

International Conference Dedicated to the 30th Anniversary of the Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care

Almaty
16th and 17th October 2008

Over 500 participants from 65 countries came together to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Declaration of Alma Ata. They exchanged the lessons and experiences of the past 30 years and discussed their relevance and application to the health challenges of today's world.

They heard with appreciation keynote addresses by Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of WHO, Ms Ann Veneman, Executive Director UNICEF and the Honorable Minister of Health of Kazakhstan. Their discussions were informed by the World Health Report which was officially launched in Almaty on the eve of the conference and by presentations by representatives of six countries with recognized experience in developing health systems based on Primary Health Care i.e. Chile, Eritrea, Estonia, Iran, Myanmar, New Zealand.

A unique feature of the conference was the participation by a number of veterans who had participated in the Alma Ata conference in 1978 and by a group of young leaders drawn from all regions, with support from UNICEF.

Conference Conclusions and Recommendations

Too few countries have fully adopted PHC as the foundation for strengthening their health systems. Participants acknowledged the urgent need to do so.

They strongly endorsed the values and principles contained in the Declaration of Alma Ata on Primary Health Care. They are timeless. Equity, solidarity, the right the highest attainable level of health and universal access to services are the key to health for all. The challenge is to apply them to the policies and processes required to strengthening national health systems.

There is now a body of knowledge and evidence available which did not exist in 1978. The conference shared the analysis and recommendations of the World Health Report 2008 as well as the evidence and lessons emerging from a number of countries from all regions. In that regard the conference was not only a meeting point but also a turning point.

The conference took place at a time of grave crisis in the international financial system. A number of countries were already taking action to revise their budgets for the coming years. Participants called upon governments and the international financial institutions not to repeat past mistakes when restructuring had resulted in often-large reductions in allocations to the health and other fundamental social sectors.

Ensuring strong health and social protection, especially for vulnerable populations, is a lesson of history. The conference unanimously called upon governments to protect health budgets and to seize the opportunity of crisis to accelerate change towards strengthening their health systems based on the values and principles of Primary Health Care.

Specific recommendations

Participants broke into six working groups to discuss key aspects of implementing PHC-based health systems. The conclusions and recommendations were endorsed in plenary and are summarized as follows:

1. Countries should take action to strengthen their health systems based on the values and principles of Primary Health Care. This includes equipping health systems with the responsibility and capacity to work with other sectors to address the social determinants of health. National strategies will be required in order to ensure both financial and political sustainability.
2. Countries should ensure strong community involvement in Primary Health Care. Civil society, community leaders and the general public all have important roles to play in developing PHC-based health systems and ensuring they are responsive to their needs. Young people in particular should be included in all levels of health planning and shaping policies for health. Their experience and enthusiasm should be engaged to provide new energy to the Primary Health Care movement.

3. Integrated models of primary health care which include preventive, promotive and primary care are the best models to deliver holistic and people-centred services and should be adapted to the specific needs and resources of individual countries. In this regard, the increasing need to focus on chronic diseases is now a global challenge, not just a problem of rich countries.

4. Human resources development is a key challenge in ensuring the delivery of quality services at all levels. Health workforce training should draw upon the values and principles of Primary Health Care, and include strong emphasis on people-centred approaches and capacity to work with other sectors. For many countries this implies change in education models and settings.

5. Primary Health Care is essential to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, especially in those countries where progress has stalled or even reversed. Through its emphasis on universal access to services and reducing health inequities PHC can drive the changes needed to accelerate progress. The MDGs remain important indicators in measuring the performance of health systems and for PHC.

6. Direct payment for services remains a major obstacle to achieving universal access. Countries should commit to developing health financing methods that ensure universal health protection and avoid direct payment at point of access to services. This is an issue of crucial importance in times of crisis.

7. Ministries of Health have critical leadership roles in directing and overseeing the changes necessary to establish and sustain PHC-based health systems. This includes continuous dialogue with the health workforce and engaging with other sectors, including local government, in defining their roles in intersectoral action for health.

8. Countries should develop information systems that can monitor and measure the development and impact of health systems based on Primary Health Care. They should make better use of information and communications technology and increase investment in health systems research.

9. The international organisations, led by WHO and UNICEF, need to accelerate and facilitate the global discussion and learning on Primary Health Care implementation, including wide distribution of the World Health Report 2008. An international conference on strengthening health systems based on Primary Health Care may be required as a means of facilitating global consensus on action needed at all levels, in the face of challenges very different from those that existed in 1978.

10. The conference participants thank the Minister of Health of the Government of Kazakhstan for convening the conference and for the excellent hospitality provided during their stay in the historic city of Almaty.