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## HEALTH INNOVATION

Driven by scientific advances and technology, social and cultural practices, the Western Pacific Region has been a leader in innovation. However, health innovations of late have had limited success in addressing longstanding problems and emerging threats. This is due to several factors: profit motives; lack of public health values; insufficient funding; and limited evidence to guide decisions of scale.

The public sector must lead in directing growth-oriented innovation that focuses on well-being and equity, scaling up innovations to improve equitable access to health and creating space for learning and improving. In line with the Region's *For the Future* vision, WHO advocates a broader role for governments in health innovation in order to regain momentum towards WHO's global goals and the Sustainable Development Goals health targets. This Strategy will support Member States to strengthen the public sector's capacity to lead and exploit health innovations to solve problems, accelerate impact and improve health and well-being in the Region.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Health Innovation Strategy for the Western Pacific*.

## **1. CURRENT SITUATION**

Health innovation is the creation and implementation of novel processes, products, programmes, policies or systems that transform or improve health and equity. Much of the progress in public health historically has been driven by innovation. Over the past three years, COVID-19 has made health innovation more pervasive, involving a wider range of actors than ever before. But the pandemic also hindered health progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) health targets. The pandemic also made fragile health systems even more vulnerable. The stresses have chipped away at trust, funding and health workforces, amid mounting pressures from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), climate change and emerging health security threats. Diminishing returns on established interventions for long-standing problems pose more obstacles. To recover and address the challenges of today and tomorrow without leaving behind the most vulnerable populations, more and better health innovations are required.

Health innovation in the Western Pacific Region is shaped by its diversity in geography, culture and socioeconomic conditions. Technological innovation has been a key driver of economic growth in many countries. Innovation ecosystems and adaptive governance demonstrate governments' collective commitment to digital transformation. Meanwhile, various social innovation approaches are fulfilling public health policy objectives and achieving equity in access to care.

Despite the Region's diversity and abundance, many health innovations have had limited success tackling challenges or contributing to population well-being, particularly in the case of technological solutions driven by profit and governed by trade and industry. Areas with limited market appeal – such as neglected tropical diseases, rare diseases, antibiotic development, prevention and health promotion, and affordable maternal and child health – have been marginalized. In areas where economic growth and well-being are reconciled – such as digital innovations for health system strengthening – the lack of mature governance, long-term funding and support systems hinders the creation of market opportunities. Consequently, financially disadvantaged and vulnerable populations with the greatest needs are often left behind. The lack of evaluation and evidence to support institutionalization poses yet another barrier to health innovations with a potentially wider impact.

The time has come for governments in the Region to assume the leadership in health innovation and offer lessons to the world: redirect growth-driven innovation models with a focus on well-being and equity while still enabling economic success; scale social innovation to improve equitable access to health; and create spaces for learning and evidence generation for continuous improvement.

The draft Strategy is based on consultations with Member States on how best to empower the public sector to orchestrate innovation efforts. This approach is echoed in the May 2023 report by the WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All, *Health for All: Transforming economies to deliver what matters*. The report outlines a path to reorient economies to deliver health for all.

## 2. ISSUES

### 2.1 Setting value and direction for mission-oriented health innovation

Solving complex public health challenges requires collaboration among various actors and sectors to innovate together. However, within the Region, many countries have not yet taken proactive roles in leading and governing health innovation, often assuming the position of a market fixer. The public sector should define clear missions, articulate problems to solve, directions to go and goals to achieve. By setting the direction for health innovation, governments can effectively transform public health priorities into actionable policy instruments and initiatives, orchestrate investment and actors across an entire economy beyond the health sector. By doing so, the public sector can foster a diverse portfolio of health innovations to address challenges at hand.

### 2.2 Strengthening public sector capacity for health innovation

The public sector faces constraints in terms of funding, infrastructure and human resources dedicated to health innovation. Insufficient investment in research and development, technology adoption and innovation-related initiatives hampers the capacity to drive transformative changes. There is also a lack of strong leadership and effective governance structures to support health innovation within the public sector. This has led to fragmented efforts, limited coordination and challenges in implementing health innovations at scale. Furthermore, the limited capacity to collect, analyse and utilize data to inform decision-making and evaluation poses a significant challenge to scaling health innovation for population impact.

### 2.3 Cultivating enabling ecosystem for health innovation

While private sector entrepreneurs may have the capacity to initiate and develop innovative solutions, enablers required for widespread implementation and scaling for broader impact can only be effectively provided by governments. Lamentably, relatively few countries in the Region have favourable regulatory environments for innovations, particularly in digital health and artificial intelligence. Furthermore, a general lack of awareness exists regarding the public sector's capacity to

create enablers for health innovation ecosystems that serve the common good. An innovation-oriented culture in the public sector is also undervalued.

#### **2.4 Improving knowledge transfer within the Region**

Regional efforts to identify, assess and amplify health innovation to address shared challenges remain insufficient. Several challenges and limitations hinder the achievement of this goal on a regional scale. These include: inadequate collaboration and communication channels among stakeholders; ineffective systems for timely knowledge exchange; an uneven distribution of knowledge with a bias towards specific countries in the Region; and limited translation of research and evidence into practical applications suitable for low-resource settings. Additionally, weak linkages between research institutions and policy-making bodies impede the dissemination of evidence for health innovation.

### **3. ACTIONS PROPOSED**

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Health Innovation Strategy for the Western Pacific*.