

منتدى السياسات الصحية في الشرق الأوسط وشمال افريقيا  
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA HEALTH POLICY FORUM



سياسات أفضل نحو صحة أفضل  
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER HEALTH

**Annual Regional Meeting**  
November 23, 2013  
Istanbul, Turkey

*FINAL REPORT*

## **Background**

The MENA Health Policy Forum (HPF) was established in 2008 as an independent, non-profit organization, with membership drawn from health policy researchers and experts from the MENA countries. Its mission is to contribute to the development of effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable policies that improve health and that mitigate adverse consequences of ill health, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged. It should be noted that the Forum is currently the only independent nongovernmental health policy network in existence covering the MENA region.

HPF is now in its fifth year of formal operation. Over the last year, the Forum has doubled its membership to currently comprise of over 70 health policy experts and researchers, including a range of relevant disciplines, from the middle and lower income countries of the region and from actual and potential sponsors.

HPF supports policy-relevant research and analysis, regional and country-level capacity building for policy-making, and networking and knowledge exchanges in health policy among its constituents. To this end, HPF seeks to influence policy development and dialogue: by commissioning and disseminating high quality original policy-relevant research and analysis; by building the national and regional capacity for sound independent policy relevant research and analysis; and by facilitating networking and exchange of ideas and experiences amongst those with an interest in health policy.

On November 23, 2014, the MENA HPF convened its annual regional meeting in Istanbul, Turkey. The meeting provided an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the core functions and activities that HPF will prioritize throughout 2014-2018, within the challenges and opportunities of the current historical juncture in the region. The meeting had four main objectives: (1) To understand the future of health system strengthening in the MENA region, and clarify MENA HFP's role (2) To develop new insights and understanding in health policy research within the current political economy context (3) To discuss opportunities and challenges related to creating a research policy evidence hub in the region; and (4) To identify priority areas of focus for MENA HPF's core functions in research, analysis, and networking.

This report provides a summary of the meeting's proceedings. The report is organized according to the sessions conducted during the meeting. The meeting's agenda, participant's list, and presentations can be found in the annexes.

### **A. Session I -- MENA HPF's Contribution to the Region's Policy Research Agenda**

Dr. Alejandra Gonzalez, Health Policy Consultant, presented her research commissioned by MENA HPF: "Paving the way for Fairness & Accountability: the Political Economy of Health Policy in the MENA Region."

The paper presents an analysis of the political economy of health policy governance in the MENA Region and its impact on current health policy making. The results of this analysis aim to establish those areas for future research that can contribute to the current policy dialogue in the MENA region about the needed transformation of state and social actors in their joint effort to seek better health status for the population. The report provides suggestions for a health policy research agenda for the region and provides a framework for analysis.

During the presentation, Dr. Gonzalez presented the following set of conditions that can bring about the transformation of health policy in the region:

1. New thinking: Country and regional institutional capacity
2. Joint effort: A new form of health policy governance
3. Reaching out: A stronger presence of health policy in the community.
4. Re-linking health to social development

The conditions address the fact that there is an abyss between policy and research, and there is a need for non-state actors to bridge the gap. Neither the state nor civil society will be able to address the health sector on its own. It is important to look at how state and society can complement each other in health.

*Group work:* Meeting participants were asked to work in groups to identify research areas and activities under each condition: defining lines for policy research and institutional capacity building in the field of political economy of health policy and health governance. The outcomes of the discussions will be included in the final report due to MENA HPF following the meeting. The report's abstract, and full presentation is attached to this report.

### *Discussion*

Following the presentation, participants asked clarification questions and provided feedback to the research approach and analysis. Below outlines the key discussion areas following the presentation:

- ❑ Equal opportunities for and distribution of health will lead to the achievement to the four conditions for health policy transformation in the region
- ❑ There needs to be further contextualization of region and its impact on political economies of health. We cannot just import a model from outside. For example, the role of bilateral and multilateral donors in the region, politicization of civil society, conflict, and accountability needs to be addressed.
- ❑ Many countries have good primary health care; however policy makers see that tertiary care is what is needed.
- ❑ The private sector, is growing both in terms of volumes of services provided, and the amount of resources absorbed (out of pockets expenditures)
- ❑ The four areas of focus should not carry the same weight, and the framework/model may need to be better detailed.
- ❑ Though countries are “independent,” policy choices are not always made within countries.

It was further discussed that MENA HPF can and should play a role in bridging civil society and governance by bringing researchers, academics, and scientists, together with policy makers. There needs to be effective policy dialogue bringing all stakeholders together.

## B. Session II: Becoming a Health Policy Evidence Hub in the Region

During this session, members discussed opportunities and challenges related to creating a research policy evidence hub in the region.

MENA HPF was invited last year to attend the European Observatory annual meeting in Brussels as observers. Dr. Salwa Najjab and Dr. Nadeem Alduaij attended on behalf of the forum. During the 2013 MENA HPF annual regional meeting, Dr. Alduaij presented “Issues to Consider in Creating a Health Policy Hub in the MENA Region.’ Dr. Alduaij presented an overview of the European Observatory, and a series of thoughts and suggestions for consideration by the MENA HPF on the implications for the Forum’s role as a regional authority of the European experience. Dr. Alduaij highlighted the steps to moving forward

1. Define our target audience.
2. Define how we collect and disseminate evidence.
3. Define a research agenda and key set of cost-effective products.
4. Identify a management team and dependable partners.
5. Identify operational cost-savings.

### *Discussion*

During the discussion that followed, MENA HPF members shared knowledge and thoughts for MENA HPF’s future strategic vision and direction regarding evolving into a regional observatory for health systems and policies.

- ❑ The idea of an observatory is not new to the region. In 2000, WHO established the EMRO Regional Health Observatory. Efforts to create national observatories that feed into a regional observatory did not work as countries did not want to publish everything. Collaborating institutions also wanted money to prepare the work. They tried to get funds through the European Union, however did not succeed.
- ❑ Critical to the success of an observatory is: (1) securing a steady stream of funding (2) willingness of policy makers to provide access to data and (3) commitment from collaborating institutions. Some primary questions asked included: who are the clients? Where does the money come from? How can we measure impact? How do we know that we are affecting policy? How do we attract policy makers?
- ❑ *Mapping.* In order to attract policy makers, we need to understand who they are. We do not know this yet. The place to start is by mapping out stakeholders in the Region.
- ❑ *Funding.* Funding should primarily come from within the region first. We can look to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, who may be willing to contribute finances. Part of the strategy should include creating partnerships with 2 or 3 funders in the region, and working on a few projects to start. The private sector in the region has a vested interest in health, and need proper political understanding in order to contribute effectively.
- ❑ *Data.* Accessing data is always a problem. MENA HPF should think creatively, and use different approaches and methodologies, for example, using patients and users to generate data.
- ❑ *Research and products.* It is ambitious to produce national reports. MENA HPF should do more than just disseminate information; it should market the information—use the media and reach people and civil society, not just policy makers. Analysis is important; however how the analysis is translated into action is more important. HPF

can be unique in shaping data to build advocacy on health policy issues. HPF may also consider focusing more on capacity building and developing branded guidelines, national policy forums, and more products.

- ❑ *Reaching health policy makers.* Policy makers represent stakeholders, including pharmaceuticals and insurance companies. To affect real impact/change/need, MENA HPF must widen the base of stakeholders to include all those who have interest in health. MENA is coalition of top-notch professionals—when the WHO, for example, looks for people to conduct research, they should look at MENA HPF for that knowledge.
- ❑ *Institutionalizing MENA HPF.* In order to move forward, MENA HPF needs to institutionalize and develop itself as an organization. Building an organization is like building a company. MENA HPF needs management structure and staff, and to develop a business plan. There is a lot of evidence out there, and MENA HPF can capitalize on what has already been collected.

### **C. Session III: Understanding Health System Trends in the Region and the role of MENA HPF as a Civil Society Actor**

MENA HPF’s development partners — World Bank and WHO — presented their strategies for health systems strengthening in the MENA Region.

**Dr. Tamer Rabie**, Senior Health Specialist at the World Bank, presented the World Bank’s 2014-2018 strategy: “Fairness and Accountability: Engaging in Health Systems in the Middle East and North Africa.” Dr. Rabie’s presentation centered around four main questions: (1) why is the World Bank developing a health strategy for the MENA region, (2) how can MENA’s health systems be made more fair and accountable, (3) what World Bank products contribute to fairness and accountability in health?, and (4) What is the process for implementation? The presentation, which includes the detailed answers to these questions, is attached in Annex C of this report.

**Dr. Awad Mataria**, Health Economist, at WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), presented the WHO’s Strategy to move toward Universal Health Coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The presentation highlighted the Priority Areas for WHO’s work with its Member States in EMR: 2012-16. It provided an overview of health system strengthening and universal health coverage, explaining what it is, how it can be monitored, where the region stands, and what the challenges are. Following this discussion, Dr. Mataria presented the strategic directions and actions to pursue universal health coverage in the region. Concluding messages and presentation details can be found in the attached presentation, found in Annex D.

### **D. Conclusions and The Way Forward**

The closing panel consisted of Dr. Raeda Al Qutob (founding member MENA HPF), and Dr. Nabil Kronfol (Chair of the Technical Advisory Committee). Below summarizes the conclusions and way forward discussed at the MENA HPF regional annual meeting.

**Dr. Raeda Al Qutob** presented a brief strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis of the Forum, summarized in the table below:

<b>Strengths</b> Diverse backgrounds in the Forum Contributions of the WHO and World Bank	<b>Weaknesses</b> Lack of operational management Lack of sustainable financing (countries are not contributing to the Forum) Lack of channels and linkages with policy leaders
<b>Opportunities</b>  “Arab Spring” brings a call for justice, freedom and fairness: working opportunities for the Forum to affect change  Financial crisis: MENA HPF can not afford to be inefficient  Demographic shift in age: youth bulge is looking forward to better work opportunities  Globalization is an added opportunity to reach the youth and informal sector  WHO and World Bank complimentary strategies. Everyone is speaking the same language: fairness, sustainable, effective, and accountable.	<b>Threats</b>  Lack of continuous financing  Changing political climate

Within this context how can we attain the objectives of the forum?

*Monitoring and information hub:* MENA HPF needs to be staffed with proper management in order to become a regional monitoring and information hub. However, MENA HPF can begin working immediately to strengthen existing experiences such as the models in Morocco, Egypt, and Palestine. It can start working on and strengthening local national information hubs, and by the time operations are strengthened, can build towards an observatory.

The Forum website needs to be upgraded, with interactive modalities which will meet demand for information. Having a solid management structure in place is critical to ensuring information is updated and accessible.

*Knowledge/research:* Having a research model or framework is a good starting point. MENA HPF needs to work on advocacy.

*Capacity building:* The Forum needs to identify priority areas for capacity building, such as advocacy and policy making.

*Institutional Development:* An executive body needs to be established to implement what was discussed and carry it forward. The Forum needs to complete registration in Egypt, which is taking a long time. MENA HPF needs to develop a business plan.

**Dr. Nabil Kronfol** highlighted that there has been movement forward for the Forum. The Forum has, over the years, become a more stable group, exerting effort to really develop its brand and strategic vision. There have been lots of difficulties in registration, management and administration of the Forum. Credit is extended to the temporary arrangement that is keeping the Forum afloat.

It is worth working towards a European Observatory model, which consists of descriptive and analytic components on health systems, as well as capacity building. It would be relevant to the work of the Forum to develop national and regional tools.

It is impressive that two major institutions—the World Bank and WHO—are very supportive of the Forum, and have clear strategies that mirror what the Forum is striving for.

MENA HPF needs to learn from successful stories of policy change. One of the success stories in policy change has been the tobacco law in Lebanon. What did it take to succeed? It took hard work by a credible coalition including parliament, the American University of Beirut (AUB), multi-disciplinary group, civil service coalitions, and a champion. Other examples include policy briefs that changed the nature of palliative care, legislation for narcotics, and reimbursement for caregivers.

MENA HPF does not need to wait for major sources of funding to work. All members bring their own networks, knowledge, and expertise to start working now. The Technical Advisory Committee, which is responsible for membership will focus on identifying and bringing in members with competencies outside of the health sector.

#### **E. Comments, feedback and recommendations from the Forum**

A lively discussion followed the conclusions and way forward presentations. Below summarizes the main discussion points raised by MENA HPF members.

- ❑ Suggest building on the WHO EMRO observatory that already exists Forum can review information to ensure that it is updated, carry out comparative studies, develop policy briefs, and conduct trainings on health economics and health policy.
- ❑ The Political Economies presentation highlighted a niche for a forum. With strategic alliances such as the WHO and World Bank, the forum can really achieve results.
- ❑ HPF needs to build partnerships at the national level; this will open doors towards greater dialogue, discussion, and advocacy at the national level.
- ❑ The discussions during the regional meeting have been very important. It is important for MENA HPF to identify its niche and position itself in the region.
- ❑ If MENA HPF wants to make a difference in health policy, it needs to focus on the determinants of health: biological, economic, and social.
- ❑ MENA HPF should learn and build on the previous experiences, lessons learned, and best practices of other countries, for example in family health.
- ❑ Members need to be seen as relevant and engaged, and need to learn and empower each other. There should be more opportunities available to members to meet, speak, learn from one another, and document best practices. It would be interesting to take a look at the Global Health Delivery Initiative, which used case studies to document best practices.
- ❑ The Forum should divide up into scientific or technical groups to collect data and resources from their own countries. This can also Use the Forum as a platform for advisory and fundraising support.
- ❑ MENA HPF needs to work on its visibility and linking with professional nonprofit organizations. An electronic newsletter and e-network such as Public Health in the Arab World (managed by AUB) is something that can be started now.