

Supporting health systems development through regional cooperation

Background

While health systems strengthening is generally considered more of a national than a regional health priority, there are strong rationales for strengthening health systems through regional cooperation because of potential mutual benefits for CAREC countries.

From the national health systems perspective, NCDs and their risk factors put major strains on services delivery and stretch health sector budgets. They are likely to increase the health sector's burden in the future with population aging, lifestyle changes, and demand for medical technologies.

From the COVID-19 pandemic experience, reducing the burden of NCDs will minimize the spread and impact of Emerging infectious Diseases (EID). It will also reduce high out-of-pocket spending associated with chronic NCDs which are likely to weigh more heavily on low income groups. Regional technology transfer and capacity building in NCD services can achieve better prevention and treatment of NCDs. Joint action can mobilize resources and improve efficiency in controlling NCDs. Developing regional standards can also contribute to reducing CDs and NCDs through, for example, quality control of medicines and food products and harmonized taxation policies on "sin goods" (e.g. alcohol, tobacco).

While this analysis focusses on NCDs, building strong health systems through regional cooperation is equally important for controlling non-communicable diseases (NCDs), CDs and other priorities such as improving maternal and child health.

Technical areas for collaboration to support health systems development

Evidence shows that both population-based (e.g., tobacco measures and a reduction in salt intake) and individual-based interventions (e.g., drugs to prevent or manage CVD by reducing blood pressure or cholesterol) are effective at reducing the NCD burden. Both types of interventions lend themselves to regional cooperation within CAREC.

There are at least 4 areas for cooperation in health systems strengthening:

1. Multisector action to tackle non-communicable diseases: Harmonizing tax policies and food labelling
2. Information systems and digital health
3. Human resources for health
4. Improving access to medicines and technology

Collaboration can also be envisioned for strengthening capacity on quality of care across the region.

Recommendations for supporting health systems development

- (i) **Harmonizing health policies and strategies** at regional level enhances NCD prevention and control efforts, especially for tobacco, alcohol, and food. This can lead to capacity building, technology transfer, economies of scale, and efficiency gains. Example areas:
 - (ii) **Human resources for health:** Most CAREC countries are facing a shortage of highly qualified health professionals, especially in rural areas. There is considerable migration of health professionals within and outside the CAREC region. Regional cooperation could include:
 - Assessing health workforce requirements to support national health strategies toward achieving universal health coverage and SDGs
 - Creating migrant health worker databases linked with employer databases (hospitals/clinics)
 - (iii) **Health information systems:** Regional cooperation on improving health information systems can focus on:
 - Advancing interoperability of fragmented health information systems at national level facilitated by national eHealth strategies
 - Facilitating harmonization of eHealth standards and strategy at regional level
 - Investment in Information/Communication Technology, to improve access to regional trainings, sharing of information and knowledge, and diagnostic and clinical decision-making support
 - Link underserved communities (including cross-border communities) to health care institutions and providers
- (iv) **Access to medicines and technology:** (i) drug regulatory coordination, harmonization and reliance policies, (ii) facilitating pharmaceutical manufacturing in the region through transfer of technologies, and (iii) pooling of procurement of medicines in the region **for economies of scale**