

Summary Notes

DG Forum Side Event: Role of SSTC in Sustaining Primary Health Care, RMNCH, and Universal Health Coverage in the Context of COVID-19

Thursday, 25 March 2021, 8:00-9:30am EST

As a side event to the 12th Edition of the High-Level Forum of Directors-General for Development Cooperation (DG Forum), a webinar on **the Role of South-South and Triangular Cooperation in sustaining Primary Health Care (PHC), Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH), and Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in the context of COVID-19** was held, on 25 March 2021. The side-event was jointly organized by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The webinar brought together experts and practitioners from many different regions of the global South to discuss issues related to South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) and SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being). The panelists outlined their views on the role of SSTC in responding to COVID-19 and supporting the delivery of essential health services during and post-pandemic, and explored how governments could further contribute to promoting country-to-country learning and exchange of knowledge. The overall objective of the webinar was to provide a platform to follow up the DG Forum conclusions, identify a limited number of strategic and focus actions over the next two years, and enable a global exchange of experiences to strengthen SSTC for PHC, RMNCH and UHC in the context of COVID-19.

The webinar was moderated by **Dr. Gerry Eijkemans**, Chief of the Health Promotion Unit, PAHO/WHO, and the panel was formed by the following speakers:

- **Mr. Adel Abdellatif**, Director a.i., UNOSSC
- **Dr. Wessam Mankoula**, Lead of Africa CDC Emergency Operations Center
- **Dr. Luis González Machado**, Director General of the National Health Board of Uruguay
- **Dr. Habib Ghedira**, Président-Directeur Général, Tunisian National Office for Family and Population
- **Mr. Wattanawit Gajaseni**, Acting Director-General, Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand
- **Mr. Anir Chowdhury**, Policy Advisor, a2i Programme, ICT Division/Cabinet Division, UNDP Bangladesh and Advisor of the South-South Network for Public Service Innovation (SSN4PSI)
- **Ms. Anjali Sen**, UNFPA Representative to Indonesia

The webinar began with the moderator, **Dr. Gerry Eijkemans**, recalling the subject-matter and objectives of the webinar as a side event to the DG Forum as well as the 4 sponsoring UN Agencies - UNOSSC, UNFPA, UNICEF and PAHO/WHO.

The opening remarks were delivered by **Mr. Adel Abdellatif**, Director a.i. of UNOSSC, who welcomed the panelists, thanked the organizing UN agencies and highlighted the essential role of SSTC in promoting knowledge exchange and capacity building to “build back better” among countries from the global South in the context of COVID-19. He briefly introduced the work of UNOSSC during 2020, including a South-South Galaxy mapping of the COVID-19 response by health authorities in the global South to enable quick access to information, and initiatives from the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation (IBSA Fund), the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, the United Nations Fund for South-South Cooperation (UNFSSC) and other fund facilities to respond rapidly to the pandemic. According to preliminary statistics, almost 12 million US dollars have been mobilized through these channels in fast track to supply protective equipment and mitigate socio-economic impacts in 31 countries in the global South. Mr. Abdellatif reiterated the importance of leveraging SSTC at various levels to confront challenges and made reference to the recent publication of *Good Practices in SSTC for Sustainable Development – Vol. 3 (2020)*, which dedicates a chapter on SDG3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and the over 30 SSTC Solutions on COVID-19 response and recovery available on South-South Galaxy. He also encouraged the use of three platforms managed by UNOSSC for sharing knowledge and best practices: South-South Galaxy, South-South Global Thinkers and Global South-South Development Expo.

Panel Discussion

Dr. Wessam Mankoula briefly introduced epistemological situation of COVID-19 in Africa and outlined its impact on essential health services. So far, there are more than 4 million confirmed cases reported in Africa, with over 110,000 confirmed deaths and over 3.7 million recoveries. He acknowledged that effects of COVID-19 on essential health services in Africa have been severe, with the highest missed services among women, people aged more than 36 years old, urban dwellers, lower income responders and those with long-standing diseases. Furthermore, the pandemic has greatly blocked access of women and girls to reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health services (RMNCH), due to the fear of catching COVID-19, health facility disruption and cost of care. To address these challenges, as he outlined, Africa CDC adopted a six-pronged approach by endorsing: (i) Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak to strengthen continental-wide cooperation, communication, and coordination between member states; (ii) Africa Task Force for Coronavirus (ATFCOR) to form steering committee and working groups comprising representatives of government, public health and research institutions, multilateral organizations and NGOs for a better coordination and surveillance framework on risk communication and policy guidance on continuation of essential health service; (iii) Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing in Africa (PACT) which has enabled all the countries in Africa to conduct COVID-19 testing by mobilizing experts, community workers and suppliers through capacity building and training; (iv) Africa Medical Supplies Platform (AMSP) which serves as a one-stop online marketplace for procurement and supply of related medicines and medical equipment; (v) COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy, with the aim to ensure Africa’s access to vaccine supply and its at-scale delivery; and (vi) harmonized, standardized and coordinated entry/exit requirements through digital solution. Dr. Mankoula finally highlighted the urgent need for Africa to implement its

vaccine strategy collectively, with a focus on financing, in order to vaccinate 60% of the population in the continent.

Dr. Luis González Machado noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has become a systemic problem at global, regional and national level and exceeds the scope and the competencies of the health sector of many countries. Despite lack of pandemic expertise in the past, Uruguay has developed a concise strategy in a very rapid way in response to the health crisis. He shared several key components of the strategy deployed by Uruguay: (i) high-level leadership, which brings in all important stakeholders and best experts to build credibility and ensure good capacity for resolution; (ii) strong commitment to innovation. Uruguay has established an agreement with the academic sector, the Pasteur Institute and other key research organizations to develop a national Uruguayan PCR testing methodology by using highly effective biomolecule technology, which enables the country to engage in mass testing campaigns and address the diagnostic needs of the population; (iii) strengthening of a national health system, which was supported by broader participation of private sector and medical professional organizations and which was geared towards a unified health policy including national and general coverage criteria; (iv) good use of digital communication tools. Telemedicine and a number of new digital platforms have been rapidly developed; and (v) knowledge sharing through partnerships. Uruguay partnered with Chile on vaccination effort and engaged actively with PAHO, Japan and other countries to learn from early successes.

Dr. Habib Ghedira highlighted the role of SSTC as a strategy in socio-economic progress and the importance of knowledge sharing among countries of the global South, given the social, economic and cultural similarities and the common challenges they face. He reaffirmed Tunisia's resolute commitment to support SSTC in achieving the SDGs and appreciated the strong partnership between UN agencies and Tunisian National Office for Family and Population, which has cumulated many successful stories in sexual and reproductive health since its establishment in 1973. He acknowledged many existing challenges in Tunisia such as soaring unemployment rates, economic difficulties, deterioration of public services, and most severely, the COVID-19, as it constitutes a great risk to vulnerable groups of women, victims of gender based violence, people living with HIV, migrants and refugees. He pointed out that, although Tunisia has seen progress in containing the spread of the virus with its early measures of lockdown and border closing, these measures have brought dramatic effects on economic performance and access to reproductive health service. He then shared some actions taken by Tunisian government to address these issues while resuming public activities gradually: it partnered with UN agencies to develop a joint communication strategy to raise awareness among the general population about the importance of the continuity of essential health services, including maternal, neonatal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, prenatal and postnatal services, essential obstetric and neonatal care, health of women at productive age, access to contraceptive methods and emergency contraception; Furthermore, the government optimized the use of new digital technologies and tools, such as video conferencing and virtual workshops, for business continuity and commitments. Educational web and smartphone applications have also been established to raise awareness among adolescent and young children on how to protect themselves against COVID-19.

Mr. Wattanawit Gajasen provided the perspective of Development Cooperation Agencies and their key role in managing governments' SSTC priorities including in the health sector. He articulated the emerging role of countries like Thailand in the development cooperation landscape and the aim of TICA to improve preparedness for emerging diseases, ensure calm public health measures in place, and share knowledge from the frontline, management, clinical and patient care. He shared lessons learned by TICA in supporting good health and wellbeing through SSTC. Firstly, make good use of international platforms and best practices, and raise absorptive ability at local level. Secondly, take advantage of challenges and turn them into a unique knowledge. The management of knowledge and know-how has to be systematized and coordinated at both central and local levels for future use. Thirdly, promote active participation of the population to ensure the success and sustainability of development cooperation. Thailand has engaged volunteers to proactively promote health related awareness among migrant communities, which helped to reduce the spread of virus in these communities. Finally, scale up the efforts of systematic partnership with UN agencies. Through cooperation with UNICEF on EMTCT and with UNDP on reproductive health, the government of Thailand has made progress in capacity building, effective delivery of health services, evaluation of impact and accountability.

Mr. Anir Chowdhury shed light on Bangladesh's digital health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted that the use of data, and not just collection of data, could allow the country to transit in a more intelligent way. Some initiatives have been proven effective: (i) a COVID-19 collective intelligence system was set up to collect self-reported data stream and identify potential high-risk zones, allowing the government to focus lockdown measures and prevent severe economic loss; (ii) a medical hotline, "Uber" Doctor's pool, has gathered nearly 4500 doctors online and provided free consultation service to 435,000 patients so far, making health care available online when many facilities were closed; (iii) a public-facing dashboard serves as one-stop shop for all official information to help control the spread of false and misleading information; (iv) a socioeconomic recovery tracker has been established in collaboration with UNICEF to analyze different indicators across the country, evaluate school closures and enable distance education; (v) a national policy dashboard provides policy guidance to field administration on resource allocation such as ICU and general beds; (vi) a Telehealth Center was launched in June 2020 to provide consultation, counseling and follow-up service for so far 600,000 COVID-19 positive patients, and a Maa Telehealth Center was launched to deliver telemedicine service to pregnant women and infants; and (vii) a Vaccine Process Flow has been supported seamlessly by the sound data management system incorporating registration, notification, shared health record, side effect monitoring, vaccination certification, storage and supply chain planning. Finally, he reaffirmed the importance of data management to improve policy-making process and help strike balance between life and livelihood, when Bangladesh has been able to sustain a GDP growth of 5.2% in 2020 by using an intelligent data approach in response to the COVID-19.

In her closing remarks, **Ms. Anjali Sen** expressed appreciation to all the panelists for sharing their experience and good practices on leadership, innovation, participation, communication and cooperation. She briefly introduced that UNFPA has institutionalized SSTC as a cross cutting, programmatic and engagement approach by integrating SSTC into its strategic plan,

and the organization has worked on inter-country cooperation to address RMNCH, gender equality, youth empowerment and aging issues. She acknowledged the existence of major barriers to maintaining progress on SDG3, when most of the resources have been focused on the pandemic: heightened vulnerability on gender based violence, disruption in family planning services, increase in child marriage, among others. She further stressed the essential role of mutual learning and cooperation in achieving SDG3 and addressing all these global health issues, including vaccination rollout, and highlighted the importance of the integration of SSTC into strategic frameworks, both institutionally and collectively, at national, regional and global levels, in order to promote cost effectiveness, efficient resource mobilization, knowledge sharing and strategic partnership, and ultimately, to achieve delivery of the SDGs and leave no one behind.