

Summary Notes

Post COVID-19: How can countries in the South work together to strengthen health systems around reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health

Wednesday, 24 June 2020

9:00 - 10:30 EST

In alignment with the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, and UNOSSC organized a webinar on how countries of the South will be able to work together during the post-COVID-19 period in strengthening health systems with a particular focus on the delivery of quality primary health care services with an emphasis on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH).

The webinar gathered a panel of experts from government and youth sectors in countries of the South to discuss how countries can work together to overcome challenges by benefitting from the knowledge and experiences of each other. The panelists also outlined their views on how countries can continue to remain on track to deliver the 2030 Agenda in the Decade of Action. The overall aim of the webinar is to enable a global exchange of experiences to improve the effectiveness of the interventions and to enable UN agencies to both identify and respond to the expectations and needs of countries in tackling the challenges of COVID-19 in post-recovery.

The webinar was moderated by **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, Deputy Director, UN Office for South-South Cooperation, and the panel was formed by the following speakers:

- **Mr. Jorge Chediek**, Director of UNOSSC and Envoy of the UN Secretary General for South-South Cooperation
- **Ms. Michelle Belfor**, Youth Advocate, Suriname
- **Mr. Ezequiel Vólquez Medina**, Director General of the Administration of Social Protection Subsidies of the Dominican Republic- on behalf of the Vice President of the Dominican Republic
- **Mr. Ghafur Muhsinzoda**, First Deputy Minister for Health and Social Protection of the Population, Tajikistan
- **Dr. Shahinaz Bedri**, Director General, National Public Health Laboratory, Ministry of Health, Sudan
- **Dr. Sanjo Oladepo Faniran**, Deputy Director in charge of Human Capital, Social Dev. Division, Ministry of Budget and National Planning, Nigeria
- **Mr. Hu Hongtao**, Advisor on South-South Cooperation, National Health Commission, China

The webinar began with the moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, Deputy Director of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation, recalling the title and objectives of the webinar as well as the 4 sponsoring UN Agencies, UNOSSC, UNFPA, UNICEF and PAHOWHO. She welcomed the panelists as well as the attendees of the event, and shared housekeeping arrangements for a successful conduction of the webinar.

The moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, introduced the subject-matter of the webinar by recalling that the right to life is a fundamental human right, and that maternal and child health are at the heart of SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing. She noted that although progress has been made, achieving the SDG targets remains a major challenge, referencing WHO reports, which highlight that every year 300,000 women die due to preventable causes during pregnancy. Regarding under-five mortality rates, she stressed the

continuous challenge, despite achieving important reductions in recent years. She noted the need to redouble efforts in light of the impact of the current pandemic and underlined the experiences in some countries where essential health services, such as maternal and child health, have been incorporated into their COVID-19 response. She invited panelists and participants to share their experiences, their perspectives and their expectations from the global south, as well as to better facilitate and support countries working together, under the principles of solidarity, in order to reach collective solutions to this global challenge.

The opening remarks were delivered by **Mr. Jorge Chediak**, Director of UNOSSC and Envoy of the UN Secretary General for South-South Cooperation. He highlighted the relevance of the event as one of the paths to promote exchange among countries from the global south and “build back better”. He welcomed the panelists and thanked the organizing UN agencies. He recalled that within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, maternal health targets were not achieved and remain a challenge particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. He also noted the negative socio-economic effects of the pandemic, thus exacerbating maternal and child health. Likewise, he noted the importance of capitalizing on the experiences and accelerate the progress in the post-COVID context. He made reference to recent publications from The Lancet regarding the devastating impact on maternal and child health as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He also highlighted existing good practices in the health sector and reiterated the UN System’s commitment to increase efforts in the promotion of south-south cooperation.

Before introducing the panelists, the moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, outlined the guiding questions for the intervention of the panelists: (i) what do countries in the Global South expect from the UN system and/or specific UN agencies in supporting Member-States in achieving their SDGs in a post-COVID world? (ii) how could the UN support countries in strengthening their health systems, especially on reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH) in a post-COVID world?; (iii) how many countries, with facilitation of the UN, leverage South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) in strengthening their health systems to achieve MCH goals, again, in a post-COVID world?

Ms. Michelle Belfor, Youth Advocate, Suriname, noted the importance for the UN to analyze the social and economic impact the pandemic, which started as a health crisis but has had an impact on all aspects of life, including access to sexual reproductive health services, education, and other social services. She stressed the need for the UN Agencies, Fund and Programs to analyze and respond from the various perspectives impacted because of the pandemic, including actions at country, regional and global levels. She noted that COVID-19 has revealed the weaknesses in the current systems of Latin America and the Caribbean particularly related to technology and education. This has been a great challenge, especially for the youth as there is no infrastructure and measures in place to support long distance learning arrangement. She highlighted the opportunity the webinar brings to come together and tackle this issue in a collective manner and with the support of the UN, under the framework of south-south cooperation, bringing people together to share knowledge. She reiterated the role of the UN as a convener and a broker, bringing resources together to facilitate exchange. Specifically, on maternal health and sexual reproductive health and rights, she called for UN agencies to increase advocacy efforts to protect youth and other vulnerable population. She stressed the need to invest in the youth populations as they will play a vital role in the achievement of the SDG’s. She also highlighted the importance of ICT services as an enabler for remote and vulnerable populations to access education and health services. She invited the participants to look beyond the health perspective and seize opportunities for economic development such as the demographic dividend. She concluded by noting the global and cross-border nature of the current challenges, and thus the need for the UN to use its convening power and facilitate knowledge sharing and implementing strategies.

Mr. Ezequiel Vólquez Medina, Director General of the Administration of Social Protection Subsidies of the Dominican Republic, thanked the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, UNFPA, UNICEF and PAHO for convening this webinar in a time when reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health has been profoundly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic that threatens the lives and livelihoods of us all. He delivered his remarks on behalf of the Vice President of the Dominican Republic. He noted that in order to position countries in order to achieve the SDG's, both the UN and Member States, should revamp and accelerate efforts across the board. He noted that the pandemic is reverting development gains in public health, education, nutrition, and warned that getting back on track will require new ways of thinking, new ways of delivering technical cooperation, new ways of developing and implementing public policy. He concluded by noting that this is the framework where South-South cooperation plays a very important role on the post-COVID world.

Dr. Shahinaz Bedri, Director General, National Public Health Laboratory, Ministry of Health, Sudan discussed maternal child health and reproductive services, geared towards what laboratories and the public health sector has to offer. She acknowledged that COVID-19 will be staying with us for quite a bit more, perhaps up until summer of 2021, and focused on the current context post-lockdown. She noted the complex series of issues linked to health, wellness, social and economic impacts. When discussing maternal and child health services in Sudan, she highlighted there is a need to take into account more than just maternal mortality and infant mortality numbers, such as micronutrients. She noted that primary health care centers now deal with preventive health education, health promotion tools, thus moving away from the curative, and underlined the need for the portfolio of services to expand to other essential services such as screening programs, STDs and NCD's, knowing that the world is prone to other pandemics and re-surge of COVID-19. With the support of UN agencies, the country has been able to offer a hotline to provide psychiatric and psychotherapy for the population. The current country context of Sudan was outlined and shows very strong pandemic impact in the last couple of months with a death rate of 5-7%, with over 500 deaths and 10,000 infected, although noting under registration because of lack of access to testing.

more than 5% it goes between five to 7% and our death rate. This has resulted in an impact to the delivery of essential health services, including those that deliver maternal and child health services. She mentioned the hybrid approach to the management of the pandemic in the country (case management and preventative) while recognizing the support of the UN system and well as the south-south networks that the country has established, thanks to ICT tools and e-learning opportunities.

Mr. Ghafur Muhsinzoda, First Deputy Minister for Health and Social Protection of the Population, Tajikistan started by highlighting the close collaboration with UN agencies and international cooperation agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared the country's experience in reaching vulnerable populations, especially mothers, and children in remote areas. He noted that access in urban areas to maternal and child health services were not affected. In terms of maternal mortality rate and neonatal mortality rate, he noted no particular deviation from the current trends, and concluded that they were stable given the current context. In terms of the pandemic numbers the country has more than 4000 COVID-19 patients. The country has developed protocols to separate newborns from infected mothers. HE reiterated the interest in exchanging experiences of treatment of COVID-19 patients.

Dr. Sanjo Oladepo Faniran, Deputy Director in charge of Human Capital, Social Dev. Division, Ministry of Budget and National Planning, Nigeria thanked UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO/WHO, UNOSSC, PPD and the organizing team of the webinar. He noted that south-south cooperation is an important strategy to addressing the current challenges. During COVID-19 Nigeria declared that free services for pregnancy and delivery. He explained the use of south-south network opportunities provided in the membership of Partners in Population and Development of National Taskforce to aggressively give special attention to

reproductive health and maternal child healthcare both during the COVID-19 and preparation for post COVID. He expressed his optimism that the MoUs signed by PPD with UNFPA and UNOSSC would accelerate the implementation of ICPD PoA and SDGs. He encouraged UN Agencies to reinforce their interventions in developing countries to improve health systems through Institutional and individual capacity building and sharing of best practices. He noted that countries of the South can share experiences using virtual technology on tackling COVID-19 and learn from good practices targeted at addressing COVID-19 pandemic, and best practices on strategic approach to tackling issues relating to MCH can also be replicated among the countries of the South. Additionally, south-south cooperation can be scaled up by donors and development partners in support of the countries of the South. He also invited UN agencies to support countries of the South in the following aspects: (i) Support technology that enhances healthcare delivery services to be replicated among countries of the South which includes; (ii) Support the development of a policy framework that addresses maternal and child health using technology; (iii) Support Digital Expo by supporting the establishment of digital exhibition center; (iv) Support a National Database for Systemic coordination and systemic dataflow in the health sector; (v) Conduct assessment of leadership and governance of healthcare delivery system; (vi) Support national logistics master plan. He concluded by encouraging and supporting an effective south-south cooperation as a collaborative system of achieving results across board to achieve SDGs.

Mr. Hu Hongtao, Advisor on South-South Cooperation, National Health Commission, China, highlighted the importance of this exchange as part of the essential and fundamental elements of south-south cooperation, particularly in the context of a global pandemic. He noted that uncertainty is one of our biggest challenges and therefore experience sharing among developing countries is very important. In acknowledging the next context he recognized that in addition to the traditional in-person seminars dialog and best practices, we should take advantage of new technologies, such as webinars and workshop, as well as social media. He knotted that in the past two months the China National Health Commission and PPD have successfully organized the two thematic webinars on maternal and child health attended by a total of nearly 700 participants. He also recalled the importance of technical guidance, referencing the amount of misinformation, and encouraged UN agencies to organize more research on maternal and child health to support the response to the challenges of post COVID-19, noting that the role of UN agencies cannot be replaced by others. Capacity building has also highlighted as one of the important aspects, as there is a need to translate the SDG's to specific actions, and thus capable human resources for effective implementation. Capacity building through south-south cooperation is a cost-effective manner to achieve these objectives. He stressed that no country can face this challenge alone and highlighted the importance of partnerships and highlighted the agreement with the Chinese South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund to implement innovative practices for the reduction of maternal mortality. He concludes by referencing the importance of sustainable financing, noting that there will an important financial gap to finance the achievements of the SDG's. He highlighted the joint UNDP-China publication on SDG taxonomy, which constitutes an innovative tool for resource mobilization.

The moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, highlighted the interactions in the chat and read some of the questions for the participants to answer: (i) during this pandemic countries with weak health systems and services, and had to postpone ANC services, what is the best strategy or suggestion to increase the utilization rate in countries?; (ii) in Nicaragua there are significant challenges to mobilizing resources to address COVID-19, one of the main reasons is due to funding restrictions from traditional donor countries, so how would you address this challenge and what is the advice from the panel? (iii) what are the suggestion in the experience with diasporas and local civil society groups, and the opportunities linked to resource

mobilization?; (iv) Do countries have advice and examples of how they adjust the needs of people with disabilities?

Ms. Michelle Belfor, answered the specific question on the diaspora specifically for Suriname. She noted that the diaspora that lives abroad is almost as big as the population, and that there has been a lot of support from the diaspora abroad, as well as civil organizations and the private sector. She acknowledged that at this moment, the country is supporting its population as people have lost their jobs. She noted the importance of working with civil society organizations to better work at community level and can better respond to their needs. She also referenced diaspora living abroad as possible funding sources for vulnerable groups.

Dr. Shahinaz Bedri made reference to question of resource mobilization in a context where traditional donors do not provide resources and noted that in Sudan is a is a country that still has a sanctions and embargo from the United States. She recognized that emergency funds from various organizations can be used to address the current situation.

Mr. Hu Hongtao, responded to the question about financial a resource mobilization issue, noting that it was a very difficult question. He recognized that there are new ways of resource mobilization, beyond ODA, and pointing to emerging economics (i.e. BRICS). He also made reference to the newly established Chinese institutions such as China South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund and the China International Development Cooperation Agency. He also highlighted the Chinese funds destined to support COVID-19 response. Two things were highlighted in terms of strategy: (i) innovation – seek for innovative projects/solutions; (ii) resources – both technical and human resources

The moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, proceeded to read another series of questions for the panelist to answer: (i) in your respective countries, do you have data on the percentage reduction in access to MCH services and shout out services to COVID-19?; (ii) we talk about south-south cooperation and the international partnership, how can countries be supported to be self-sustainable in the production of PPE's, drugs, supplies and expertise to address this and future pandemics; (iii) how will UNOSSC follow-up on the recommendations of the panelists that can advance south-south cooperation with partners; (iv) how will the organizers come together to promote south-south cooperation in developing countries to improve maternal and child health, and to respond to post COVID-19?

Mr. Ezequiel Vólquez Medina, Director General of the Administration of Social Protection Subsidies of the Dominican Republic recalled how south-south and triangular cooperation has continued to increase in magnitude and scope in the region of the Americas, particularly in the health sector. He noted that a key area where the UN System can support Member States in leveraging south-south and triangular cooperation, both from the offer and the demand sides, is to eliminate the barriers for these exchanges, which can come in a variety of manners: (i) The need for a global perspective and facilitating exchanges at a global level; (ii) Strategic partnerships and investments, best value for our money is a must, and in that sense, south-south and triangular cooperation can help us achieve that objective; (iii) Evolving cooperation in strengthening health systems in developing countries. He invited all participants to learn from each other and adapt their achievements to our own context. He thanked the Organizers for convening the webinar on such critical issues.

Ms. Michelle Belfor, answered the question on the data on the percentage of reduction in access to maternal and child health services. She recognized the need to collect data as there is none readily available, although there has certainly been a reduction.

Mr. Jorge Chediek made reference to the question on south-south cooperation noting that the UN system is working on a coordinated strategy to support south-south and triangular cooperation. Regarding this specific proposals and support, he highlighted the South-South Galaxy as a knowledge sharing and partnership creating space. UNOSSC is also convening think tanks in a joint initiative with UNDP. UNOSSC is also mobilize funds, highlighting the India-UN Development funds. He reiterated the commitment to continue to work together.

The moderator, **Ms. Xiajun Grace Wang**, concluded by quickly summarizing the highlights of the panelist's interventions, as they relate to the guiding questions of the webinar. She noted that both the panelists as well as the participants emphasized the importance of the issue of maternal and child health in the context of this pandemic and raised awareness about the possible implications within the pandemic. The panelists shared their experience on addressing this challenge with a particular focus on vulnerable populations. Additionally, panelists called on UN Agencies to leverage their role a convener and facilitate knowledge exchange, with the capacity to analyze, differentiate and adapt possible solution to common challenges. The panelists also acknowledged the importance of working beyond the health sector, and the need to address the all of the social determinants of health, such as education, bridging the digital divide, environmental determinants, among others.

Finally, south-south cooperation was recognized a modality of cooperation that can bring down barriers and promote stronger solidarity among countries. The organizing agencies, UNOSSC, UNFPA, UNICEF and PAHO/WHO committed to continue promoting south-south and triangular cooperation in the areas of policy coordination, capacity development, networking and adaptation of best practices and lessons learned that would lead to the achievement of health related objectives at the national, regional and global levels.

She thanked the panelists and the organizing UN agencies for convening the webinar.