

Foreword

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time. Spreading to nearly every country in the world, it is generating major economic and social costs with potential long-lasting scars.

Governments of Asia-Pacific countries and territories have acted swiftly in the face of already tight fiscal constraints. Radical measures forced the shutdown of entire sectors and imposed restrictions on mobility. While these efforts are vital to suppress transmission and save lives, they also had the unwanted effect of driving economies into recession, causing sharply rising unemployment and growing poverty. The pandemic has inflicted real suffering, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable populations. In order to overcome this crisis, countries and territories should continue to provide support to individuals, households and companies impacted by the crisis while at the same time invest in building resilient health systems to face future pandemics and other shocks. Investments should address risk factors, create adaptable surge capacity, strengthen the health workforce, as well as continue to share experiences to facilitate mutual learning to a relatively unknown disease.

Support a sustained economic recovery while further strengthening health systems

COVID-19 is much more than a public health crisis, as it has rapidly evolved into a major global economic crisis. Every day, people are losing jobs and income, with no way of knowing how long this new normal will continue and what the new future will look like. In this context, solving the health crisis remains a precondition for solving the associated economic and social crisis.

Governments in the Asia-Pacific region should implement policies that support a sustained recovery from COVID-19 in the coming years, including building strong and resilient health systems, capable of anticipating, absorbing, adapting, and recovering from major shocks in the future. Digital health technologies offer huge opportunities to support better care, disease surveillance and research. With the Asia-Pacific region a main driver of the technological revolution, digitalisation policies can be key to unlocking a sustained recovery from COVID-19. Yet, it is also a region with a significant digital divide, with less than 14% of the population connected to affordable and reliable high-speed Internet. People who remain unconnected are usually those living in rural communities, the poor and women. Scaling up and sustaining investments to increase Internet affordability, accessibility and speed will help modernise health systems in the region, and act as a driving force to breakdown remaining barriers to achieving universal health coverage (UHC).

It is imperative that we harness lessons from the pandemic to better manage future health shocks. COVID-19 revealed how many countries were caught by surprise. It points to the need for sustained investment in health system preparedness to major public health crises; in prevention, to build healthier and stronger populations; and in health services that can address the needs of people directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. With the right policy focus and investment, countries

can hope not just to recover from this pandemic, but also to emerge from it with stronger and more resilient health systems.

Accelerate progress to reach universal health coverage

There is a global consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted considerable human suffering, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable populations. Asia-Pacific countries have seen the suffering first hand, with existing gaps in care and socio-economic backgrounds leaving many exposed to COVID-19. For example, most countries in the region have high out-of-pocket expenditures for health, leading to unmet care needs. Furthermore, over 1 billion people – including most migrants and refugees – still live below the poverty line of USD 3.2 per day. These individuals are less capable to protect themselves against the spread of COVID-19, often living in overcrowded flats, and having less stable employment conditions in jobs where physical distancing is difficult. Asia-Pacific also accounts for around 65% of the global slum population, which typically have limited access to health care. Some efforts have been made across the Asia-Pacific region to support vulnerable groups during the pandemic, including the removal of financial barriers to COVID-19 related care.

By exposing prevailing gaps in care, the pandemic provides an incentive for Asia-Pacific countries and territories to accelerate progress towards UHC. Renewed policy attention is needed to guarantee that the entire population accesses high-quality health services without facing financial hardship. Making headway to universal health coverage will be an important stepping-stone to stronger health systems.

Strengthen international collaboration

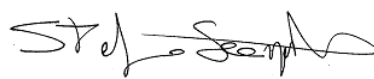
The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the need for multilateralism and a coordinated response at the national and international level. Timely and granular information is fundamental to ensure a rapid response. This requires continued efforts to strengthen digital health data infrastructures across the region, building on the successful experiences in countries like the Republic of Korea and Singapore. OECD and WHO will continue to support efforts to share on-going experiences, and identify and benchmark best practices across countries.



Poonam Khetrpal Singh
Regional Director,
WHO Regional Office for
South-East Asia



Takeshi Kasai,
Regional Director,
WHO Regional Office
for the Western Pacific



Stefano Scarpetta,
Director,
Directorate for Employment, Labour
and Social Affairs, OECD



From:

Health at a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2020 Measuring Progress Towards Universal Health Coverage

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/26b007cd-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/World Health Organization (2020), "Foreword", in *Health at a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2020: Measuring Progress Towards Universal Health Coverage*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/082e0136-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.