

Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery Meeting

Réunion des directeurs des soins infirmiers et obstétricaux du Pacifique

Strategic Directions and Policy Options for Nursing and Midwifery Workforce to meet the Population Health Needs in the Pacific Island Countries

The global and regional documents related to nursing and midwifery were recently published. They revealed the real situations and described values of nursing and midwifery, as well as provided essential implementation toward health goals, such as UHC and SDGs. Moreover, consistent challenges are addressed in these documents; improvements and reinforcements in education, investments, fostering leadership, and utilization of their full scope of practice, to meet the population health needs.

In the Pacific Island Countries (PICS), much progress and achievements were found. However, it was also indicated that there are some challenges remained for nurses and midwives to meet changing population health needs. It was addressed that the PICS require quality assurance mechanisms of nursing education, as well as continuing professional development. Improvement and updating nursing education are crucial to strengthen the capability of nurses and midwives and provide essential healthcare services for people in the country in the future.

While some PICS have updated their national strategic health workforce plan. It is important to identify gaps based on workforce data and projections and to develop a national future nursing and midwifery workforce plan. The important prediction was revealed that the pandemic of COVID-19 promotes international flows of nurses from low and middle-income countries to high-income countries. Therefore, policy implementations to attract, recruit and retain midwives and nurses should be highly prioritized, in order to ensure the availability of nurses and midwives in the PICS.

1. BACKGROUND

Quality and affordable health care is a fundamental human right. The Target “3.8 achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC)” in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: ‘Good health and well-being’ is one of the goals to be reached by 2030¹. It includes the full range of essential health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care and its’ essence is universal access to a people-centred health system, which is based on primary healthcare. A keyword in the definition of UHC is “*person-centred*”, which is one of the important values of nursing and midwifery. Therefore, the importance of nurses’ roles has been emphasized in the context of achieving UHC.

Healthcare systems in countries including the ones in the Western Pacific Region (WPR) have been confronting challenges due to demographic, epidemiological, and environmental changes, such as aging population, the rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and environmental threats caused by climate changes². In the Pacific Island Countries (PIC), approximately 75% of deaths were caused by NCDs, and accelerating interventions on NCDs are required to be addressed³.

The nursing workforce is the largest among all the healthcare professionals and approximately 27 million, nearly 50% of the global health workforce, consist of the global nursing and midwifery workforce⁴. In the WPR, approximately 74% of health professionals are nurses and midwives and the percentage is the highest among all regions⁴. Therefore, nurses and midwives are expected to make a central contribution to the national, regional, and global targets such as achieving the healthy island vision, For the Future vision, UHC and SDGs.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Global initiatives in strengthening nursing and midwifery workforce

At the global level, guidance and policy options have been developed and shared with countries on the status and direction needed for prioritization for strengthening nursing and midwifery workforce.

[The Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030](#)⁵ seeks to accelerate progress towards UHC and SDGs by ensuring equitable access to health with strengthened health systems with the aim of promoting the right enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of health through four main objectives: 1) Optimizing performance, quality, and impact of the health workforce; 2) Anticipate and align investment in future workforce requirements and plan the necessary changes; 3) Strengthen

¹ United Nation website. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>

² WHO. (2020). For the future: towards the healthiest and safest Region.

³ WHO. (2022). The 14th Pacific Health Ministers Meeting: Accelerating action on noncommunicable diseases.

⁴ WHO. (2020). State of the World’s Nursing 2020: investing in education, jobs and leadership.

⁵ WHO. (2016). The Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030.

individual and institutional capacity to manage HRH policy, planning and implementation; and 4) Strengthen data, evidence and knowledge for cost-effective policy decisions.

[State of the World's Nursing 2020](#)⁴ and [The State of the World's Midwifery 2021](#)⁶ provide the latest numbers of nurses and midwives in the member states. The two reports describe contributions and the role of nurses and midwives in the 21st century health systems thus providing guidance on future directions for nursing workforce policy. The reports called on Member States and other stakeholders to commit to supporting nursing and midwifery workforce. It is indeed encouraging that most PICs provided data on their nursing and midwifery stock, distribution, gender, composition, and duration of the training, as well. It revealed that in the PICs, younger nurses accounted for much more than in other regions; variations existed in the national standards and regulations for nursing and its education; the absence of leadership training remained. These two reports led to the development of [the Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021-2025](#)⁷, which represents a set of strategic directions and highlights four key areas: **education, jobs, leadership, and service delivery**. It presents evidence-based practices and an interrelated set of policy priorities that can help countries ensure that midwives and nurses optimally contribute to achieving the UHC and other population health goals. Educating enough nurses and midwives with competencies to meet population health needs. It proposes that countries: 1) Create jobs, manage migration, and recruit and retain nurses and midwives where they are most needed; 2) Strengthen nursing and midwifery leadership throughout health and academic systems; and 3) Ensure midwives and nurses are supported, respected, protected, motivated, and equipped to safely and optimally contribute to their service delivery settings. In addition, The WHO [Global Community of Practice for Nursing and Midwifery Platform](#)⁸ was launched in 2022. This is a network for Nurses and Midwives around the world to share initiatives and experiences and to learn from experts from the different fields.

2.2 Regional initiatives in improving nursing and midwifery workforce

In the WPR, the vision paper: [For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region](#)² was adopted at the seventieth session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific. It sets out thematic priorities for WHO's work in the region for the next five years and an implementation plan for global goals, considering the demographic, economic, social, and geographic characteristics of the region. The four main priorities presented are: 1) health security; 2) NCDs and ageing; 3) climate change, the environment and health; and 4) reaching the unreached, meaning people and communities still affected by infectious disease and with high rates of maternal and infant mortality. Following the vision paper,

⁶ UNFPA, WHO and ICM. (2021). The State of the World's Midwifery 2021.

⁷ WHO. (2021). The Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021 to 2025.

⁸ Global Community of Practice for Nursing and Midwifery website. <https://nursingandmidwiferyglobal.org/page/about-us-91ea8cda-33eb-4763-b595-0515a9d07af9>

[*Vital Roles of Nurses and Midwives in the Western Pacific Region*](#)⁹ was published in 2020. It highlights the contributions and expectations for the nurses and midwives in the region and provides information about why and how nurses and midwives are important in achieving the four priorities described in the vision paper, using case studies from a variety of countries in the region, as well as four future policy directions; 1) Reform nursing and midwifery education; 2) Increase investment in nursing and midwifery; 3) Use practice to full potential; 4) Foster leadership and equal partnership in decision-making.

In the PICs, the South Pacific Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officers Alliance (SPCNMOA), formed in 2004, is an exemplary initiative that engages in several activities in strengthening nursing and midwifery workforce and partnerships across the region. The leaders led several initiatives at the regional/across PICs at the national level. Some of the examples include: the nursing and midwifery leaders working together towards the establishment of a subregional Quality Improvement Programme for nursing in PICs, with a focus on nursing and midwifery education and regulation. A scoping review was conducted in 2020 culminating in the production of a road map for this area of work¹⁰. Cook Islands is reviving the nursing training program with a revised curriculum; Kiribati developed a new Diploma of Nursing curriculum; Papua New Guinea is reviewing the curricula for the diploma in nursing and community health workers training programmes, and Vanuatu is reviewing the nursing training program. Kiribati and Solomon Islands completed reviews of their national midwifery curricula, while Fiji, Samoa and Tonga initiated their reviews. Kiribati and Solomon Islands developed a continuous professional development strategy and package for the primary health care nurses. Solomon Islands is currently reviewing the nursing legislation.

3. CHALLENGES

The global and regional documents, published in recent years, revealed the real situations, described values of nursing and midwifery, and provided essential implementation options toward health goals, such as UHC and SDGs. Moreover, consistent challenges to meeting the population health needs are addressed, such as education, leadership, service delivery, and availability (supply, demand, recruit, and retain). Some of the significant challenges that are also encountered by the PICs are:

3.1 Education:

It was shown that 21 nursing diplomas and 6 nursing bachelor's programs which lead to nursing registration, as well as 30 programs for post-registration and 3 masters programs, exist in the PIC. However, the [*Scoping Study: Improving the Quality of Nursing and Midwifery Education and*](#)

⁹ WHO. (2020). Vital Roles of Nurses and Midwives in the Western Pacific Region.

[Regulation in PIC](#)¹⁰ indicated that the nursing and midwifery education and training standards do not meet the needs for population health needs. It was reported that ten out of 15 PICs established a nursing council or authority for regulation of nursing, however, only eight PICs prepared “accreditation mechanism for education institutions”, “standards for duration and content of education”, and “standards for faculty qualifications” as well as only 4 PICs have continuous professional development^{4,10}. Furthermore, accreditation standards for educational institutions, competency standards for nurses and midwives, and continuing professional development (CPD) were indicated as future challenges by chief nursing officers of PIC¹⁰. The SDNM emphasised as a strategic direction of “education” that “midwife and nurse graduates match or surpass health system demand and have the requisite knowledge, competencies and attitudes to meet national health priorities”⁷. Therefore, continuous updates and upgrades in nursing and midwifery education and enhancements of accreditation and regulation of educational system for nurses and midwives are recommended.

3.2 Availability (supply, demand, recruit, and retain):

While some PICs, such as Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa, updated their national strategic health workforce plans. Kiribati and Tonga are in the final stage of the updating process. Marshall Islands, Niue, and Palau have a plan to develop a new one. The SDNM stressed as a strategic direction of “job” that “increase the availability of health workers by sustainably creating nursing and midwifery jobs, effectively recruiting and retaining midwives and nurses, and ethically managing international mobility and migration”⁷. It is important to identify gaps based on workforce data and projections and to develop a national future nursing and midwifery workforce plan. Although no shortage of nurses was addressed in the global document⁴, the shortage of nurses for 2030 was estimated in three countries in the regional document: 20,000-30,000 nurses in Papua New Guinea, 100-200 in Solomon Islands, and 200-300 in Vanuatu¹⁰. Furthermore, the characteristics of geographical environments in the PICs that 25,000 islands are scattered in the vast Pacific need to be considered. In addition, migrations of nurses and midwives need to be monitored. There are variations in mobility among PICs: Fiji, Samoa and Tonga are included in “High mobility”, while Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are categorised as “Low mobility”^{11,12}. The important prediction was revealed that the pandemic of COVID-19 promotes international flows of nurses from low and middle-income countries to high-income countries¹³. Therefore, careful monitoring of mobility of nurses and midwives and policies to attract,

¹⁰ Rumsey, M., Brown, D. South Pacific Nursing and Midwifery Officer Alliance (SPCNMOA). (2021). Scoping Study: Improving the quality of nursing and midwifery education and regulation in Pacific Islands Countries and areas.

¹¹ Melbourne School of Population and Global Health. (2017). International Health Workforce Mobility in the Pacific: Trends in Fiji.

¹² Melbourne School of Population and Global Health. (2017). Study on International Health Workforce Mobility and Its Implication in Papua New Guinea.

¹³ International Centre on Nurse Migration. (2022). Sustain and Retain in 2022 and Beyond.

recruit and retain midwives and nurses where they are most needed should be highly prioritized in order to ensure the availability of nurses and midwives in the PICs.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

4.1 Recommendations for governments:

Strengthening nursing and midwifery workforce in delivering essential health care services by:

- i. Update nursing and midwifery education to meet the changing population health needs.
- ii. Implementing policies to attract, recruit and retain midwives and nurses in order to ensure the availability of nurses and midwives.
- iii. Investing and mobilizing more resources for nursing and midwifery education, jobs, leadership, and service delivery settings.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

Support the PICs in implementing the government commitments by:

- i. Facilitating cross-country sharing of best practices in strengthening nursing and midwifery education and practice
- ii. Providing technical support for the implementation of the commitments and building the PICs capacities
- iii. Advocating for the collaborative partnership.