South-East Asia Network – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NEWS: India proposed the creation of a **South-East Asia Network for Transboundary Collaborative Surveillance** to strengthen health emergency response.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Introduction of the Proposal

1. The proposal was presented at the regional meeting on multisource collaborative surveillance, organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO).

2. The meeting aimed to discuss strategies for strengthening disease surveillance, enhancing regional cooperation, and improving response mechanisms to public health threats.

Aim of the Proposal

1. To enhance multi-source surveillance by integrating various data sources, including clinical, environmental, and genomic surveillance.

2. To facilitate cross-border collaboration among the 11 SEARO member nations, ensuring a coordinated response to emerging health threats.

Objectives of the Proposal

1. **Strengthening Real-Time Health Data Sharing and Multi-Sectoral Collaboration**

   - Promote seamless exchange of health data across countries to improve transparency and coordinated action.

   - Foster collaboration among government health agencies, research institutions, and private healthcare organizations.

2. **Enhancing Disease Detection, Monitoring, and Response to Epidemics and Pandemics**

   - Improve early warning systems by integrating multiple data sources for faster detection of disease outbreaks.

   - Establish a robust framework for monitoring health trends and responding to potential health crises in real time.

3. **Promoting Evidence-Based Decision-Making During Complex Health Emergencies**

   - Enable policymakers and healthcare professionals to use accurate, timely, and comprehensive data for making informed decisions.

- Strengthen public health preparedness through data-driven policies and interventions.

Implementation Framework

1. **Utilizing WHO's Regional Manual on Public Health Decision-Making**

   - The manual provides a step-by-step approach for implementing multi-source collaborative surveillance.

   - Countries are encouraged to adopt best practices from the manual to enhance their surveillance systems.

2. **Early Adopters of the Implementation Process**

   - Countries like Indonesia and Nepal have already taken steps to implement the multisource surveillance framework.

   - Their experiences and learnings will serve as models for other SEARO nations.

3. **Strengthening Laboratory Systems and Cross-Sectoral Partnerships**

   - Improving laboratory infrastructure to ensure timely and accurate disease diagnosis.

   - Enhancing partnerships between public health, veterinary, and environmental sectors to address health security challenges holistically.

Key Focus Areas of the Proposal

1. **Pandemic and Epidemic Preparedness**

   - Strengthening preparedness and response mechanisms for infectious diseases such as COVID-19, influenza, and other emerging viral threats.

- Enhancing surveillance and rapid response teams to contain outbreaks effectively.

2. **Zoonotic and Foodborne Diseases**

   - Addressing health risks at the human-animal-ecosystem interface by improving monitoring and control measures.

   - Implementing One Health approaches to detect and prevent zoonotic disease spillovers.

3. **Climate-Driven Health Emergencies**

   - Tackling vector-borne diseases (e.g., malaria, dengue) and waterborne illnesses exacerbated by climate change.

   - Enhancing early warning systems for climate-related disease outbreaks, particularly in vulnerable regions.

4. **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)**

   - Strengthening regional efforts to monitor and combat drug-resistant infections.

   - Promoting the responsible use of antibiotics and antimicrobial stewardship programs to reduce resistance.

Challenges Faced by WHO in the SEARO Region

1. **Data Sharing and Coordination Issues**

   - Lack of a unified surveillance system across countries and sectors hampers efficient data integration.

   - Fragmented data ownership among multiple stakeholders leads to delays in response measures.

2. **Inadequate Laboratory Infrastructure**

   - Many SEARO countries struggle with weak diagnostic and genomic surveillance capabilities.

   - Limited financial investments in laboratory systems hinder the region's ability to detect and respond to emerging diseases.

3. **Cross-Border Health Threats**

   - Difficulties in implementing International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) across borders lead to gaps in disease reporting and response coordination.

- Lack of synchronized public health policies among neighboring countries affects global health security.

4. **Climate and Environmental Factors**

   - Rising temperatures and changing weather patterns contribute to an increase in vector-borne and waterborne diseases.

   - The need for improved wastewater surveillance and early outbreak detection is growing due to environmental challenges.

Way Forward for Strengthening Regional Health Security

1. **Strengthening Regional Collaboration**

   - Establishing a unified health data-sharing mechanism across SEARO member nations.

   - Fostering multi-sectoral partnerships to improve coordinated disease surveillance and response efforts.

2. **Investing in Laboratory and Surveillance Systems**

   - Increasing funding for diagnostic and genomic surveillance infrastructure to improve detection capabilities.

   - Developing advanced early warning systems for timely epidemic preparedness.

3. **Enhancing Policy and Governance Mechanisms**

   - Implementing National Action Plans for better disease control and response strategies.

   - Ensuring adherence to International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) to strengthen global coordination in managing health threats.

4. **Embracing Innovation in Public Health Surveillance**

   - Leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to analyze disease patterns and predict outbreaks.

   - Expanding genomic and wastewater surveillance to enhance early detection of public health threats.

Commitment from WHO and SEARO

1. WHO and SEARO reaffirmed their dedication to improving health security in the region.

2. They emphasized the importance of multisource collaborative surveillance for ensuring timely and effective responses to health crises.

3. Continued support will be provided to SEARO nations to strengthen their disease detection and public health infrastructure.

About the South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO)

1. **Role and Establishment**

   - The SEARO is one of the six regional offices of the World Health Organization (WHO).

   - Established in 1948, SEARO provides region-specific health policies, technical assistance, and capacity-building support to its member nations.

2. **Headquarters and Member Countries**

   - The SEARO headquarters is located in New Delhi, India.

   - It consists of 11 member countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, North Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.

   - These countries collaborate on health initiatives, policy-making, and emergency response efforts.

3. **Objectives of SEARO**

   - Strengthening healthcare infrastructure and disease surveillance systems.

   - Combating communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS.

   - Addressing non-communicable diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular illnesses.

   - Ensuring universal health coverage and equitable access to healthcare services.

   - Promoting maternal and child health programs, vaccination initiatives, and nutrition campaigns.

   - Tackling emerging health threats, including antimicrobial resistance and climate-driven health emergencies.

4. **Key Initiatives of SEARO**

- **Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI)**: Ensures widespread vaccination coverage against preventable diseases.

- **Measles and Rubella Elimination**: Aims to eliminate these diseases through mass immunization campaigns.

- **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Monitoring**: Strengthens surveillance and regulatory frameworks to combat drug-resistant infections.

- **Multi-Source Collaborative Surveillance**: Enhances regional disease detection and response mechanisms.

- **Emergency Preparedness Programs**: Focuses on pandemic preparedness and response to climate-related health risks.

Conclusion

The multisource collaborative surveillance initiative by WHO SEARO marks a significant step toward strengthening public health security in South-East Asia. By improving data-sharing mechanisms, investing in surveillance infrastructure, and fostering regional cooperation, SEARO aims to enhance epidemic preparedness and disease response capabilities. However, overcoming challenges related to data fragmentation, inadequate laboratory systems, and climate-driven health threats will require sustained efforts and policy innovations from member nations.

Source: https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Mar/13/india-proposes-creation-of-south-east-asia-surveillance-network-to-strengthen-response-to-health-emergencies-who