

KYRGYZSTAN

Early planning for strong COVID-19 preparedness and response actions

The central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan is a nation of just over 6.2 million, with a relatively young population: 67% of the total population is under age of 35, and 64% of the population is within the working age, ages 15 to 64. Kyrgyzstan has adopted successive reforms to transform its health system. This included the establishment of a single purchaser, the Mandatory Health Insurance Fund (MHIF), which pools funds at the national level to purchase a standardized package of services. The country was among the first former Soviet Union countries to shift from input- to output-based budgeting. A reform of the service delivery model to promote family medicine practices and rationalize excess hospital capacity improved the efficiency of the system. Although the Government has prioritized health in their budget, Government spending on health amounts to only US\$33 per capita and out-of-pocket payments remain high, representing 56% of current health spending. The spread of COVID-19 can jeopardize the progress the country has made. Therefore, WHO and development partners continuously advocate to keep investing in preparedness and strengthening the health system against COVID-19 to mitigate the broader socio-economic costs of the pandemic.

Kyrgyzstan's preparedness to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

Kyrgyzstan has been at the forefront of the Central Asian region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite challenges, Kyrgyzstan, in cooperation with WHO, has proven to be a leader in the region in terms of this response. Kyrgyzstan's preparation and almost immediate response for the pandemic was assisted by the presence of one of three WHO European sub-regional WHE hubs¹ that enabled the country to effectively respond to COVID-19. As the demand for WHO expertise and support continues to grow in the region, the Kyrgyz hub is being fortified with more professionals to have a larger response on the ground and to cater to the needs of neighboring countries.

Drawing strength from past preparedness experiences

Some of the preparedness activities done for Kyrgyzstan in previous years includes laboratories and influenza preparedness. The joint efforts of WHO, the national health authorities and other development partners to strengthen Kyrgyzstan's preparedness for emergencies have proven fruitful in the face COVID-19. For example, WHO assisted during the meningitis outbreak by strengthening laboratory capacity. As laboratories play an essential role in detecting and controlling infectious diseases and preventing outbreaks, improving the quality of laboratory services and strengthening national laboratory capacity are key elements of this work. Influenza pandemic preparedness is a focus, as influenza sparks every year during the cold season in Kyrgyzstan. Over the past 2 years, WHO helped develop a pandemic influenza preparedness plan, strengthen influenza surveillance in the country, and train specialists on

¹ The hubs have been operational since 2017 and are in the WHO Country Office Serbia for the Balkans, WHO Country Office Georgia for South Caucuses, and WHO Country Office Kyrgyzstan for Central Asia

World Health Organization teams at country, regional and global levels have helped verify and validate the information and data contained in this case study, at the time of the original publication (as of July 2020)

epidemiological and laboratory surveillance and clinical management, which has now contributed to the COVID-19 preparedness, readiness and response.

In January 2020, before any cases arrived in Kyrgyzstan, WHO conducted rapid needs assessments based on International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) identifying the needs to enhance their IHR Core Capacities. Just before the country went into lockdown and at the request of the Government of Kyrgyzstan, WHO Regional Office for Europe organized three missions focused on evaluating local hospital capacity, preparing the contingency plan, and assessing the capacity of national laboratories. The mission's results were beneficial not only for Kyrgyzstan but were also shared with the neighboring countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.

WHO has assessed the country's operational readiness for preventing, detecting and responding to a public health emergency as 2 out of 5, among the lowest in the region. The key gaps highlighted in the country's emergency readiness for public health emergencies were in the areas of human resources (shortage of staff and low qualifications due to high turnover and low levels of pay), infrastructure, and lack of equipment and consumables for essential operations. As of end July 2020, there were 35,805 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,137 deaths.

National commitments and plan to address COVID-19

Kyrgyzstan is at high risk since it borders four countries—China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and a large share of the population temporarily works abroad, increasing the likelihood of cross-border transmission.

With the support of WHO, the Government has initiated a pandemic preparedness response. On 29 January 2020, the country adopted key legislation for COVID-19, including Government Order No. 30, order 52 of the Minister of Health on prevention of the spread of COVID-19 disease, and Protocol No.1 based on the meeting of the Republican Headquarters for the Prevention of the Spread of COVID-19 on the Territory of the Kyrgyz Republic. The MOH has also established its own COVID-19 Headquarters and a 24/7 Secretariat.

WHO encouraged the Kyrgyz government to implement preparedness initiatives in advance and the government acted quickly. This resulted in the development of a 12-month interagency development COVID-contingency plan, understanding that fundraising and procurement of supplies would require time. This plan, developed by WHO and well-received by the government, initially called for US\$15.8 Million and is designed to ensure an effective, timely, and coordinated response to mitigate the impact of COVID-

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To the effect of COVID -19 cases detection and epidemiological surveillance of suspect cases, WHO Country Office in Kyrgyzstan equipped and trained national epidemiologists to increase their skills on investigation and contact tracing. Bishkek, the 1st week of February 2020. © WHO/ Mihail Grigorev

19 outbreak. The Plan was approved by the Government on 18 March 2020. The Kyrgyz National Contingency Plan (NCP) builds on the WHO COVID-19 operational planning guidelines and other countries' experience; it captures all essential activities required for an effective outbreak control. The preparedness and response activities included in the NCP could be broadly divided into five focus areas. While all key activities are planned out, given the current sporadic cases transmission scenario in the country, early detection, isolation, contact tracing (surveillance) are highly prioritized. As such all PoE and laboratory capacities for COVID-19 testing are being immediately strengthened. Within just a few weeks after the initiation of the plan and observing the impact that the interventions had on the population, international partners decided to commit additional funding resulting in the plan's budget of over US\$46 Million.

This preemptive, intersectoral IHR-based approach reached the highest level of national authority for designing a response plan. The plan included; coordination of partners and the government, emergency risk communication, surveillance control, infection control and prevention in hospitals, logistic support, and more. With this plan in place and relying on WHO's technical guidance, the government prepared all entry points into the country and was well equipped to receive imported cases and establish quarantine areas for those cases. All 22 points of entry have temporary medical points, staffed with public health medical staff. All arriving travelers are thermo-screened, and travelers from countries with a high incidence of COVID-19 are required to fill out a questionnaire based on the WHO template. Asymptomatic travelers arriving from countries with high incidence are taken to a designated hospital for 14 days for medical observation, while travelers displaying symptoms are taken to four other designated hospitals for treatment. Information is transmitted to the MOH 3 times per day from the oblast health authorities. For instance, quarantine area preparation included repurposing a former US military base near the country's main airport, as well as all hotels – all following WHO's guidelines on the quarantine measures.



Dr Nazira Artykova, WHO Representative in Kyrgyzstan is giving interview to local media outlets on WHO technical assistance to the country. Bishkek, 13th of March 2020. © WHO/ Almaz Zhumaliev

WHO's coordination role and its wide network of expertise assisted Kyrgyzstan to be the first country in the Central Asian region to bring in an emergency medical team from abroad, specifically, from Poland. With the first cases of COVID-19 recorded on 18 March 2020, Kyrgyzstan was prepared. The national testing capacity has increased significantly as there are 13 laboratories performing COVID-19 tests. The weekly test load has consistently been above 15,000 since early April 2020. As of 20 July of 2020, there are 26 hospitals that have been designated for COVID-19 response, with a total of 3142 beds, include 96 intensive care unit. Confirmed cases of COVID-19 will be treated in 26 designated hospitals. Despite this preparedness, capacities for management of severe acute respiratory infections are limited at designated reference hospitals and room ventilation systems in infectious disease hospitals are not available.

WHO's support and coordination in Kyrgyzstan

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For over a quarter of a century, WHO has been a first point of trust for health matters within Kyrgyzstan. This established trust further benefitted the Organization's support to the government in responding to the ongoing pandemic. *"WHO is seen through social and other media channels as a go-to source of information"* said Dr Nazira Artykova, WHO Representative (WR) Kyrgyzstan. *"Since the start of the pandemic, WHO's main message was that COVID is not just a health sector issue but is the business of everyone,"* WR continued. This message was essential in establishing an intersectoral approach at the government level. It is now at the center of the government's efforts to contain the epidemic, address its socio-economic impact and ensure that all health services are maintained in a coordinated manner with engagement of four levels of the government.

Communicating with the Kyrgyz population

An example of working in coordination can be found at the central level government, reaching the offices of the Kyrgyz Prime Minister and Vice Prime Minister, through the special COVID-19 Headquarters headed by the Prime Minister. The Republican Headquarters for the Prevention of the Spread of COVID-19 consist of all ministries and state agencies. With these offices and with WHO's technical guidance, a COVID Communication Unit has been established which now also includes UNICEF and the Red Cross. The Republican Health Promotion Center (RHPC) is responsible for informing the population about the disease risk factors and prevention methods. The RHPC provides regular information and updates through mass media and other mechanisms for informing the public. Additionally, a COVID-19 hotline has been established and is widely used. Daily briefings for the population and media were established, with all data being transparently reported in line with the country's obligations under IHR. In doing so, WHO supported the establishment of one common language and channel for the media, government, and partners. This transparency from the side of the Kyrgyz government allows everyone to have access to reliable, accurate and timely information on COVID-19.

Moreover, village health committees, who are informed and educated by the RHPC, hold regular meetings to discuss threats and prevention methods to ensure preparedness. The MOH has distributed COVID-19 prevention communication materials and is using these fora to educate and inform the population about risks, prevention, and detection of COVID-19 cases and to avoid stigma or panic.



WHO Country Office in Kyrgyzstan locally procured medical consumables (alcohol-based hand sanitizers and masks) for health professionals, who face increased risks in the frontline of combatting COVID-19. Bishkek, 7th of February 2020. © WHO/ Almaz Zhumaliev

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Achievements in maintaining essential health services

In a true sign of success for WHO Kyrgyzstan to help in maintaining essential health services, the nation conducted the European Immunization Week with support from WHO and UNICEF. Under this initiative, 65 mobile teams, fully equipped with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), were established and were deployed to remote areas of the country. Over the course of the week, 24,000 children were reached and successfully immunized against measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases. This was a very important message to give to the population, that—despite COVID-19—people-centered primary health care services remain fully accessible.

With the support of WHO Regional Office for Europe, online trainings, briefings, and webinars were hosted. All national authorities, institutions, and universities followed these WHO webinars. As a result, several clinical working groups on diabetes, hypertension, and mental health were then established. Additionally, alongside a COVID-19 support hotline, WHO assisted the government in establishing a hotline for mental health response.

Specialist Training

The need for epidemiologists continues, but WHO was a pioneering agency in preparing for this shortfall. Initially, 100 clinicians were trained before COVID-19 arrived in Kyrgyzstan. Following the lockdown of the country, Marshall law was declared and movement throughout Kyrgyzstan was strictly limited. Considering this, all trainings were moved online. Over 18,000 doctors and nurses (600 on IPC and 180 public health specialists and epidemiologist), including from private sector, were trained on COVID-19 through this initiative, and it was vital to the response effort.



*Over 310 health workers from Intensive Care Units, Republican Infectious Diseases Hospital, PHC Centers and 2 Military Hospitals attended the 2-day specialized training in Clinical Management of COVID-19 patients. It provides technical assistance to the labs in Kyrgyzstan to get ready for COVID-19 testing. Bishkek, early in February 2020.
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Next Steps for Kyrgyzstan

There are several challenges facing Kyrgyzstan throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The key challenges are ambulance care, clinical management of pneumonia, and laboratory testing. Additionally, it was not expected that during the summer months, the country would see such a rapid increase in cases. This creates the challenge of the procurement needed for life-saving equipment in hospitals. Establishing telephone triage care could prevent patients from coming to the hospital if they can be treated at home.

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From the very beginning, trust toward WHO was built in all levels of government and society. Key features of the response include advance preparedness; reaching commitment at highest national authorities; and encouraging and getting the government to review the health security and contingency plans, thus allowing for resources to be timely allocated throughout the country. Despite the remarkable response, increasing and improving social and technical support within the country is vital. Returning and adapting to a “new normal” is going to take continued effort and will allow Kyrgyzstan to expand its role as an example for all Central Asian countries.

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