



WHO Western Pacific Regional Action Plan for Response to Large-Scale Community Outbreaks of COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This Regional Action Plan has been developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office and country offices of the Western Pacific to guide WHO and partner actions in supporting countries and areas in the Region to mitigate the public health impact of large-scale community outbreaks of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Background

Since 2005, Member States of the Western Pacific Region have strengthened national health system capacities to detect and respond to emerging infectious diseases, guided by the *Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies* (APSED III) (1). Strengthening these core capacities – as mandated by the International Health Regulations, or IHR (2005) – has enabled the Region to be more prepared to manage the challenges posed by public health emergencies. These capacities and the systems they support will be tested in the months to come as the world prepares to manage large-scale community outbreaks of COVID-19.

On 7 January 2020, authorities identified a novel coronavirus from a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown etiology in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province in Central China. On 30 January 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern.

By early March, unprecedented physical distancing measures and other non-pharmaceutical interventions had largely brought the spread of the virus under control in China. However, COVID-19 continues to spread in other countries around the world, many of which are not prepared or lack resources to respond to the same degree.

Measures to control initial cases and localized outbreaks of COVID-19 involve active surveillance, contact tracing, isolation, quarantine and laboratory confirmation of each case. These measures are intense and challenging to sustain over time, particularly in resource-limited settings. If the virus has spread widely in the general community, control measures are no longer practical. Instead, authorities should focus resources on non-pharmaceutical interventions to reduce transmission and measures aimed at mitigating the impact on health-care systems and societies.

The 2014 outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa highlighted the need for response plans to change if initial cases or localized outbreaks develop into large-scale community outbreaks. In this scenario, initial intense control efforts must shift – quickly – to longer-term interventions that reduce the impact on health and social services and emphasize the engagement of communities in a sustained response. This type of situation requires a coordinated approach with countries and areas, WHO, the United Nations and other partners in the Western Pacific Region working together in a collaborative, all-of-society response.

WHO's response to COVID-19 is a major test of the Organization's transformed emergency response structure, which has incorporated lessons from the Ebola outbreak. It is also an opportunity to put into practice the global WHO *Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023* (2) and the Western Pacific Region's shared vision for the coming years as articulated in *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region* (3). This will be achieved by ensuring that short-term emergency response goals also contribute to long-term strategic priorities, including addressing health emergencies, improving access to universal health coverage and strengthening health systems.

This Regional Action Plan is based on the foundations laid by APSED III and designed to support implementation of the WHO guidance on preparing for large-scale community transmission of COVID-19 in countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region (4). This Plan is also aligned with the global *Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan* (5), WHO guidance on responding to the community spread of COVID-19 (6), and relevant international principles and initiatives, including the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* (7).

Scope and target audience

This Regional Action Plan is intended for use by WHO and partners to support Member States across the Western Pacific. It may also be used as a reference by Member States to inform national planning for large-scale community outbreaks of COVID-19 in accordance with their national contexts. This Plan specifically addresses the public health response actions needed once large-scale community outbreaks are established in a country and measures to mitigate the impact of a long-term COVID-19 epidemic.

Pacific island countries and areas (PICs) face unique health system challenges, including logistical complexities, limited infrastructure, and relatively small populations and economies of scale. The priority areas and actions outlined in this Plan will be adapted to fit the Pacific context to meet specific needs and challenges in facing potential outbreaks of COVID-19.

Objectives

1. Minimize illness and deaths caused by COVID-19 and reduce transmission of the virus.
2. Reduce stress on health services and protect those delivering care.
3. Engage communities to drive and sustain the response.
4. Protect vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations.
5. Work in partnership with governments, community partners, international and United Nations agencies and donors to deliver a coordinated, multisectoral public health response.
6. Strengthen overall health systems and contribute to long-term health priorities in the Region.

Priority areas

Actions to mitigate the impact of large-scale community outbreaks of COVID-19 are outlined in 10 priority areas:

1. Incident management, planning, administration and coordination
2. Strategic communications
3. Community engagement
4. Non-pharmaceutical public health

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