

LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE LONG HAUL

The case for post-pandemic systemic change in MENA's healthcare systems

The COVID-19 pandemic may be behind us, but its impact and implications on healthcare systems are far from over. Where speed of delivery, operational continuity, and supply chain resilience were put to an unprecedented stress test, the pandemic exposed deep-seated vulnerabilities and longstanding gaps in these systems. The MENA region was no exception; varying levels of preparedness and economic resilience across countries further complicated the consolidation of efforts in the face of health crises, and on the upside, accelerated the need for fundamental reforms.

Critical deficiencies within MENA's healthcare landscape unraveled during the pandemic. Limited absorptive capacities (such as hospital beds, ICUs, and ventilators) and a shortage of trained personnel hindered service delivery. Inequalities in healthcare access became more pronounced, particularly for communities in conflict zones, refugees, and low-income groups – many of whom faced immense challenges in testing, treatment, and vaccination. The absence of robust, real-time data collection made it difficult to track viral spread and, in turn, allocate resources efficiently and implement targeted interventions. And in equal parts, there emerged a growing need and wide gap for the scalable adoption of digital health solutions – with many patients being reluctant to visit hospitals due to infection fears and requiring remote monitoring and consultation services.

While certainly challenging, these realities have also yielded prompt, proactive, and coordinated action among MENA healthcare stakeholders to address a crisis of unprecedented scale and magnitude. Substantial infrastructure investments, accelerated telehealth expansion, and stronger regulatory frameworks were just some of many positive developments to have come out of the pandemic.

As our region transitions into long-term recovery, all ecosystem stakeholders – be they governments, providers, industry bodies, or communities – must align on lessons learned, evaluate pandemic-induced regulatory measures, and envision a path forward for more adaptable, equitable, and agile healthcare systems.

It is safe to say that many of the lessons have centered on needs. The need for strong foundational public health infrastructure, both at an operational and policy level. The need for digital health solutions as a critical component of care continuity and mental health support – particularly when physical systems of both people and providers are stretched thin. The need for data-driven decision making, supported by AI-powered telemedicine, remote monitoring, and mobile health. The need for closer and stronger collaboration between health authorities, government bodies, private sectors, and civil society. And most importantly, the need for equitable access to essential services, including vaccines and treatments.



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And the path forward entails many imperatives. MENA must prioritize sustainable funding and investing to level the field for community primary healthcare, preventative care, and digital health provision. It should increasingly integrate AI, robotics, and data analytics, with health ministries and insurers working hand in hand on trickle-down strategies for telemedicine, digital health tech, and electronic health data repositories – with AI governance setting solid foundations to balance innovation and information with ethics and privacy. Regulatory bodies will continue to ensure that high-quality healthcare is accessible and affordable to all, with robust social protection mechanisms to mitigate financial burdens. And in the event of future critical health crises, they also stand to focus on transparent communication, public engagement, and health literacy campaigns to rally communities behind their initiatives.

Put simply, MENA's healthcare ecosystems and systems must move away from rigid structures towards more agile and adaptive models that can not only answer, but also preempt crises. This includes cross-training healthcare professionals, diversifying service delivery models (e.g., home care, mobile clinics), and building resilient supply chains for essential medical resources. It's a systemic transformation that can immensely benefit from enhanced regional collaboration on expertise, best practices, research, and resources to build collective resilience against future health threats.

COVID-19 was a wake-up call for regional healthcare. But crises are what we make of them. By turning hard-won lessons into policy, regulation, and practice, MENA can move from crisis management toward future-ready infrastructure, investments, incentives, and innovation. And nowhere is this shift more urgent than in healthcare.