



# Policy Brief

Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum 2024

**2024**

Virtual Meeting

Thursday 7 March 2024

11:00–13:00 GMT



***Actionable Solutions to Building Resilience in Healthcare Systems within the Commonwealth, with an emphasis on Small and Vulnerable States***

# Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum 2024

## POLICY BRIEF

### 1. Introduction

#### **The Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance (CHPA)**

The Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance (CHPA) is an alliance of Commonwealth accredited associations representing health and social service workers. Members of the CHPA work together to amplify the voice of Civil Society on issues relating to the health and wellbeing of the people of the Commonwealth. They aim to efficiently and effectively represent and support health professionals in Commonwealth countries and promote high standards of practice and equity in access to health and social care for the people of the Commonwealth.

#### **The Annual Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum (CCSPF)**

The CHPA is committed to optimizing Civil Society interaction with Commonwealth Health Ministers and beyond. Each year, CHPA hosts the Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum (CCSPF), an important opportunity for influencing health and wellbeing policy and practice on behalf of the practitioners that CHPA represents, and the citizens of the Commonwealth to whom CHPA members provide care. Recommendations from the Forum are directly presented to Commonwealth Health Ministers, who meet annually on the weekend prior to the commencement of the World Health Assembly, creating a formal advocacy route. Over many years, with the ongoing support of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, The Commonwealth Civil Society has actively interacted with Commonwealth Health Ministers at their annual meeting. Civil Society organizations bring a unique perspective to the deliberations of Commonwealth Health Ministers, and it is important that their voice is heard.

### 2. Theme and objectives

The theme of the Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum 2024 was 'Actionable Solutions to Building Resilience in Healthcare Systems within the Commonwealth, with an Emphasis on Small and Vulnerable States'. Key priorities were identified, and recommendations drafted.

The objectives of the CCSPF 2024 were to:

- Raise awareness of the impact of climate change and natural disasters on health, and of current health workforce challenges across the Commonwealth, particularly in small and vulnerable states.
- Create dialogue within Civil Society around these challenges, share best practices, and agree on potential ways to address priorities by leveraging the Commonwealth network.
- Develop actionable recommendations to address these issues for presentation at the 2024 Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting, to support building resilience in healthcare systems throughout the Commonwealth.

### 3. Survey

An online survey was conducted prior to the CCSPF. The main purpose of the survey was to gather views and opinions on the draft recommendations to inform the 2024 policy report to Commonwealth Health Ministers. A total of 94 responses were received:

- **Countries:** Sri Lanka (21%), Uganda (13%), United Kingdom (10%), India (9%).
- **Age group:** 35-44 (32%), 25-34 (21%), 45-54 (20%).
- **Gender:** male (59%) and female (41%).
- **Professional groups:** pharmacy (46%), medicine (21%), social work (15%).
- **Sector:** Academia/Educational body (30%), community (18%), hospital (18%), non-governmental organization (15%), government or public body (11%).

The majority of respondents agreed with all the key challenges identified and proposed recommendations (over 98% across all recommendations). Minor changes and suggestions were proposed to the original recommendations.

### 4. Forum

In keeping with the theme, 'Actionable Solutions to Building Resilience in Healthcare Systems within the Commonwealth, with an Emphasis on Small and Vulnerable States', and the objectives of the forum, speakers placed an emphasis on the need for actionable solutions to build resilience in healthcare systems, address the impact of climate change and natural disasters on health and the current health workforce challenges across the Commonwealth, particularly those affecting small and vulnerable states.

The Forum opened with welcome remarks from Rt Hon Baroness Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, and Dr Anne Gallagher AO, Director-General of Commonwealth Foundation. The welcoming address emphasized the importance of Civil Society's role in strengthening health systems, acting as a catalyst for change and to consider health care resilience as a global issue with global solutions through collective actions. The Forum was chaired by Professor Vajira Dissanayake, Chair of the Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance and nine invited speakers who responded to the forum objectives through presentations and panel discussions.

Together, the speakers explored these challenges with Civil Society members and agreed on potential ways to address priorities by leveraging the Commonwealth network. Health workforce challenges were a shared priority amongst all speakers, emphasizing the long-standing global shortage of healthcare workers but also a need to ensure ethical recruitment. Four key areas were highlighted: planetary health; global health security in the world recovering from COVID-19; increasing migration of healthcare workforce; and increasing importance of equality, diversity and inclusion within the workforce.

These four key areas will likely continue to have an impact on healthcare over the next generation. Civil societies need to work together to share knowledge including gathering health workforce data to monitor and understand the depth and breadth of the problem. Task-shifting and sharing, community engagement, and innovations in technology were recognized as key principles to ensure sustainability of our health workforce and responsiveness to changing global health emergencies to ensure timely access to medicines and healthcare, particularly in relation

to vulnerable populations. These principles need to be adopted and form the foundation of health systems prior to any health emergency or disaster. Health security, resilience and health efficiency for the population can only be improved when these elements are in place.

Six key recommendations were made and agreed upon at the policy forum. These recommendations from the Commonwealth form the backbone of our final recommendations to Commonwealth Health Ministers. The six actionable recommendations address the highest priority issues identified by Commonwealth civil societies for building resilience in healthcare systems throughout the Commonwealth.

The recording of the Forum is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g51UHTgXok>.

## 5. Recommendations

With the effect of climate change on health and the health workforce crisis being at the top of the global agenda, never has there been a more important time to come together and address these issues to help build more resilient healthcare systems for the people of the Commonwealth. The following recommendations were discussed:

### 5.1. Recommendation 1 - Addressing the effects of climate change on health

**The challenge:** Climate change has resulted in disasters such as rising sea levels, an increased incidence of extreme weather and other major incidents which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, in particular, women, children and those with disabilities. Poor air quality and heat stress, for example, have profound effects on physical and mental health, worsening non-communicable diseases such as asthma and heart conditions.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends that the effects of climate change on health are prioritized in the development of all policies and resources, and collaborative education, adaptation and mitigation strategies are considered for building more resilient communities, with particular focus on vulnerable populations such as children, older people and people living with disabilities. Development partners are encouraged to support investment in building resilient healthcare facilities particularly in small island states.

### 5.2. Recommendation 2 - Strengthening Health Emergency Capacities

**The challenge:** Global events and conflicts have further added to the challenges faced by healthcare systems, the supply chain and the provision of safe and effective healthcare. Global warming is also creating additional opportunities for mosquito borne diseases and resistant pathogens to replicate more rapidly, adding to the burden of antimicrobial resistance and challenging human, animal and environmental health systems on a global scale.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends that, across the Commonwealth, preparedness plans are developed to ensure that timely, effective and sustainable responses can be successfully deployed in emerging disaster scenarios that might threaten the people of the Commonwealth. WHO benchmarks for Strengthening Health Emergency Capacities can facilitate the planning process. This includes supporting the Commonwealth Heads of Procurement Network, ensuring that policies, processes and procedures are created to support member countries to strengthen the resilience of supply chains for essential medicines and vaccines, and support services, and ensure access is maintained in disaster scenarios.

### **5.3. Recommendation 3 - Leveraging workforce capability to support health across the whole life course**

**The challenge:** Resilient healthcare systems are critical to address the complex needs of a globally aging population, which is estimated to reach 1.4 billion by 2030, and 2.1 billion by 2050. Since 1990, health loss has shifted toward a global growing burden from non-communicable diseases, which are also increasingly affecting younger people in vulnerable states, requiring timely and continuous access to medicines and healthcare.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends that national action plans are established with a focus on prevention, early detection and effective disease management, to support communities to maintain their mental and physical health. This includes the deployment of health systems for health security approach, to ensure the workforce are capable and sufficient to deliver health service during emergencies; utilizing and maximizing the capability of the entire workforce, through innovation, task shifting and sharing; adequate resourcing to minimize worker migration; reducing the pressures on health and social services; collaborating with other sectors and leveraging on the strengths of all cadres of health workers, whilst keeping communities at the center.

### **5.4. Recommendation 4 - Bringing younger and older generations together**

**The challenge:** Evidence suggests that intergenerational learning encourages both young and older people to establish positive emotions, attitudes and values, fostering an understanding of learning and helping to narrow the generation gap. Families and communities in all Commonwealth countries survive and thrive thanks to intergenerational relationships, as evidenced in the care commitments of thousands of young carers.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends the creation of further opportunities for intergenerational interaction and learning across all sectors so that health workers and the communities they serve can learn together and support each other, with the goal of healthy communities throughout the whole life course. In the follow up to the year of the Youth, we commend the Commonwealth Young Carers Charter and suggest that 'One Health: One Commonwealth' could be used to bring generations together and unite them around a shared goal.

### **5.5. Recommendation 5 - Addressing sustainable availability and employment of healthcare workers**

**The challenge:** Countries across the Commonwealth are experiencing a health workforce crisis. Evidence shows there is an increase in workforce attrition due to many factors including aging, resignations linked to burnout and poor mental health, incapacitation/death as a result of COVID-19, and global migration. Recruitment is also challenged due to a lack of training places, and competency-based programmes that develop the required knowledge and skills to meet current and future needs. Additionally, many health systems lack funds to employ sufficient numbers to meet the increasing demand on services, further exacerbating brain drain and brain waste.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends working in collaboration with the civil society to revisit and further develop guidelines and policies around ethical recruitment from low- and middle-income countries, to ensure fairness and mutuality of benefit and minimizing brain waste and brain drain. This includes leveraging the Commonwealth network to create further

opportunities to cooperate and strengthen health systems, including health exchange programmes and cross-country partnerships across all professions to boost local capacity and maximize skill sets. This also provides opportunities for bi-directional learning and upskilling, increasing workforce retention.

## **5.6. Recommendation 6 - Developing a resilient health workforce**

**The challenge:** Evidence shows that up to 62% of health and social service workers experience some form of abuse throughout their career, with trends of increasing violence throughout the pandemic continuing. This has a significant negative impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of the existing workforce, and on the ability to attract people into health and care professions, thus reducing the resilience of health systems.

**Recommendation:** CHPA recommends the establishment of multi-sectoral national and local evidence-based interventions, programmes and policies fostering safe, equitable and transparent work environments that support health and wellbeing, addressing recruitment policy and pay gaps and poor working conditions, and creating jobs that are inclusive and appealing to all generations. New strategies to address the chronic shortage of healthcare workers should be explored particularly in small islands and ensure that developed nations adopt ethical recruitment practices.

## **6. Summary and next steps**

The Commonwealth Civil Society Policy Forum 2024 focused on "Actionable Solutions to Building Resilience in Healthcare Systems within the Commonwealth, with an Emphasis on Small and Vulnerable States." Speakers and panel discussions emphasized the need for concrete actions to address climate change impacts, workforce challenges and healthcare system resilience, particularly in small and vulnerable states. Discussions highlighted key areas impacting healthcare in the future: planetary health, global health security post-COVID-19, healthcare workforce migration including ethical recruitment, and equality and inclusion.

The forum agreed on a final six recommendations addressing climate change effects; strengthening health emergency capacities; leveraging workforce capability to support health across the whole life course; bringing younger and older generations together; sustainable availability of healthcare workers; and developing a resilient health workforce.

These recommendations, reflecting civil society priorities, will inform the Commonwealth Health Ministers meeting in enhancing healthcare resilience across the Commonwealth, ahead of the World Health Assembly.