

TECHNICAL BRIEF

Essential public health functions

A sustainable approach to ensure multi-sectoral actions for population health

October 2022

Public health challenges underscore the need for integrated health systems strengthening with strong public health orientation in order to meet population needs in times of peace and stability as well as during emergencies. The essential public health functions (EPHFs) complement primary health care (PHC) and offer a holistic, integrated, cost-effective and sustainable means of strengthening health systems with the public health capacities required to advance UHC and other health-related SDG targets.

Key messages

- The World Health Organization (WHO) lists 12 EPHFs as a minimum requirement for Member States to assure public health in a holistic, integrated, and sustainable manner. These functions enable better alignment and tailoring of health and intersectoral policies, programmes, and services to address population health needs.
- EPHFs are acknowledged as a cost-effective and efficient means for advancing universal health coverage (UHC), other health-related targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and health security. They also contribute to socioeconomic growth.
- Routine, proactive public health activities have been chronically under-prioritized, in terms of investment and stakeholder action, compared with hospital-based health care and disease-specific interventions. In addition, there has been a disproportionate, fragmented focus on responding to crises – to the detriment of long-term measures including health promotion and disease prevention. These have left health systems and populations vulnerable to public health threats.
- The 69th World Health Assembly provided WHO with a strong mandate to support the Member States in strengthening EPHFs (Resolution WHA 69.1). More recently, the unprecedented impacts of COVID-19 in countries of all income groups have led to a renewed focus on EPHFs as a means of ensuring the long-term resilience of health systems including the capacity to maintain essential services in any context.
- WHO has renewed its commitment to help countries strengthen EPHFs in health systems recovery and reform, and to build an integrated approach to policy-making, planning and services.
- Effective public health leadership and targeted investments are necessary to ensure that EPHFs are comprehensively embedded within health systems, with a focus on PHC and multisectoral actions. This will enable countries to build resilience, promote equity and ensure joint accountability for public health.

Background and challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic and other public health challenges have shown that most efforts to strengthen health systems are fragmented: they have not ensured adequate public health capacities to enable resilience and safeguard UHC. In addition, the predominant focus on clinical care and emergency response has been detrimental to the capacity of health systems to provide a long-term response to a wide range of ever-evolving public health challenges.

Objectives for short-term health gains have not only failed to address chronic foundational gaps in health systems, but have also proven to be costly in the long run. The EPHFs represent a more holistic and integrated approach to public health, which is sustainable, cost-effective and efficient, and can effectively advance UHC and other health-related SDGs. This is closely interlinked with the Astana vision of primary health care which identified EPHFs as a core component.

World Health Assembly Resolution 69.1 urges Member States to build strong public health systems, and mandates WHO to support their efforts to strengthen EPHFs. The 2019 United Nations Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage also outlined the need to promote more coherent and inclusive approaches to safeguarding UHC, including the provision of EPHFs.

These policy developments, along with other global and regional strategies, and lessons learned from health system shocks, have given impetus to WHO's work on EPHFs. This has led to an increased global, regional, and national recognition of, interest in, and commitment to the role of EPHFs within the UHC agenda and beyond.

However, countries need to do more to operationalize EPHFs in policy-making,ⁱ planning, financing, service delivery, and monitoring and evaluation – especially as they look to recover and build better and fairer health systems in the context of fiscal constraints. The global momentum created by the pandemic presents a unique opportunity for countries to do things differently and demonstrate that lessons have truly been learned.

Key actions and policy recommendations

- Countries and partners should prioritize the implementation of EPHFs as a comprehensive, integrated and cost-effective way of strengthening health systems strongly oriented towards UHC. This WHO view is supported by WHO's position paper on recovery and building resilient health systems;ⁱⁱ the release of a renewed, consolidated list of EPHFs for country application; the roadmap for developing the public health workforce to deliver the EPHFs; the primary health care measurement framework and indicators and a review of the role of national public health institutions in EPHF delivery.
- WHO, countries and other global health actors should continue to identify EPHFs as a strategic priority, applying them in national health sector reforms,ⁱⁱⁱ and in defining the roles of public health institutions.^{iv}
- Member States should implement the existing EPHF and PHC strategies, and make use of guidance and tools at the regional and country-level. This will ensure that EPHFs are considered in decision-making, financing and all actions impacting public health within and beyond the health sector.
- Countries should strengthen PHC to promote operationalization of EPHFs with integrated delivery of population-focused and individual services in all contexts, including periods of crises
- Countries with foundational health system gaps and those with fragile, conflict-affected and violent settings should apply EPHFs in their reconstruction and development agendas. This should entail establishing, reconfiguring, and strengthening national public health institutions and giving greater prominence to public health for the coordinated delivery of EPHFs.
- WHO should continue to provide leadership in strengthening the EPHFs as countries and partners rethink and rebuild health systems to meet 21st century public health demands.

i. For example, the Pan American Health Organization's strategy on building resilience highlighting the need to implement EPHFs, and the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean's strategic revision of its EPHF framework.

ii. Associated editorial: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8958831/pdf/BLT.22.287843.pdf>

iii. For example, Ireland's review of its EPHF capacity and delivery, to inform health sector reforms based on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

iv. Example, the International Association of National Public Health Institutes uses the EPHFs as the basis of their framework for the creation and development of national public health institutes.

