WHO and Sri Lanka: Celebrating 75 years of partnership for public health and well-being

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The year 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the creation of the World Health Organization (WHO), the establishment of the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, and the founding of Sri Lanka as a sovereign and independent state. It marks an opportunity to look back to where we have come from and a chance to look forward to the future as Sri Lanka, the WHO South-East Asia Region, and the world recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 1948 most of Europe was recovering from the Second World War, most of Africa was under colonial rule, and much of Asia was newly independent or would become so soon [1]. In Sri Lanka, health indicators showed a country struggling with high mortality rates, infectious diseases, inadequate quality of care, and inequitable access to essential health services [2]. Overall life expectancy in the country was relatively low, at just under 55 years. The median age was just 20 years. The maternal mortality ratio was around 1000 per 100,000 live births [3,4,5].

Today, the picture is vastly different. Life expectancy in Sri Lanka has surpassed 75 years [6]. Access to health care has significantly improved: Child immunization coverage has reached 99%; antenatal care coverage has exceeded 90%. Sri Lanka is among five countries in the South-East Asia Region to have achieved the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on reducing rates of under-5 and neonatal mortality [6]. It continues to be polio-free and has sustained the elimination of maternal and neonatal tetanus as a public health problem. Over the past decade, the country has eliminated malaria, lymphatic filariasis, mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis, and measles and rubella [7].

However, in the years ahead, Sri Lanka faces an array of challenges. Climate change will continue to increase the occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events and heighten the risk of vector-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria. Sri Lanka’s ageing population (aged over 60 years) – which is expected to increase from 14% of the population in 2017 to 22% by 2037 – will continue to shift disease burdens, requiring targeted, appropriate and sustainable models of care [8]. If unaddressed, inadequate human resources for health – intensified by inequitable global health workforce migration – will continue to impede healthcare delivery not just in Sri Lanka but across the Region and world.
Notably, Sri Lanka’s decades-long commitment to achieve universal health coverage (UHC) has helped limit the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the country’s ongoing economic crisis. In the recovery from both, and to effectively tackle present and emerging health challenges, Sri Lanka must continue to prioritise health and well-being – and UHC specifically – as both an input and output of sustainable social and economic development.

For this, increased public financing for health is required, not only to meet growing service demand but also to strengthen health system preparedness and resilience for future emergencies. Concurrently, the WHO is supporting health leaders to re-orient their health systems towards quality, accessible, affordable, and comprehensive primary health care (PHC) in alignment with the WHO Regional Strategy for PHC and the Region’s Build Back Better vision [9].

Across Sri Lanka, intensified action is especially needed to better integrate services for maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health at the PHC level. This is also the case for services for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs – including mental health – as highlighted by the Regional NCD Acceleration Roadmap, as well as the 2022 Paro Declaration on universal access to people-centered mental health care and services.

Opportunities to expand access to digital health technologies and tools should be vigorously grasped, alongside ongoing efforts to strengthen human resources for health, including the development of multi-skilled PHC teams. Crucially, health and political leaders should continue to build on the country’s whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to achieving UHC – the Regional Flagship Priority and SDG target that underpins all others.

Over the past three and a half years, Sri Lanka has shown remarkable resilience in the face of two unprecedented crises. With renewed determination, increased investments, strategic prioritisation, and strengthened international partnerships, Sri Lanka can now accelerate the recovery, with a focus on reorienting the health system towards quality, accessible, affordable, and comprehensive PHC to achieve UHC, health security and Health for All. Towards these goals, WHO reaffirms its solidarity and support, building on more than 75 years of science, solutions and success.

References
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