

Advancing Universal Health Coverage in the Middle East and North Africa: the role of research, 16-17 December, Online

Introduction

The World Health Organization estimates that at least half of the world's population still lack full coverage of essential health services.¹ The global commitment towards achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) has been affirmed as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). UHC means that all individuals and communities should have access to the full spectrum of essential and effective health services including promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care without suffering financial hardship.

UHC is a cornerstone and pillar for sustainable development and an important step towards social inclusion and equity. With only 10 years remaining to meet the SDG target (reference), many low- and middle- income countries are making progress towards UHC, with most - including those in the Middle East and North Africa - attempting to implement strategies to ensure their whole population has access to essential health services of high quality, and are saved from the financial risk of impoverishment.

Establishing UHC depends on strong health systems with intra and intersectoral collaboration and aspects including: improving infrastructure; training the healthcare workforce; increasing the number and quality of health facilities from local clinics to hospitals; promotion, prevention and community orientated care; appropriate sustainable financing and good governance; developing information systems; and ensuring the supply of medicines and medical technologies.² However, a multitude of barriers and challenges exist which prevent the achievement of UHC, many of which are region specific, including contextual challenges inflicted by political instability, the undertaking of complex health reforms, and a spiralling burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD's)³. Some challenges and barriers are shared however, such as those posed by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Research is vital in developing the technology, systems and services needed to achieve UHC,⁴ and global support can help accelerate the attainment of this goal, through global and regional level research, information gathering, financial investment and technical assistance.

Current data also suggests that in many low- and middle-income countries, the quality of care provided is sub-optimal. Quality of care is defined by the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes, are person-centred and are in line with current health research knowledge. Furthermore, measuring and evaluating progress provides valuable insight for policymakers and is essential to improvement. Quality of care can be measured by seven elements of quality; **effectiveness**, safety, timeliness, equity, person-centeredness, care integration and efficiency.⁵ Many barriers exist which prevent health care workers, providers and policymakers from offering high quality health care, and research and evaluation is essential to determining opportunities and challenges, and assessing progress.

¹ The World Health Organization (2018). *Universal Health Coverage fact sheet*. [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-\(uhc\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-(uhc))

² The Academy of Medical Sciences (2016). *Improving the Health of the Public by 2040*.

³ World Bank (2015). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/02/12/scaling-up-universal-health-coverage-and-containing-non-communicable-diseases-in-mena>

⁴ The World Health Organisation. (2013). *Research for Universal Health Coverage*. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85761/9789240690837_eng.pdf;jsessionid=6EE10AFFE4BB39C56EE2F6474305BA8E?sequence=2

⁵ World Bank Group. Kieny MP et al. (2018). *Delivering quality health services: a global imperative for universal health coverage*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/482771530290792652/Delivering-quality-health-services-a-global-imperative-for-universal-health-coverage>

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An opportunity exists for quality of care to be built into the foundation of UHC and into policies, processes and institutions as health systems are developed and services scaled up. Further research, including health policy and systems and implementation research, is necessary to understand these barriers, better and drive innovation, and develop new approaches to transform low-quality health systems into high-quality systems.

The main objective of this workshop is to reflect on the state of progress towards UHC in the Middle East and North Africa, and to explore the role of research in advancing the UHC agenda and improving the quality of care provided, and opportunities to revisit the research agenda in the region in order to address key challenges in implementing quality UHC. Within this, it will aim to discuss how researchers can engage with policymakers across sectors to support the development, implementation and monitoring of evidence informed policies, and provide a platform for countries in the region to share best practice examples which have led to improved health coverage or increased quality of care, and knowledge of what hasn't worked well.

To achieve this, our aims are as follows:

- Provide a platform for experts to revisit the UHC research agenda in the Middle East and North Africa.
- Bring together evidence from countries in the region on progress towards effective UHC and explore shared opportunities for research to support advancements in the UHC agenda
- Identify country specific and shared research challenges and barriers that undermine progress to UHC.
- Identify actions, tools and strategies that could support a reshaped research agenda and accelerate progress towards delivery of high quality care for all.
- Discuss research priorities and solutions to overcome the identified barriers at a country and/or regional level.
- Provide a platform for multi-disciplinary experts to discuss how to better impact policy uptake through the use of science and investment in research and research leadership.

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Day Two: Strengthening Universal Health Coverage research in the Middle East and North Africa and incorporating quality of care

Day two of this workshop will bring together the different groups into one forum to: identify commonalities between groups; discuss pre-requisites and priorities for action; and explore mechanisms to support each other in setting out a pathway to potential solutions. The aim of this day will be to identify key opportunities and focus areas to strengthen UHC research capacity in the MENA region, explore how quality of care might be better incorporated into research, policy and practice, and ways to improve research-policy uptake to support the implementation of this agenda. It will include a series of short presentation examples of research efforts related to UHC in the region to share best practice and learnings, and highlight potential pathways forwards.

09:00-09:05	Welcome <i>Professor Dr Maha-El Rabbat; Professor Mike English FMedSci, Workshop co-Chairs</i>
09:05-10:10	Presentation Session - Examples of research informing the UHC agenda in the MENA region <i>Session Chair: Professor Mike English FMedSci</i> Panellists will give short talks on examples of research which has informed UHC interventions in the MENA region. Can include examples of research informing policy, digital solutions, improved research methodologies, building research capacity and networks. Speakers (5-6 presentations): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dr Mouna Jameleddine, <i>Head of the Health Technology Assessment department, Tunisian Authority of Assessment and Accreditation in Healthcare (TINS)</i> HBPs and technology assessment• Professor Richard Sullivan - <i>Professor of cancer and global health, King's College London</i> NCD's and outcomes in the Middle East with a focus on health in conflict• Dr. Mohanned Al-Nsour, <i>Executive Director, Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET)</i> MNCAH, family medicine and public health networks across the region• Professor Fadi El-Jardali, <i>Professor of Health Policy & Systems, American University of Beirut</i> Knowledge to policy translation• Dr Tasnim Atatrah, Q&A/ Panel discussion (15 mins)
10.10-10.55	Session 5: Breakout Group Presentations <i>Session Chair: Professor Dr Maha El-Rabbat</i>

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	<p>During this session, a representative of each breakout group will give a presentation on the key messages emerging from the discussions on Day one, including the priorities and prerequisites identified for impactful UHC research in MENA Region.</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <p>Breakout Group 1: (10 mins) <i>5 min clarifications</i></p> <p>Breakout Group 2: (10 mins) <i>5 min clarifications</i></p> <p>Breakout Group 3: (10 mins) <i>5 min clarifications</i></p>
10:55 – 11:25	<p><i>Group Discussion: Next steps and actions for research (30 mins)</i> <i>Session Chair: Professor Dr Maha El-Rabbat</i></p> <p>Following the morning's presentations, participants will have the opportunity to discuss all of the evidence, challenges and opportunities highlighted, including priorities and next steps. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions achievable in the short term (3-12 months) to help re-mobilise and scale-up UHC research efforts in the MENA region and future priorities • Actions achievable in the longer term (1-3 years) • Opportunities for multi-sectoral collaboration with key stakeholders and delivery partners, locally, regionally and internationally to put these actions into practice • Mechanisms to improve policy uptake of research (including key policy-relevant questions) and potential priorities for policy to ensure effective, evidence-based, accountable and quality UHC is embedded in the region <p>Session Outcome</p> <p>The output from this session will be up to seven common research areas to take forwards to achieve effective, evidence-based UHC in the Middle East and North Africa, along with the introduction of quality of care into this agenda. These will be jointly owned by all workshop participants along with agreement that they will be actioned upon their return to their home country.</p>
11:25 – 11:30	<p><i>Conclusions and wrap up</i> <i>Workshop co-chairs</i></p>

Steering Committee:

- **Professor Dr. Maha El-Rabbat (co-Chair)**, Professor of Public Health, Cairo University
- **Professor Mike English FMedSci (co-Chair)**, Principal Investigator, KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kenya; Professor of International Child Health, University of Oxford
- **Professor Kalipso Chalkidou**, Professor of Practice in Global Health, Imperial College London
- **Professor Fadi El-Jardali**, Professor of Health Policy & Systems, American University of Beirut
- **Dr ElSheikh Badr**, Policy Development Expert, National Qualifications Authority, UAE
- **Professor Dr Lubna Al-Ansary**, Professor, Dept. of Family & Community Medicine, King Saud University
- **Dr Awad Mataria**, Director of UHC/Health Systems WHO-EMRO