


A VISION FOR PRIMARY HEALTH CARE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Towards universal health coverage and
the Sustainable Development Goals



TECHNICAL
SERIES 
**ON PRIMARY
HEALTH CARE**

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the Sustainable Development Goals

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Foreword

In 1978 world leaders, international organizations and health authorities gathered in Alma-Ata (now Almaty), Kazakhstan, and released the Declaration of Alma-Ata on Primary Health Care, which remains a landmark document in the history of global health. The Alma-Ata Declaration established a standard of public commitment to making community-driven, quality health care accessible, both physically and financially, for all. This was the forerunner of the Global Strategy for Health for All by the Year 2000 that was pursued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and its partners for the rest of the 20th century, and of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” by 2030.

The world has made excellent progress on global health, with changes so great that life expectancy is now around 10 years more than in 1978, and the risk of dying before the age of 5 years has fallen by around two thirds. Indeed, the spectrum of disease is now very different from 40 years ago, due to the demographic and epidemiologic transitions that have occurred. While the unfinished agenda of preventable child and maternal mortality remains, chronic noncommunicable diseases and injuries have replaced acute infections as the major causes of morbidity and mortality, necessitating a change in the profile of health services needed. A number of factors and trends have made the world a very different place in 2018 compared to 1978 – changes in population distribution (more urban, older, but with a heavy burden of young people in some global regions), increasingly sophisticated health and non-health technologies, improving health literacy, engagement and expectations, and growing food security and environmental risks that negatively influence health. Put simply, now is a good time to both review and adapt the Alma-Ata Declaration and develop a new vision of primary health care (PHC) as a foundation of universal health coverage, for the SDG era and beyond.

In October 2018, world health leaders, international organizations, civil society and other stakeholders meet in Astana, Kazakhstan, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the 1978 Declaration. A new document – the Declaration of Astana on Primary Health Care – has been developed after global public consultation involving experts and civil society, and detailed negotiations between the WHO Member States. It will be officially launched at the Astana Global Conference on Primary Health Care, where a call will be made for governments to give high priority to PHC, including in non-health sectors, in partnership with their own public and private sector organizations, development partners and other stakeholders.

A vision for primary health care in the 21st century: towards universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals provides the rationale for and foundation of the Declaration of Astana, with its continued political focus on the right to integrated, quality, personal and population-level primary care; on health as a multisectoral social and economic construct, dependent on many sectors; and on community engagement in health, and empowerment with respect to health services. It reviews evidence gathered over the last 40 years, and explains why progress on PHC, as originally envisioned, has been mixed. It provides a detailed description of how the components of PHC might evolve, and ends with an appealing and achievable vision for PHC in the 21st century.

In 2008, 30 years after the Alma-Ata Conference, *The world health report 2008 – primary health care: now more than ever* created a new opportunity for the reinvigoration of PHC. However, in the following years, health development assistance became more disease-focused, and an opportunity to work across sectors, across programmes and for community involvement in health care decision-making was lost. As a result, the accountability and reach of the primary care system – a core component of PHC – remains weak in many countries, along with poor quality of care and inadequate staffing.

We are still in the early years of the SDG era, and the promises offered by the digital age are exciting and revolutionary. This Vision document outlines how PHC can benefit from new technologies, new resources, new partnerships and new opportunities. Our organizations will continue to promote PHC as a foundation of health and health care services, imperative for the achievement of universal health coverage. Together we can achieve healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages, leaving no one behind.



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