

Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and lasting impact on health systems and economies in most countries around the world, including those in the Asia-Pacific region. Since January 2020, over 1 million people have died due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region, and more than 80 million lost their jobs in 2020. Amid the recovery is under way, it is critical that stakeholders identify lessons learned, while at the same time leveraging heightened awareness of the importance of health resilience and preparedness to propel investment, commitment, and action towards building resilient health systems that are adequately prepared for the complex health challenges of the future.

Lessons learned across Asia-Pacific during the pandemic

In response to the pandemic, most Asia-Pacific countries introduced rapid and far-reaching measures to protect people's health and livelihoods, ranging from effective contact tracing strategies, to smart containment measures, and later to successful vaccination campaigns. However, the crisis has also exposed underlying health system shortcomings and social and economic inequities often further exacerbating them. As this report outlines, limited access to essential health care services, in particular for disadvantaged groups such as women living in low-income households or rural areas, and high levels of out-of-pocket and catastrophic health spending remain significant issues in Asia-Pacific.

To remedy these and other challenges, universal health coverage ensures that all people can access quality health services, without financial hardship. It is the foundation of a resilient health system, and ensures that when acute events occur, essential health services can be maintained. Building equitable and resilient health systems not only protects people's lives, especially in times of crisis, but also pave the way towards inclusive recovery, social justice and sustainable development.

How to prepare for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that when health is at risk, everything is at risk. This suggests that ensuring greater resilience and preparedness to shocks – and the required investment to achieve these goals – should be a key element of governments' overall commitment to sustainable social and economic development.

Only with significant and sustained financial investment and political commitment can countries mobilise the whole-of-government capacity needed to tackle the increasingly complex health challenges of our time. In the months, years and decades ahead, key priorities include investing in innovative health and social care service delivery models, including patient-centred and integrated primary health care; adopting digital health interventions; and creating healthy environments and lifestyles to promote healthy ageing.

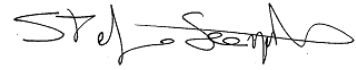
Given that health is intricately linked to social, economic and cultural life, delivering this agenda and working towards more just and equitable societies and health systems requires a multidisciplinary, cross-sectorial and collaborative approach. Ultimately, investments to achieve quality and accessible health care for all, without financial hardship, are investments in overall economic and social development that will translate into healthier, more resilient and cohesive societies that are future-ready.



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