

Recommendations from the People's Forum to CHOGM: A Call to Action on Improving Access to Essential Medicines Across the Commonwealth

Access to essential medicines is a key aspect of **universal health coverage** (UHC). It is an increasingly critical issue for many Commonwealth nations, especially for small island and developing states (SIDS). Challenges around access to medicines in our Commonwealth translates to issues such as: end of life care being managed without pain relief; diabetic patients being unable to access lifesaving insulin; and basic age-old antimicrobials being unavailable to treat tuberculosis - impacting the health of citizens and contributing to the global health crisis that is antimicrobial resistance.

With the resources available to us collectively across the Commonwealth, this inequity and the related suffering it brings is simply unacceptable! As a Commonwealth with a vision to advance UHC and leave no one behind, **we must address the urgent need for access to medicines**. With a globally ageing population coupled with the increase in **NCDs (non-communicable diseases)**, people are living longer with multiple comorbidities, and the need for medicines is growing exponentially, as has been highlighted in the **Commonwealth's Healthy Aging Roadmap** policy.

During discussions at the **Commonwealth People's Forum**, participants reached a consensus on the urgent need to address barriers to medicine access, including **high costs, supply chain inefficiencies**, and **limited local production** capacity. These challenges continue to prevent millions of people from receiving life-saving treatments.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the value of **traditional medicines** rooted in the knowledge and practices of ancient cultures and communities. By taking a **holistic approach** to healthcare, we can embrace both modern pharmaceuticals and traditional remedies, recognising the unique health needs of diverse populations. This reflects a commitment to the **decolonisation of healthcare**—shifting away from solely Western-centric models and ensuring that locally relevant, culturally appropriate solutions are integrated into national health systems.

The recommendations presented here, drawn from insights shared during the People's Forum, and following engagement with Samoa's community and hospital procurement teams, represent a united call to action. We urge the **Commonwealth Heads of Government** to adopt these solutions to improve the availability, affordability, and quality of essential medicines. With 1 in 10 medicines in LMICs being **substandard or falsified**, the **quality** of the medicines obtained is a huge challenge and an equally important issue to address in parallel to access challenges.

Summary of Discussions from the Commonwealth People's Forum Side Event on Access to Medicines

During the Commonwealth People's Forum, participants from all regions shared their experiences and challenges in accessing essential medicines. Discussions revealed several critical themes:

1. Geographical Isolation and Supply Chain Vulnerabilities:

- o Small island developing states (SIDS) in the Pacific, such as Samoa and Fiji, face significant barriers due to their geographical isolation and low population densities.

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This contributes to recurring medicine shortages and stockouts, particularly in rural areas. Similarly, Cameroon and Sri Lanka reported challenges in managing supply chains, with long lead times for essential medicines, exacerbating delays and stockouts.

2. Import Dependencies and Local Production Gaps:

- o Countries like Samoa, Cameroon, Sri Lanka and Malta remain heavily dependent on imported medicines, leaving them vulnerable to global supply chain disruptions. While some local production is possible, these countries struggle to meet national needs due to shortages in raw materials and manufacturing capacity. The reliance on imports was particularly critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the focus was on vaccine procurement and the access to life-saving medicines failed to be prioritised in parallel and had catastrophic effects on health and well-being. These dependencies need to be addressed to build resilience into the medicines supply chains and future proof countries against further global health emergencies, which are only increasing as a result of climate change.

3. Affordability and Procurement Challenges:

- o Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago and Fiji highlighted the financial burden of procuring essential medicines, with high drug costs, exacerbated by export restrictions from larger pharmaceutical producing/acquiring nations. This forces small countries to adopt alternative, often more expensive, treatment regimens, which in turn contribute to increased drug resistance and treatment non-compliance.

4. Need for Regional Collaboration:

- o A key takeaway was the importance of regional collaboration in addressing procurement and supply chain challenges. For example, Pacific Island nations called for pooling procurement with larger regional partners like Australia and New Zealand to secure more affordable and consistent access to essential medicines.

5. Supply Chain Innovation:

- o Malaysia's National Medicines Policy (MNMP) offers a potential model for addressing supply chain inefficiencies through digital track-and-trace systems. These innovations improve transparency, streamline distribution, and ensure timely delivery of medicines, especially to remote and underserved communities.

These discussions emphasise the need for coordinated, multi-country approaches to ensure that quality essential medicines are consistently available and affordable, particularly in small island states and LMICs across the Commonwealth.

Recommendations

We present the following recommendations alongside the overarching need to strengthen the call to decolonise healthcare across the Commonwealth and particularly in SIDS:

1. Support the Establishment of an Effective Pooled Procurement Mechanisms in the Samoa and the Pacific

It is recommended the Commonwealth take deliberate steps to explore lessons learnt from previous efforts to establish a pooled procurement mechanism in the Pacific region, and the successes seen through pooled procurement of COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic. The potential for regional collaboration remains a compelling solution for ensuring access to essential medicines in small island states. With this in mind, a country-specific/regional taskforce approach aligned to the Commonwealth Secretariat's Heads of Procurement Network (HOPN) could be a tangible way forward. If this approach is successful in the Pacific region, learning can be shared and applied across other Commonwealth regions. Through establishing an effective pooled procurement mechanism, there is the opportunity to:

- Increase purchasing power and lower the cost of essential medicines.
- Secure a more consistent supply of medicines by reducing reliance on vulnerable global supply chains.
- Enable smaller nations to access volume-based discounts and ensure quality control through shared expertise.

2. Leverage Expertise to Facilitate the Development of Local Capacity for Medicine Manufacturing and Regulation

It is recommended that Commonwealth governments support and invest in strengthening regulatory frameworks and building local pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity where this is appropriate. This investment will:

- Reduce dependence on international imports and create more resilient local healthcare systems and reduce the number entry points for substandard and falsified medicines.
- Support the establishment regional Commonwealth regulatory mechanisms to detect and prevent the circulation of substandard and falsified (SF) medicines, while ensuring the quality of locally manufactured medicines.
- Embrace the important and complementary role of traditional medicines and relax regulations on plant sources that can be used for medicinal purposes.

3. Facilitate Increased Implementation of Digital Logistical Pharmaceutical Management Systems

It is recommended that Commonwealth nations should be supported to develop comprehensive digital systems to enhance medicine inventory management, prevent stockouts, and ensure equitable access. Sharing expertise and experiences between Commonwealth Nations would be particularly valuable and could be a function of the work around HOPN. Such systems would:

- Provide real-time monitoring of medicine supplies throughout the procurement and distribution process.
- Improve coordination between healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, and regulatory bodies.
- Ensure timely access to medicines in rural and underserved communities by identifying supply chain gaps early.
- Reduce infiltration of substandard and falsified medicines.

4. Encourage Investment in Research and Training Around Medicines Procurement Processes

Underpinning all the following recommendations is the need for accessible funding for SIDS to research the space around essential medicines and procurement, especially within the Pacific region. This would increase understanding of the local and regional context and provide an evidence informed route to creating more effective medicines policies and related workforce development programmes - that are country owned and sustainable. In parallel, health workforce capacity

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requires investment and training e.g. creating opportunities for sharing of good practices and developing training opportunities to support SIDS in the procurement of medicines and logistics management systems. Investment in research and training will:

- Strengthen supply chains from within and build a sustainable evidence-informed model tailored to the local context.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth People's Forum has highlighted a shared commitment to improving access to essential medicines in Samoa and across the Commonwealth. The time to act is now! By implementing these recommendations—pooled procurement, local manufacturing and enhanced regulation, and digital logistical management systems— whilst moving towards decolonisation of healthcare across the Commonwealth as a whole - we can significantly improve access to life-saving medicines, particularly for small and vulnerable nations.

We call on the Commonwealth Heads of Government to adopt these recommendations and take coordinated action. Only through such decisive steps can we address the barriers that limit access to medicines and ensure that all Commonwealth citizens have access to the treatments they need, no matter where they live.