosen based on consultations with health leaders from across the subregion and are of primary importance in the Pacific. For example, noncommunicable diseases remain the largest cause of premature mortality in Pacific island countries and areas. The islands, populations and ecosystems of the Pacific are on the front line of climate change and are among the planet’s most vulnerable to extreme weather events. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 crisis serves as a unique opportunity to use pandemic preparedness and response to drive systems strengthening.

Furthermore, all three issues have long been at the heart of the Healthy Islands vision and the discussion at previous Pacific Health Ministers Meetings. They are also closely aligned with the thematic priorities and operational shifts set out in the WHO action framework for the broader Western Pacific Region, For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge during the event was the importance of using the current momentum during the pandemic, when there is unprecedented support for health, to strengthen the systems and capacities needed to meet health needs now and in future. Through joint action, we can make the Healthy Islands vision a reality, achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver better health for people across the Pacific in years to come.

Dr Takeshi Kasai, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific

Honourable Isaia Taape, Minister of Health, Social Welfare and Gender Affairs, Tuvalu

Dr Paula Vivili, Deputy Director-General of the Pacific Community
Outcomes of the Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting

We, the Ministers of Health of Pacific island countries and areas (PICs) at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, reasserted our commitment to the Healthy Islands vision, noting that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has further underscored its continued relevance and importance.

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, recognized that the Healthy Islands vision is reinforced by the World Health Organization action framework for the broader Western Pacific Region, For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region, and that the realization of the Healthy Islands vision will be essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, therefore underlined the need for expedited and collective action to make this vision a reality, noting that, even in the midst of the pandemic, PICs and our partners have an opportunity to create a better, greener and healthier future for the millions of people who call the Pacific home.

Leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to build sustainable systems and advance universal health coverage (UHC)

We, the Pacific Health Ministers at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of strong health systems, and emphasized that now is a once-in-a-lifetime moment to strengthen systems and promote innovative actions to ensure that everyone across the Pacific can access life-saving health services during the pandemic and long into the future.

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, committed:

- to strengthen integrated service delivery across the different levels of health care, including outreach, referral pathways and overseas medical referrals. Where possible, we will explore opportunities to strengthen primary health care services with a renewed focus on telehealth, nutrition, noncommunicable disease control, supportive supervision and community engagement;
- to review and revise public health legislation and governance structures to enable effective, whole-of-government and whole-of-society responses to future health emergencies and pandemics;
- to prioritize the collation and analysis of country data for the UHC Service Coverage Index and to use this regular monitoring and analysis to inform annual workplans and budgets;
- To contribute to subregional mechanisms for cooperation, knowledge exchange and resource sharing, such as:
  - the ongoing work on the subregional platform for regulation of medical products, plus support for efficient medical products supply chain
management [implementation of the commitment made during the Thirteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting];
• the ongoing work on the subregional Quality Improvement Programme for Nursing and other identified health-care specialist workforces, including visiting specialists, with a focus on education and regulation [implementation of the commitment made during the Twelfth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting];
• the development of a Public Health Laboratory Network across the Pacific, including the ability to undertake whole genome sequencing;
  ▪ to work with key stakeholders, including those beyond the health sector, to identify at least one COVID-19 response intervention per country that could be invested in and harnessed to facilitate sustainable health systems strengthening, for example laboratories, digital health, health workforce and community engagement.

**Accelerating action on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)**

We, the Pacific Health Ministers at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, highlighted the need for accelerated action on NCDs.

We the Pacific Health Ministers noted that while NCDs are leaving people more vulnerable to COVID-19, the continuing rise in the prevalence of NCDs can be characterized as a “slow-burn pandemic” that, as the No. 1 cause of premature mortality in the Pacific, is already claiming too many lives and, without urgent action, will claim far too many more in future.

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, endorsed the *Pacific Legislative Framework for Non-communicable Diseases* as key guidance that will assist PICs in making it easier for their citizens to make healthier choices.

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, committed:
  ▪ to lead our teams to monitor progress using the Pacific Monitoring Alliance for NCD Action [MANA] Dashboard indicators and the Pacific Legislative Framework, and to use the assessments to advocate for national action to ensure countries can more effectively progress towards the SDGs and global NCD targets;
  ▪ to invest in additional resources to ensure effective prevention and early detection and management of NCDs, especially at the primary health care level, and to maximize the impact of available resources by employing innovative approaches, promoting vaccinations, fostering good nutrition and harnessing cross-cutting issues to strengthen decentralized NCD service delivery;
  ▪ to promote a life-course approach, including an emphasis on healthy ageing, and to ensure that all NCD interventions effectively address the needs of indigenous populations, young people, older people and those living in outer/remote islands;
to support the regional endorsement of the Pacific Legislative Framework at high levels from political leaders, such as by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, and consider more opportunities for Pacific-level actions and national utilization;

to take active steps to ensure engagement of non-health sectors and civil society in national NCD leadership, governance and implementation in order to address the root causes of NCDs in a coordinated whole-of-government, whole-of-society and health-in-all-policies approach.

Putting health at the centre of the climate change discussion

We, the Pacific Health Ministers at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, expressed concern at recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the picture the Panel paints of the devastating future impacts of climate change.

We the Pacific Health Ministers acknowledged that the health sector has a leadership role to play in inspiring the collective action required to counter the rising climate crisis and in ensuring that health systems have the capacity to respond to its health impacts.

We, the Pacific Health Ministers, committed:

- to proactively advocate on the national and international stage for intersectoral and international action to address the health impacts of climate change, highlighting the special needs of the Pacific. We will do this by:
  - directing ministry staff to prioritize the gathering of data and evidence on the health impacts of climate change and the health co-benefits of action taken by colleagues outside the health sector;
  - engaging colleagues working in other sectors to help them gain support for action that addresses climate change, while also benefiting health;
  - supporting the inclusion of health priorities, including those related to nutrition and essential services such as water and sanitation, in national adaptation plans and by developing or revising health national adaptation plans or equivalent plans;
  - driving specific agenda items on the health impact of climate change at meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties and other global climate change forums;
  - achieving incremental progress on an annual basis through mainstreaming climate change interventions in all our work to tackle this existential challenge to the health of the people of the Pacific.

- to harness the resources available during the pandemic to ensure that health-care systems are not only better able to protect communities from the threat of COVID-19, but also have a reduced environmental impact and can continue serving patients in the face of a changing climate. As part of this, we will:
• conduct climate change and health vulnerability and adaptation assessments;
• commit to achieving the following proposed targets in the next five years:
  - 100% of health-care facilities have access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene services and medical waste management;
  - 100% of health-care facilities have access to electricity; and
  - health infrastructure has been assessed and strengthened and the capacity of the health workforce built to withstand climate shocks and other health emergencies, including pandemics.

Support requested from development partners

We, the Pacific Health Ministers at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, request the continued support of our partners in joint efforts to deliver better health for people across the Pacific now and in future. We invite partners to assist us with the following:

▪ to support PICs in adopting and implementing sustained, future-oriented action informed by country data analysis that is used to prioritize workplans and budgets; to ensure that partner resources deployed for the COVID-19 response result in long-term systems strengthening; to explore equitable financing options for better-targeted results on UHC; and, wherever possible, to put plans in place for a transition to full country ownership.

▪ to ensure that support provided is in full partnership with Pacific governments and is on plan, on budget and on system to improve transparency and accountability, to reduce systematic fragmentation and the potential for overlaps and gaps, and to support the transition to full country ownership;

▪ to facilitate cross-country sharing of best practices in harnessing COVID-19 response measures for sustainable and long-term impact;

▪ to support the strengthening or establishment of subregional mechanisms for cooperation, knowledge exchange and resource sharing, such as:
  • the subregional platform for regulation of medical products (implementation of the commitment made during the Thirteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting);
  • the subregional Quality Improvement Programme for Nursing and other identified health-care specialist workforces, including visiting specialists, with a focus on education and regulation (implementation of the commitment made during the Twelfth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting);
  • a specialized Public Health Laboratory Network with the ability to undertake whole genome sequencing;
  • a network or platform for making referral pathways between outer and main islands and overseas medical referrals an effective, efficient and equitable part of national health systems, including through the use of telehealth/telemedicine networks.
to support PICs with the scaling up of NCD actions and monitoring of the progress of implementation through the MANA Dashboard and other agreed reporting mechanisms and utilize this information to encourage actions in annual health workplans, as well as increasing engagement from non-health partners;

to explore opportunities to maximize available resources to enhance NCD prevention and management services, and to implement innovative interventions using advanced technology and creative communication to enhance behaviour change;

to strengthen efforts to improve civil society engagement, regional coordination, international collaboration and networking opportunities for PICs;

to support the regional endorsement and the implementation of the Pacific Legislative Framework for Non-communicable Diseases at the national level;

to support the efforts of countries to develop or strengthen plans and access sustainable financing, including the Green Climate Fund, to address the health impacts of climate change, focusing on development effectiveness and identifying opportunities to optimize available resources to tackle both COVID-19 and climate change, simultaneously;

to support efforts of Pacific leaders to inspire those beyond the health sector to play their part in addressing the health impacts of climate change, including through the development of communications and advocacy tools;

to produce and share regional guidance on climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health-care facilities, and support countries in its implementation;

to monitor the health and nutrition impacts of climate change and gather and share evidence to inform decision-making, guide advocacy, drive action, and track the impacts and successes of interventions;

to facilitate cross-country sharing of ideas and best practices, including through the digital arm of the climate change, environment and health platform.
Pacific Health Ministers Meetings

We, the Pacific Health Ministers at this Fourteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, recommend that the revised terms of reference for the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting be reviewed by Pacific Heads of Health at their next meeting and then submitted to Pacific Health Ministers for their endorsement.

We the Pacific Health Ministers acknowledge the offer of Tonga to host the Fifteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting.