

CAREC: Regional Health Cooperation

Briefing Note for Senior Officials Meeting, 30 June 2021

A. Background

1. The CAREC 2030 strategy, endorsed at the 16th Ministerial Conference in October 2017, envisages strengthening regional health cooperation (RHC) under the CAREC framework as part of the operational cluster for human development. In 2018, the CAREC Secretariat commissioned a scoping study to assess the potential of CAREC as a regional platform for promoting RHC, so as to mitigate regional health risks and build resilient national health systems. The study identified three strategic areas for CAREC health cooperation, namely: (i) regional health security; (ii) strengthening health systems through regional cooperation; and (iii) improving access to health services for migrants, mobile populations and border communities.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the importance of building resilient national health systems and strengthening regional cooperation for health. It demonstrated that viruses do not halt at borders and with increased global connectivity, a novel coronavirus of modest virulence can spread around the world within 6 months. RHC provides an opportunity for countries to jointly control the spread of pandemics, strengthen health systems, improve regional health security, and achieve better health outcomes. It is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 which is interwoven with other SDGs such as SDG 1 on poverty reduction and SDG 5 on gender equality.

B. Progress

3. To date, a number of consultations have been held with member countries and development partners to discuss the findings of the scoping study and deliberate on the preparation of a CAREC health strategy leading to 2030. On 15 October 2020, a [virtual regional consultation workshop](#) was organized to present the results and recommendations of the scoping study to CAREC member countries and seek their feedback. The event was attended by CAREC member countries and development partners including the World Health Organization. The scoping study has been published which incorporated comments and suggestions from the countries and development partners.

4. A [regional inception workshop](#) was held on 4 March 2021 which consulted CAREC member countries and development partners on a proposed framework for the new CAREC health strategy and discussed challenges and priorities of CAREC countries in the proposed focus areas. The consultations were organized in interactive breakout groups to allow for more in-depth and informal discussions. The meeting marked the establishment of a CAREC Working Group on Health (WGH) to guide the formulation of the strategy and the related investment framework. A Technical Assistance (approved by ADB in July 2020) is supporting the development of the CAREC health strategy and related assessments. A team of consultants has been mobilized in December 2021 to support this work. The strategy is planned to be submitted to the CAREC Ministerial Conference for endorsement in November 2021. The Regional Investment Framework will be completed in 2022.

C. Development of the CAREC Health Strategy and Regional Investment Framework

5. The strategic framework for the CAREC health strategy is based on three strategic areas identified in the scoping study, namely: (i) regional health security; (ii) strengthening health

systems through regional cooperation; and (iii) improving access to health services for migrants, mobile populations and border communities. During the consultation on the strategy, further ideas were generated along the three priority areas which are summarized below:

- (i) **Regional health security/resilience** can be strengthened through better sharing and standardization of electronic surveillance data that can also offer early warning of infection spread in the region; more and better trained epidemiologists; a better mechanism for effective regional consultations on response measures; improved supply-chain logistics for necessary consumables; and higher quality laboratory performance and increased access to testing and quarantine facilities.
- (ii) **Regional cooperation to support health systems** can be provided by training of health managers for faster and more effective resource mobilization; establishment of regional quality assurance mechanisms; regional support for improved laboratory functioning; harmonization of policies and regulations as well as simplification of procedures to remove barriers for the registration of new drugs in the region; and more integrated health information systems.
- (iii) **Health services for migrants, mobile populations, and border communities** can be supported by setting up an accessible database of migrants to facilitate their improved access to health services, setting up mobile health services to reach far- flung border communities, and better continuity of care for those traveling across borders especially for those with communicable diseases including tuberculosis (TB).
- (iv) **Other areas of interest** proposed included enhancing capacity in CAREC countries to conduct healthcare research for communicable and non-communicable diseases, social inclusion, and the threat of drug-resistant TB.

6. As an example of a regional Working Group on Health (WGH), a senior representative of the Ministry of Public Health in Thailand, presented lessons from RHC in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Other discussion points during the consultation included institutional arrangements for regional health cooperation under CAREC, including the need for alignment of the strategy with global and regional health policy frameworks to ensure policy coherence, and the need for a supporting environment at the national level.

D. Next steps

7. The next steps in the process of finalizing the CAREC health strategy include:
 - Assessments, data and information gathering, in-country consultations started in April and will continue until September (ongoing)
 - Consultations with CAREC WGH in Q3 2021
 - Presentation of draft strategy at CAREC National Focal Points Meeting in September 2021
 - Approval of CAREC health strategy in November 2021
 - Development of the Investment Framework in 2022 (assessments to start in 2021)