



## International Council of Nurses 21<sup>st</sup> Asia Workforce Forum 1-2 March 2023

### ICN AWFF Communiqué

1. Nursing leaders representing 10 National Nurses Associations across Asia and including eight million nurses participated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Asia Workforce Forum (AWFF) co-hosted by International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the Nurses' Association of Thailand held in Bangkok, Thailand, 1-2 March 2023.
2. The Forum was convened at a time when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge health system rebuild, whilst also having been a major cause of nurse stress, burnout and turnover. One key focus for the Forum was to assess how the pandemic nurse workforce challenges can best be analysed and addressed.
3. The pandemic has reinforced that nurses are the backbone of health systems, are central to achieving sustained improvements in population health and will be critical to health system rebuild. Nurses are present in all parts of the health system, notably in primary care. All countries have committed to progressing towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC), which means that all individuals and communities can receive the health services they need. The pandemic has disrupted health system progress towards UHC. Nurses have been recognised by WHO as being critical enablers to achieving UHC. **In recognition of the unprecedented global challenges that the pandemic has created for the nursing workforce**, the AWFF reviewed and verified these challenges, and explored strategies for cooperation among countries.
4. The starting point of this assessment was the recognition that the World Health Organization (WHO) had already estimated a pre-pandemic shortage of approximately nine million nurses worldwide, and that this shortage has been

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exacerbated by the pandemic, with some of the worst affected countries being in Asia. Participants at the Forum reported that all countries and regions face significant and increasing difficulties due to the growing shortage of nurses. Ageing of the population in many of the countries participating in the Forum is another identified source of increased demand, and therefore increased requirement for nurses. In order to address these shortages of nurses, there is an urgent need to provide effective support to enable the nursing workforce to recover after the stress, heavy workload and burnout which has been a damaging result of their vital engagement in pandemic response in all countries, as well as to invest in the long-term sustainability of the workforce by improved funding for education, wages and working conditions for the nursing workforce. In particular, it is important not only to increase the number of new nurses being trained and educated, in part because of the need to replace those nurses who have left work prematurely because of the effects of the pandemic, but also to equip registered nurses with the appropriate skills and qualifications that meet priority population health needs. This includes upgrading nurse education level to prepare more nurses at B.Sc level so that they are better equipped to provide safe, effective and quality care in complex and challenging health systems, and strengthening continuing education for new nurses to enable them to adapt effectively to the workplace.

5. The Forum expressed deep concern about the detrimental impacts of increasing levels of active international recruitment by high income countries on the ability of lower- and middle-income countries to maintain safe and accessible health services to their populations. This is neither a sustainable nor an ethical approach to addressing global nursing shortages.
6. The Forum recognized that the pandemic has accelerated the need for effective primary care and chronic care, which will also be driven by ageing populations, and there is increasing recognition of the value of advanced practice nurses working in these areas, often as the main first point of contact for communities. This is an investment, not an expenditure, which will have a multiple payback in terms of supporting the health system rebuild and achievement of UHC, generating a return on investment through economic growth, and supporting social development through access to improved education and career opportunities.
7. Participants agreed that securing sufficient and well qualified nurses is a critical and central step in supporting health system rebuild, and achieving UHC. There is an

urgent need to support the recovery of the nurse workforce. Strategies for improving retention for nurses, such as organisational support for health and well-being, provision of safe and flexible working environment, elimination of workplace harassment, valuing recognition and respect for the nursing workforce, and securing fair wage and competitive employment conditions for nurses must be urgently developed and implemented. The recent increase in health workforce protests and strikes in many countries is a manifestation of the deep rooted problems which have been created when there is insufficient support, respect and investment in the nurse workforce, and of the prolonged and unfair reliance on nurses working excess hours with a heavy workload, poor pay, with no end in sight. It is imperative that all governments and employers ensure fair pay and decent working conditions that respect nurses rights and reflect the true value and contribution of their work to both population and economic health and wellbeing.

8. The Forum agreed that all NNAs must work with other stakeholders to improve retention, and advance career development and professionalism of nurses by securing, recognizing and rewarding excellence in nursing practice. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is the most effective way to retain competent nurses for patient-centred care, particularly when it is linked with a career structure with real prospects for promotion.
9. The pandemic impact has meant that, in many countries, nurses are increasingly performing specialized and advanced roles in a range of specialties and locations, notably in primary care and chronic diseases. This reflects growing recognition from governments and health policy makers that advanced practice nurses are safe and cost-effective solutions to support health system rebuild and changing population health priorities, to improving access to health care, and to leading the development of improved primary health care delivery. Use of technology to support nurse education and nurses in practice, often in local clinics and remote and rural areas, is another linked enabler for improved effectiveness of nurses. For example, some countries are expanding the use of Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs), who play a leading role in caring for patients with chronic diseases in primary health care systems, and are extending the ability of APNs to prescribe and manage medication, which evidence shows they can do safely and cost-effectively. The pandemic has served to increase the scope for nurses in these roles, and accelerate the need for the role. The participating NNAs agreed on the need to work with other stakeholders,

including politicians, the media and civil society, to further develop the evidence, advocate and make the case for a positive, modern view of nurses, and for the central role they can and must play in supporting health system rebuild and delivering safe and effective care, including at an advanced practice level.

10. The Forum also agreed that it is critical that during the process of health system rebuild, and to enable recovery of the nursing workforce, senior nurses are fully involved in the policy-making process within their countries, and internationally, in order to ensure that the central role of the nursing workforce is fully represented. This means focusing on identified priorities related to improving recognition of the nursing profession, expanding nurses' roles and advanced practice, securing educational programmes that reflect population health priorities, including those driven by ageing populations, and retaining experienced nurses in the workforce. Nursing leaders also must be fully engaged in maintaining consistency of national nursing workforce policies, plans, regulations and management; only then can nurses participate fully in, and influence, health policy decision-making processes. This includes the specific point that each country and government must establish the position of Chief Nursing Officer which can play a key role in reflecting the voice of nurses and in focusing on recognition and development of the nursing profession.
11. The Forum agreed that not only investment in the nursing workforce is essential to improve global health, achieve UHC and deliver the Sustainable Development Goals but that it is also fundamental to patient safety and the security and sustainability of health systems. Investment in health is also a key enabler and accelerator of economic growth.
12. The Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021-2025 was developed with the active support and engagement of ICN and was endorsed by the World Health Assembly. It contains the policy actions that are required now to support nurses and thereby advance UHC. It is critical that governments in collaboration with health and nursing organisations lead efforts to ensure implementation of the strategy and report on their progress.