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## COMMUNICATION FOR HEALTH

Communication used strategically can be a powerful tool to address growing and complex health challenges. In the digital age, communication is more important than ever; however, using communication strategically requires expertise, skills and resources.

In the Western Pacific Region, WHO has developed [Communication for Health \(C4H\)](#): a set of principles and practices to help ensure communication interventions are designed to inform and change attitudes and behaviours in ways that support the achievement of defined public health outcomes. This Framework aims to support Member States to adopt and scale up C4H to ensure health communication programmes, campaigns and other interventions achieve greater impact and progress towards public health goals, including the Region's *For the Future* vision and the global health targets in the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft [Regional Action Framework on Communication for Health: A vision for using communication to improve public health in the Western Pacific Region](#).

## 1. CURRENT SITUATION

Health challenges are growing in number and complexity. In addition to the threat of the next major health emergency and climate-related health issues, countries are grappling with historically high rates of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), including mental health issues, rapidly ageing populations and stubborn challenges related to reaching populations – especially the vulnerable – with quality, accessible and affordable health services. These challenges cannot be solved with communication alone; however, targeted, evidence-informed, strategic health communication is important in solving them. Encouraging key policy changes and empowering people to change habits and adopt new behaviours all require a strong understanding of cultural, social, psychological and environmental factors, as well as the design, testing and evaluation of interventions for the greatest impact.

COVID-19 has highlighted the necessity of strategic health communication. The infodemic that spread along with the virus increased the urgency of applying C4H principles and practices. Strategic communication efforts, drawing upon relevant data and evidence, have been crucial in helping to understand and address people's evolving concerns and information needs. They have been equally vital in maintaining people's trust in health authorities and their response to the pandemic, especially amid uncertainty.

The communication landscape continues to change rapidly, with digital transformation and the proliferation of social media platforms. Globally, an estimated 1.5 billion more people gained access to the Internet over the past five years, bringing the total number of users to more than 5.1 billion. Social media users alone totalled more than 4.8 billion worldwide in 2023, an increase of over 10% from 2022.

People have access to huge volumes of information, yet it is harder than ever to know if something is true. At the same time, people's trust in the health advice of friends and family is growing much faster than their trust in health experts, according to a [2023 global report](#) on trust and health. This has important implications for how to plan and implement communications for health.

To meet these challenges and harness the full potential of communication to make measurable contributions to health outcomes, WHO has been working since 2019 to establish and advance implementation of the C4H approach in its work in support of Member States in the Western Pacific Region.

C4H has already helped address some health challenges in the Region. For example, powerful storytelling was used in Papua New Guinea in 2020 to increase awareness about the need to seek health care to reduce maternal and newborn mortality. In Malaysia, surveys and focus groups were conducted

in late 2021 to understand and reflect the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of different communities to tailor the communication response to COVID-19. And during a study conducted in China between 2020 and 2022, behavioural science insights were used to nudge people towards ordering lower-sodium meals using a range of communication interventions in a food delivery app.

The draft Framework on C4H is based on the experiences of applying the approach so far, along with the needs expressed by Member States in the Region going forward. The Framework was developed following consultation with internal stakeholders, through a consultation with experts and partners in the Region in March 2023 and a formal consultation of Member States in April 2023. It should further build understanding of how to apply C4H principles and practices to improve health outcomes, including in emergencies; encourage Member States to invest and enhance their capacities in this area; and support the adoption and scaling up of this approach across the Region.

## **2. ISSUES**

### **2.1 Improving people's health and saving lives**

Strategic communication can be used to support the achievement of goals across nearly every area of public health. Communication that is accessible, understandable, relevant, credible, timely and actionable is essential to building knowledge, shifting attitudes and supporting people to change behaviours towards positive health outcomes. Strategic communication principles and practices help to identify challenges and barriers to the adoption of recommended behaviours, design and test targeted campaigns, and contribute to improved health outcomes. Knowledge, attitudes and behaviours are all affected by psychological, sociocultural and environmental factors. Targeted, evidence-informed communication can help to influence these and address the gap between what people should do to protect their health and what they actually do. The C4H approach enables health authorities to plan and implement communication interventions to complement the effectiveness of other public health interventions and help achieve measurable health outcomes. Applying the principles and practices of C4H can help make the Western Pacific the safest and healthiest region in the world.

### **2.2 Responding to current and future health challenges based on COVID-19 lessons**

From the earliest days of COVID-19, strategic communication was an essential part of the response. Even when there was significant uncertainty and vaccines or effective treatments were unavailable, strategic communication helped inform people across the Region about the virus and public health and social measures to reduce transmission. As more information became available, strategic

communication helped maximize compliance with individual measures, such as mask-wearing and physical distancing. When vaccines became available, strategic communication was essential in persuading people to get vaccinated. Using techniques such as research and social listening, as well as effective storytelling and targeting groups on digital channels, the C4H approach helped to track and address rumours and share accurate health information with wide audiences.

Building on the experience and lessons of the pandemic, the C4H approach can be used to help address a range of public health challenges. These may include: tackling communicable and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) including mental health issues; anticipating and meeting the needs of rapidly ageing populations; and reaching vulnerable populations with quality, accessible and affordable health services.

To maximize preparedness for and effective responses to current and future health challenges, WHO is working with Member States across the Region to adopt and scale up use of the C4H principles and practices.

### **2.3 Building essential techniques for C4H**

The C4H approach brings together principles and practices to help ensure communication interventions are designed to inform and change attitudes and behaviours in ways that support the achievement of defined public health outcomes. This approach builds on work done by Member States, United Nations agencies and other development partners across various disciplines. C4H is intended to be a comprehensive approach to leverage the full power of strategic communication to improve public health outcomes. Evidence-informed and evaluation-driven, C4H brings together theories, tools and techniques – from multi-source listening to social and behavioural sciences to storytelling, and data-driven planning to monitoring, evaluation and learning. Effective use of these techniques requires expertise and skills which have to be built, enhanced and practised.

### **2.4 Communicating for health impact**

Investments and coordinated efforts by WHO, Member States and partners to operationalize this Framework and scale up C4H should help to ensure that health communication programmes, campaigns and interventions achieve greater impact and accelerate progress towards the *For the Future* vision to make the Western Pacific the world's healthiest and safest region.

### 3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Action Framework on Communication for Health: A vision for using communication to improve public health in the Western Pacific Region*.

