

Meeting Report

SECOND WHO WESTERN PACIFIC REGION PARTNERS' FORUM



30 June–2 July 2021
Virtual meeting

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

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English only

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Convened by:

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

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NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants of the Second WHO Western Pacific Region Partners' Forum and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the conveners.

This report has been prepared by the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific for Member States in the Region and for those who participated in the Second WHO Western Pacific Region Partners' Forum virtually from 30 June to 1 July 2021.

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SUMMARY

One of the key elements outlined in *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region* is the need to strengthen partnerships. Effective partnerships – both within and beyond the health sector – are pivotal in achieving the Western Pacific Region’s goals for the coming years and beyond. WHO must go beyond conventional partnerships in order to support countries to address wide-ranging and interconnected health and development challenges and to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

On 1–3 July 2019, the First WHO Western Pacific Region Partners’ Forum was held as part of the major consultation on the development of *For the Future*. More than 350 individuals attended, and partners and WHO staff came together virtually to discuss the thematic priorities, operational shifts and the role partners have in driving the vision forward.

Since then, the world has changed dramatically as a result of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and there was a renewed need to virtually convene partners. Attended by approximately 1,000 registrants representing over 35 countries and areas, the Second Partners’ Forum focused on the essential role of partnerships in the Western Pacific Region in advancing health priorities, how partnerships have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and how institutions must work together to address future public health challenges. The three-day agenda included sessions on partnering beyond the health sector, communicating on COVID-19 vaccines, WHO’s main thematic priorities in the Region, youth engagement and more.

WHO partners representing nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, academia, WHO collaborating centres, professional societies and other networks were invited to participate in a range of sessions including panels, interactive discussions, a partner exhibition and networking.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Meeting organization

The Second WHO Western Pacific Region Partners' Forum from 30 June to 1 July 2021 was hosted on an online events platform that allowed participants to experience many of the benefits of an in-person conference. The three-day Forum included opportunities for participants to contribute to discussions in chat boxes, virtual “lounges” or topic-focused discussion groups, and to network with other participants, speakers, and WHO directors and staff through a speed networking session and dedicated time to set up one-on-one meetings. Fifty-five partner organizations hosted booths and showcased their work during the Partners' Expo in a virtual exhibition hall. The Forum was designed to be accessible to anyone regardless of time zone throughout the three days, and participants had the option to join in and out of the conversation as they wished.

1.2 Meeting objectives

The objectives of the meeting were:

- (1) to review partnerships between WHO and partners since the First Partners' Forum, highlighting successes and challenges throughout the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) response, including maintaining essential services;
- (2) to assess what has worked well and what could be done better in terms of partner engagement;
- (3) to review new partnerships beyond the health sector that have been leveraged throughout the COVID-19 response and identify lessons; and
- (4) to identify further means for WHO and partners to work together to drive forward *For the Future*.

2. PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Opening session and working together during COVID-19

This first half of the session included: opening remarks from Dr Takeshi Kasai, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific; reflections on the First Partners' Forum, held in 2019; and logistics, such as the schedule and how to make the best use of the virtual meetings platform, Accelevents. The second half of the session dove into the COVID-19 situation and how the Western Pacific Region has responded, with various COVID-19 responders speaking about how partnerships enhanced technical response interventions such as laboratory, operational support and logistics, and essential health services. Panellists and moderators concluded that the role of partners from all sectors has expanded during the COVID-19 response, and many have taken the approach of “preparing while responding”, an approach championed in the *Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies* or APSED, now in its third iteration. The need to continue to invest both in the response and in preparedness was also emphasized, with preparedness efforts being described as a key component of our collective future.

2.2 Thematic priority breakout sessions

Four breakout sessions were held covering each of the thematic priority areas outlined in *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region*: health security, including antimicrobial resistance (AMR); climate change, the environment and health (CCE); noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and ageing;

and reaching the unreached. The sessions began with an introduction to the thematic priority area followed by a short panel discussion, and then open interactions with all participants through live forums.

2.2.1 Health security, including antimicrobial resistance

The Western Pacific Region continues to face a large number of health security threats, not just from COVID-19 but also natural disasters, vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and poliomyelitis, and emergent threats such as AMR. These diseases, outbreaks and public health emergencies continue to show us that a health crisis can happen in any country at any time. The panel discussed that partnerships are essential in preventing, detecting and responding to crises. Eighteen months into the COVID-19 pandemic, partnerships have been strengthened in both health and non-health sectors. Participants agreed that community-level preparedness is essential, in addition to preparedness at national levels. Partnerships are essential to making impact at the community level. Participants also discussed the challenge of misinformation and the importance of partners speaking together with one voice. Partners brainstormed how they can work together to support the important issue of developing legislation related to COVID-19 that will also serve to support future emergencies. Lastly, it was concluded that the investments made in partnerships prior to COVID-19 have paid dividends.

2.2.2 Climate change, the environment and health

The Western Pacific Region is among the most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation. One quarter of the death and illness in the Region is linked to the environment, with a disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups such as young children and the poor. Progress in addressing climate change, the environment and health, or CCE, has been made, even during the pandemic. Examples include the inaugural meeting of the Technical Advisory Group for CCE in the Western Pacific Region or the work coordinated by the United Nations Environment Programme or UNEP. However, incremental change by individual actors will not be enough to halt rapidly rising temperatures at less than 1.5 degrees Celsius and protect people across the Region from the worst impacts of climate change, environmental degradation and the flow-on effects on health. While COVID-19 has challenged us in many ways, participants noted that it has also created a momentum that must be seized. As we think about what we want the world to look like in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must consider how we can collectively contribute to the creation of a greener, healthier, more resilient, and sustainable future, including through stimulating stronger partnerships.

2.2.3 Noncommunicable diseases and ageing

The Asia Pacific region has the largest and fastest growing population of older people anywhere in the world. While having people enjoy longer lives is generally a positive development, it also poses challenges for health systems and societies – one of which is the increasing burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Panellists and participants discussed how the emergence of COVID-19 has further increased the urgency for addressing the challenges related to NCDs and ageing. It has revealed gaps in NCD services, showing that the burden of premature mortality from NCDs is not shared equitably and making it obvious that older people or people who have NCDs are more likely to become seriously ill and, sadly, die as a result of COVID-19. Partnerships were seen as an important factor/enabler to help address these challenges going forward and several examples were highlighted to showcase how partnerships can be leveraged to foster innovation and promote collaboration across countries as well as different sectors.

2.2.4 Reaching the unreached

Despite the many public health gains that have been made across the Region, many people still remain unreached by essential health services. There continues to be a need to transform health care to reach the most marginalized, vulnerable and stigmatized. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has put more people in this category. The pandemic has also challenged the efforts of all partners who are working tirelessly to reach them. During this breakout discussion, partners discussed the important role of innovation and technology in reaching vulnerable groups. Examples were given of effective community-led approaches. It was evident that strong partnerships are essential to closing all of the gaps in the coming decades. Participants noted the importance of trust, working together for a shared vision and working in partnership both within and beyond the health sector.

2.3 Health beyond the health sector

COVID-19 has confirmed what we already knew: the complexity of today's health challenges require us to work in partnership both within and beyond the health sector – but partnering is not always straightforward. A panel discussion with partner experts explored several partnership examples from across the Region, addressing questions such as: How can we develop partnerships to create added value? Do partnering expectations and outcomes change over time? How can we measure the impact of partnerships? And how can we maximize partnerships for the future? The panel noted that having agreed goals, clear communication and flexibility to adapt to changing needs are key for successful partnerships.

2.4 Leveraging partnerships for communicating on COVID-19 vaccines

Communication to support the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines has presented unique challenges. The unprecedented speed and scale, complexity in the scientific, technical and political landscape, and various risks threatening the success of vaccination efforts has meant that strong partnerships with a range of actors are essential. This panel discussion convened partners from academia, the private sector, international organizations and country teams to reflect on the collective effort to communicate with the public on COVID-19 vaccination amid a highly complex landscape, as well as opportunities to take this collaboration further. Panellists discussed the need to use a range of sources and varying techniques to understand and address people's concerns. Moving forward, it was agreed that further investment is needed in the Communication for Health space. Advancing this work will require engagement with a wide range of partners.

2.5 Working with young people, for young people

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