Background

In the WHO South-East Asia Region there are unique opportunities for new approaches to improving access to medicines and vaccines, such as leveraging regional manufacturing capacity for low cost generic essential medicines and supporting countries with small markets and limited purchasing power that rely on imported medical products. In addition, many other actions, from increased financing to better monitoring, are needed in the Region to accelerate progress on improving access to medicines within the framework of achieving universal health coverage.

To further this agenda, the eleven Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region came together for a three-day regional consultation focused on ways to improve the availability of affordable, quality-assured essential medicines and vaccines in the public sector, through domestic actions and regional cooperation on procurement and pricing. The consultation aimed to address public pharmaceutical procurement and other supply side constraints to access to medicines and deliberate upon a collective strategy to counter the same. Officials from public procurement agencies and national regulatory authorities, as well as procurement experts, UN agencies and international partners, including The Global Fund and United States Pharmacopeia, participated.

Consultation Objectives

1. Review different options for collaboration on strategic procurement and pricing in the Region.
2. Identify key enablers of effective collaboration, potential barriers and solutions to address those.
3. Build mutual confidence and trust to fulfill the different needs of countries.
4. Agree on priority areas for collaboration, next steps and timeframe for implementation, including identifying needs for technical assistance.

Overview of Programme:

Day 1. Where are we now in South-East Asia?

- Access to medicines: A changing agenda regionally and globally
- Progress, challenges and lessons learnt in the Region on procurement
- Global procurement mechanisms

Day 2. What actions are needed & feasible within & across countries?

- Opportunities for getting better value and better coverage through pooled procurement
- Options for improving price transparency & quality of products procured by the public sector in the Region
- Strategies to address challenges and ways forward on collaboration on procurement

Day 3. How do we take these priority actions forward?

- Priority actions for bilateral/inter-country and regional/multi-country cooperation

Setting the scene: Country experiences and regional characteristics

The consultation commenced with observations from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO SEARO, on the need for collaborative approaches to develop public pharmaceutical supply systems that would address the twin challenges of availability and affordability of essential medicines through robust procurement mechanisms. Countries shared best practices and explained key aspects of existing successful models for public procurement of essential medicines, including price transparency and regulation and pharmaceutical logistics management information systems. Many emphasized the need for enhancing price negotiation powers and the importance of effective quality assurance processes. Further, Member States deliberated upon maximizing the use of existing global procurement mechanisms and utilizing price information exchange platforms.

Discussion: Defining a roadmap forward on access to medicines in the Region

In the three-day consultation the Member States reflected upon country experiences and factors impacting access to medicines in the Region. They acknowledged the regional dynamics that determine drug cost, availability and quality. Recognizing this, they realized the need for exploring different forms of pooled procurement that could not only cut down on costs and potentially reduce procurement prices, but also leverage the strengths of Member States to support each other. The need for small but concrete steps in collaboration was noted. Member States identified life-saving medicines with potential risk of shortage or quality problems as a possible target for pooled procurement. While highlighting existing information sources across states, participants stressed the need for innovative strategies to improve information sharing regarding prices, quality and performance of suppliers and to dedicate resources to build and strengthen platforms to do so.
Proposed actions for collaboration on procurement of essential medicines in the South-East Asia Region

Multiple options for action to collaborate on procurement of medicines and vaccines exist that require different depths of cooperation and coordination. Like the various depths of a swimming pool, these actions range from sharing existing, publicly available information at the “shallow end” to more complex agreements for contracting at the “deep end.”

Four priority action areas were identified and agreed upon with timelines:

1. **Information sharing on medicines prices.**
   - Share existing price, quality & supplier information via WHO SEARO portal with links to procurement agencies **within 1 month**.
   - Share public procurement price info on PIEMED or agreed price information exchange platform after expert workshop before the end of 2017, from 2018 onwards.

2. **Improved access to information on product quality.**
   - South-East Asia Regulatory Network (SEARN) will decide on a minimum set of information to share on SEARN and National Regulatory Authority (NRA) websites **from 2018 onwards**.

3. **Checklist for effective bilateral cooperation agreements.**
   - Develop checklist of key questions when negotiating bilateral agreements for procurement between two countries/states **by end of 2017**.
   - Document case studies on experiences of bilateral collaborations within & beyond the South-East Asia Region **by end of 2018**.

4. **Regional collaboration on procurement, starting with antidotes.**
   - Interested countries will discuss an initial coordinated procurement activity focused on improving availability of lifesaving antidotes, including snake anti-venom **in the first quarter of 2018**.

**Key principles of collaboration:**
1. Build on what exists;
2. Start with small but concrete steps;
3. Keep collaboration voluntary;
4. Build trust.

**Immediate next steps:**
1. Countries agreed to discuss meeting outcomes with key actors and stakeholders before the Regional Committee, 6-10 September 2017.
2. WHO SEARO will facilitate communication and engagement of countries, UN agencies and other international partners.