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MINISTERIAL ROUNDTABLE: REGIONAL HEALTH ESSENTIAL STOCKPILE AND POOLED PROCUREMENT MECHANISM

Access to safe, effective, quality-assured and affordable medicines, vaccines, diagnostics and other health technologies is essential for universal health coverage, health security and protection from financial hardship due to health expenditures. Despite progress, Member States in the WHO Western Pacific Region continue to face persistent challenges across pharmaceutical systems, supply chains and markets, with particular constraints for smaller and geographically dispersed countries and areas.

Many access challenges are too extensive for countries to address on their own. Voluntary regional or subregional collaboration must complement national efforts to support faster access to rare and critical products, regulatory cooperation, shared awareness of shortages, coordinated procurement approaches and preparedness for equitable access to pandemic-related health products.

The Regional Committee is invited to note these challenges and provide guidance for future WHO Member State consultations, evidence gathering and feasibility assessments for areas of collaboration and cooperation to facilitate equitable access to critical health products and technologies for all.

1. CURRENT SITUATION

Access to safe, effective, quality-assured and affordable medicines, vaccines, diagnostics and other health technologies is fundamental to achieving universal health coverage (UHC) and the health-related Sustainable Development Goal targets. These products enable prevention, diagnosis and treatment across the life course. They are integral to primary health care and preparedness for health emergencies. As such, they play a key role in achieving the regional vision, *Weaving Health for Families, Communities and Societies in the Western Pacific Region (2025–2029)*, which calls for collective action to advance UHC, health security and health equity.

This agenda is broadly supported by many global and regional mandates. Over the past decade, the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific has endorsed resolutions that address access challenges: UHC (WPR/RC66.R2), regulatory strengthening and cooperation (WPR/RC68.R7), antimicrobial resistance (WPR/RC70.R2), vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization (WPR/RC71.R1) and health financing (WPR/RC75.R1). Meanwhile, the World Health Assembly has adopted resolutions on regulatory systems strengthening (WHA67.20); improving access to essential medicines and vaccines (WHA67.22); transparency of markets for health products (WHA72.8); strengthening local production to improve access (WHA74.6); public health, innovation and intellectual property (WHA75.14); and diagnostics capacity (WHA76.5).

Member States have made progress in strengthening medicine selection, regulation, financing, procurement and supply management. However, reliable and equitable access to essential health products continues to be limited by persistent constraints across the end-to-end pharmaceutical system – from sourcing ingredients and manufacturing to distribution – in addition to gaps in policy and legislation, sustainable financing, forecasting, procurement planning, quality assurance, logistics, information systems, workforce capacity, post-market surveillance and appropriate use.

Medical product supply chains are complex. They can span several countries for a single product. Supply continuity can be disrupted by sudden changes in demand, shortages of raw materials or active pharmaceutical ingredients, manufacturing or quality problems, transport and trade constraints, climate-related events, conflicts, cyber incidents and other shocks. Concentrated production and supplier bases, together with limited visibility of manufacturing capacity, supplier pipelines and stock levels, can make emerging disruptions hard to anticipate and even harder to manage.

The nature and extent of these vulnerabilities vary across the Western Pacific Region. Smaller or geographically dispersed markets, including Pacific island countries and areas, may face limited supplier interest, elevated/erratic freight costs, dependence on imports, penalties for small orders and

other challenges in accessing low-volume products. Larger markets may have greater leverage, but they still face global shortages, concentrated production, price volatility and risks from substandard and falsified products. Across all settings, disruptions tend to increase costs and undermine continuity and quality of care.

Financial hardship associated with health spending remains a major challenge across the Western Pacific Region. While the proportion of people experiencing financial hardship declined to 27% in 2022 from 40% in 2000, nearly 600 million people in the Region still incur financial hardship from health expenditures, according to Global Health Observatory statistics. For many countries and areas, spending on medicines constitutes the largest component of out-of-pocket health expenditures, according to a 2025 WHO global report on monitoring UHC. Improving affordable access to safe, effective and quality-assured medicines is critical not only for better health outcomes, but also for advancing UHC and strengthening financial protection for individuals and households.

The *Roadmap for WHO action 2025–2030* looks at factors that constrain access to safe, effective and quality-assured health products and technologies throughout the health product ecosystem. The road map emphasizes the importance of strong regulatory systems, efficient procurement and supply chains, market transparency and sustainable financing to overcome challenges. While some risks and market failures require solutions that are beyond the abilities of individual countries, strong national pharmaceutical systems remain the foundation. Targeted and voluntary collaboration can then add value by addressing clearly defined problems, complementing national systems and preserving national ownership and decision-making.

The Roundtable provides an opportunity for ministers and senior health leaders to exchange experiences, learn from regional and global initiatives, identify shared priorities and prioritize areas warranting further analysis and consultation. The discussion is exploratory and not intended to establish a specific regional mechanism.

2. ACCESS CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL AREAS FOR EXPLORATION

Many access challenges have both national and cross-border dimensions. Strong national pharmaceutical systems remain the foundation for sustainable access, while collaboration among countries may add value where shared constraints exceed the leverage of individual systems. The areas outlined are not exhaustive. They are intended more to promote and support discussion. Other areas for voluntary regional or subregional collaboration may be considered. Further exploration may help

identify areas in which coordinated action would complement national efforts, support more reliable access and reflect the diverse contexts of Member States, including Pacific island countries and areas.

2.1 Rapid access to rare and critical medical products

Antidotes, antitoxins, selected paediatric formulations, emergency medicines and other rare or low-volume products may have few suppliers, long lead times, short shelf lives or limited commercial appeal. Recent incidents demonstrate that such items are sometimes not available in-country when needed. While maintaining stocks in every country may be costly and increase expiry and wastage, reliance on ad hoc emergency procurement can delay treatment when rapid access to such low-volume products is essential.

Further exploration may help determine whether voluntary regional or subregional approaches can improve timely access to selected rare and critical medical products. Such approaches could include shared visibility of available stocks, advance arrangements with suppliers or strategically located reserves.

2.2 Regulatory reliance and collaborative registration pathways

Regulatory reliance occurs when regulatory authorities in one area take into account and give significant weight to assessments performed by other regulatory authorities or trusted institutions, or to any other authoritative information source, in reaching a decision.

Duplicative national assessments, differing documentation requirements and limited regulatory capacity can delay access to quality-assured products, particularly in small markets and during health emergencies. WHO-facilitated product introduction – including collaborative registration procedures for WHO-prequalified products and those approved by WHO Listed Authorities – offers voluntary pathways for faster, reliance-based national registration while preserving national responsibility for authorization and oversight.

Further exploration may identify opportunities for regional or subregional cooperation to make better use of existing WHO-facilitated pathways, exchange regulatory experience and build confidence in reliance-based approaches. This could support faster and more predictable access to quality-assured products, particularly where markets are small, regulatory resources are constrained or timely access is needed during emergencies.

2.3 Regional collaboration on shortages and supply security

Authorities may have incomplete or uneven information on manufacturing dependencies, supplier capacity, regional demand, inventories and emerging shortages. Definitions and reporting practices vary, and commercially sensitive information must be protected. These gaps may delay warnings of supply disruptions and limit assessments of alternative products, hindering efforts to pre-emptively address shortages.

Further regional collaboration may help improve awareness of emerging shortages, fragile markets and supply risks, particularly where individual countries have limited visibility or leverage. Areas for exploration to improve supply security may include more consistent exchange of market and supply information, collaborative assessment of emerging shortages and supply risks, and coordinated engagement with suppliers and procurement partners.

2.4 Demand aggregation and coordinated procurement approaches

Countries with smaller or fragmented markets may have difficulty attracting suppliers, obtaining reliable delivery or achieving competitive landed costs. Voluntary demand aggregation or coordinated procurement may improve forecasting, reduce transaction burdens and improve supplier services for selected products where countries have common needs and credible demand estimates.

Further exploration of aggregated demand and coordinated procurement may help determine where regional or subregional collaboration would improve market access, supplier engagement and value for money for selected products of shared priority. Areas for collaboration may include better visibility of country demand, more coordinated planning and procurement timelines, and voluntary approaches that strengthen negotiating leverage while respecting national purchasing decisions.

2.5 Regional preparedness to access relevant health products for public health emergencies

Public health emergencies, such as outbreaks of Ebola virus disease, mpox and COVID-19, demonstrate that access to critical health products depends not only on global supply. Timely and equitable access also depends on preparedness, coordination and delivery capacity at regional and national levels. Other regions have collaboratively advanced readiness for high-threat pathogen and pandemic-related products through WHO or other mechanisms such as regional entities. These approaches to secure access to health products for public health emergencies applied in different contexts offer valuable insights for enhancing operational readiness in the Western Pacific Region.

Addressing these challenges will build on the mandate, endorsed by the Regional Committee in October 2025, for Member States to participate in consultations and act on priorities to strengthen

the operational readiness of the Region for public health emergencies by implementing amendments to the International Health Regulations.

Further exploration may identify where voluntary regional or subregional collaboration can best support countries to strengthen readiness, better understand shared risks and priority needs, and connect national preparedness plans with emerging global arrangements for equitable access, supply chain coordination and benefit sharing.

3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The Regional Committee is invited to note persistent and evolving challenges affecting access to safe, effective, quality-assured and affordable medicines, vaccines, diagnostics and other health technologies in the Western Pacific Region.

The Regional Committee is further invited to provide guidance for future WHO and Member State consultations, evidence gathering and feasibility assessments for areas of voluntary regional or subregional collaboration and coordination to complement national efforts to address shared access challenges. This work may also include engagement with other partners to assist in assessing practical, legal, regulatory, financial and operational considerations in addressing these challenges.