

## Transforming women's, children's, and adolescents' health and wellbeing through primary health care

Despite substantial improvements in health outcomes for women, children, and adolescents over recent decades, many have now stalled.<sup>1,2</sup> There remains a substantive unfinished agenda of preventable mortality among women, children, and adolescents, while at the same time, epidemiological shifts call for greater attention to non-communicable diseases.<sup>3</sup> Pregnancy and the first two decades of life provide a unique window of opportunity for supporting healthy growth and development, preventing health-related risks, and promoting health and wellbeing along the life course.<sup>4</sup> The demographic dividend of improved survival will only be reaped if women, children, and adolescents are enabled to thrive, thereby building human capital that will reduce inequities and benefit current and future generations.

At the 2023 UN General Assembly, the high-level meeting on universal health coverage will provide an opportunity for member states to recommit to achieving universal health coverage and Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.<sup>5</sup> The WHO Director-General has called for a “radical reorientation of health systems towards primary health care”.<sup>6</sup> Primary health care is an approach consisting of three key components: integrated health services focused on primary care and essential public health functions; community engagement and empowerment; and multisectoral policy and action to address the broader determinants of health.<sup>7,8</sup> Here, we highlight what implementation of a transformative primary health care approach will mean for women's, children's, and adolescents' health and nutrition from the perspective of the Strategic and Technical Advisory Group of Experts for maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health and nutrition, a group that advises the WHO Director-General.

Both the primary health care transformation and the global strategy for women's, children's, and adolescents' health<sup>9</sup> require a shift towards preventive, promotive, and protective functions in health services, and with involvement of communities and working across sectors. The strategy's survive, thrive, and transform agenda requires enabling health system and multisector interventions in health, education, finance and social protection, water and sanitation, agriculture and nutrition, law and justice, and other sectors, as well as a focus on prevention of disease and promotion of wellbeing. A continuum of care, starting with the health of prospective parents before conception, and sustained through all stages of a newborn's, child's, and adolescent's life, is central to this agenda, alongside attention to family and community support systems. It also requires investment in evidence-based intervention packages<sup>10</sup> and essential public health functions<sup>7</sup> that have been shown to have a lifelong impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and of populations (panel). Transforming from vertical programmes and illness-centred care to a preventive, promotive, and life-course approach requires expansion and increased investment in community-based models of health care, including for basic health services.<sup>11</sup> Alongside provision of universal basic health services,<sup>11</sup> such systems can address the determinants that are associated with poor health outcomes and are embedded within political, social, cultural, economic, environmental, and health system realities. Empowering individuals and communities to take control over their own health requires improving health literacy and expanding community roles in health governance and advocacy, service delivery, self-care,<sup>12</sup> and home-based care. Investing in accessible, effective, and quality community-based health services for maternal, child, and adolescent health, nutrition, and mental health, and including communicable and non-communicable diseases and injury risk reduction, will yield substantial returns across the life course.<sup>4</sup>

A more integrated, community, and multisectoral primary health care service model will be characterised by functional primary health care networks. A primary health care network has been

characterised as a network of organisations that supports provision of comprehensive and integrated health services to a defined population. These organisational networks for health are held accountable to the population they serve for coverage and quality of care and for health status.<sup>7</sup> Such service delivery models need to be mandated by laws and policies that support development of workforce capabilities for essential public health functions and life-course interventions. Primary health care transformation will also require reforms to human resource and financial management systems to ensure adequate investment in community-based health services. This will mean governments and partners, such as international agencies, the private sector, local governments, and non-governmental organisations, recognising and overcoming barriers and challenges related to overemphasis on vertical programming and illness-centred care, and inadequate financial and health workforce investment in capabilities for life-course interventions and community-based services. Solutions for addressing these barriers include policy reforms that orient service investments towards community-based primary care, as well as investing in developing public health workforce capabilities for engagement of communities and sectors in health prevention and promotion services across the life-course.

Supporting primary health care transformation for women's, children's, and adolescents' health requires a commitment to values and investments in systems, services, workforce, and community engagement. A primary driver will be translating values of quality, equity, gender responsiveness, and accountability into systems and processes that place the needs and voices of communities at the centre of health policy, planning, and services.

In view of the 2023 UN high-level meeting on universal health coverage, we call on political leaders and health partners to ensure that the primary health care transformation emphasises health services for women's, children's, and adolescents' health across the life course, and makes the needed shifts in policy, governance, and investments to enable the transformation to take place. Leadership at all levels is required to shift mindsets and reform laws, policies, resourcing, and governance processes to align models of prevention and care. This primary health care transformation must accelerate now, to ensure access to essential health interventions and have a lifelong impact on the health and wellbeing of future generations.

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