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Innovation in the Western Pacific: Vision, transformation, and challenge

Gauden Galea,a Takashi Kasai,b and Kidong Parkc

aWorld Health Organization Representative to China, Beijing, China
bWorld Health Organization Regional Director for the Western Pacific, Manila, Philippines

cData, Strategy and Innovation at World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Manila, Philippines

The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific “For the Future” vision makes innovation an operational shift, a term used to capture the transformations, in technology, in finance, and in society, that are shaping population health in Member States, and the need to forge an active response. It is this term – transformation – that is key to our progress for a healthier and safer future, not just for the Western Pacific region, but for humankind. We must transform societies to balance economic growth with the resolution of social problems, balance the rising demand for energy with technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, balance the urgent need for food security with technology and systems to reduce food waste, and balance the growing intensity of international competition with the promotion of sustainable means of production and trade.3

These transformations have geopolitical, economic, cultural, technological, and social facets. They require complex solutions that cannot be reduced to a single dimension or to the work of the health sector alone. They require, however, that the whole of society become focused and centred on the attainment of health as a foundation of all other measures of well-being or growth. The WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All suggests that all Member States should achieve this operational shift through defining health as an essential value to which the whole of society should be held accountable, setting governance and financing mechanisms for innovation, and defining metrics for assessing progress. The State is not a mere fixer of market failures but actively shaping and co-creating value.

Nowhere are these transformations clearer than in digital health. There is a convergence taking place in the field of digital health. The fields of big data, artificial intelligence, and robotics are advancing and converging at unimaginable rates. The health policy maker, today, is challenged to envision new futures and to cast a path back to the present. A future where the quantified self drives personal and societal efforts for wellness screening. A future where genomics advances detect quickly and cheaply the emergence and re-emergence of infectious agents. A future where care for the frailty of old age is alleviated by robots that can augment care and assist manual labour.

In such a future state, the Health Minister becomes a “Wellness Society Minister”, drawing on multiple streams of information to review the health of the population in real time, managing a portfolio of innovative technologies (digital, financial, and social) that contribute to the growth of industry while protecting the environment, investing in start-ups while ensuring return on society’s investments in the form of public goods, and ensuring that all sectors of society both have access to innovation’s benefits as well participating in the governance of these solutions.

One component of a system of health innovation is the creation of a pipeline of solutions adaptable to multiple member states. WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific launched the “Innovation for the Future of Public Health: The First WHO Western Pacific Innovation Challenge” in September 2021 with the goal of stimulating this process at a regional level.1

468 entrants from 49 different WHO Member States registered for the Challenge. Entries came from academia, public organizations, private organisations, and collaborations across multiple organisations. 153 innovations progressed through to the first panel judging phase where each innovation was rated against five criteria: novelty, scalability, impact, relevance, and adaptability. The judging process was intentionally designed to simulate the system a Ministry of Health might use to generate and manage their own pipeline. Twenty-nine winners were announced at the Second WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific Innovation Forum: Scaling for Impact. Most of the winners, understandably at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic,
came from the field of health security. This issue of *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific* contains 9 Viewpoints from the 29 winners. The whole set of winners is introduced on the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific website.

The Challenge, this collaboration with *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*, and other initiatives are being taken in order to bring the operational shift of innovation more to the fore in the public health imagination. It is a long journey to a time when health innovation is a first order function in Member States, when the emphasis would be less on surfacing solutions and more on scaling them to population level, but the Challenge has been a solid step in that direction. We congratulate the winners, and deeply appreciate the large number of registrants who have demonstrated that the health innovation ecosystem is truly vibrant in WPR.

**Declaration of interests**

No conflict of interest.

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