

Importance of Public Health Resilience in the New Normal

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Sri Lanka has consistently achieved remarkable health outcomes for its income group. This sustained success is rooted in the primary health care (PHC) orientated health systems approach that pre-dates Alma-Ata with public investment in public health. Pre-COVID-19, efforts were focused on tackling the increasing public health challenge from NCDs and integrating the area into Sri Lanka's primary health care. NCDs have underlined the multiple and complex influences on health, beyond the health sector alone, and which required a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral and whole-of-society approach to secure the 'best buys', notable prevention of NCDs. COVID-19 has changed global public health forever. Sri Lanka's success with vaccinations and managing hospital care demonstrated the capacity of the country's PHC system to adapt and innovate to emergency public health needs - the essential attributes of resilience. There are also important lessons learned from the pandemic for public health. Mental health has emerged as a key NCD challenge that further underscores the significance of a multi-disciplinary and whole-of-society approach, especially engagement with communities for psycho-social support as a

critical component of mental health care. Communities have, in fact, proved to be critical contributors to overall service resilience, meriting a formal role for non-government entities in public health in future. This shall require a broader

review of human resources as the key to sustainable resilience as highlighted by COVID-19, including skill mix and capacities in using the potential of technology for health. The prolonged global pandemic brought with it an unprecedented economic downturn with recovery predicted to be slow. Superimposed on this in Sri Lanka is the worst economic crisis since independence. For Sri Lanka, the new normal shall be in the context of this dual challenge. Public health has been built on the sound principles of primary health care and these need to be preserved. Further, lessons learned for resilience from the pandemic need to be examined for the systematic strengthening of primary health care going forward. WHO is supporting analytical work in each health systems area to identify options for recovery in Sri Lanka based on both technical issues as well as international experience.