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HIGH-LEVEL EUROPEAN EXPERT GROUP PROPOSING A ROADMAP TOWARDS STABILIZATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE EUROPEAN REGION:

With the current knowledge and understanding of the pandemic it is possible to lay out a strategic framework towards stabilization of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe.

We propose to define “stabilization” as “having passed the previous season without major disturbances of the health care system due to COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, as a reflection of a much less harming transmission to people.”

In its report last May, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response has suggested that we should not stay in a reacting mode but consider strategies towards stabilization of the Covid pandemic. The strategic shift should start at regional level which may more easily transcend political, economical and geopolitical divides and federate pandemic stabilization efforts.

The High-Level European Expert Group convened by the Regional Director identified ten objectives as strategic directions towards COVID-19 stabilization in Europe with the twin purposes of providing aspirational targets for the region and concomitantly recommending a pragmatic approach based on the use of existing and new tools to come.

These operational recommendations are issued in the early days of September 2021, based on the existing knowledge. This document may be therefore revised and updated in the upcoming weeks or months, while the High-Level European Expert Group continuously monitors new evidence from the domain.

The following ten objectives for the region are proposed to the WHO Regional Office for Europe:

1. **Increasing as fast and massively as possible vaccine coverage** of all adults and adolescents above 12 years old. Reaching such goal will be of significant challenge to countries at national level, but with a politically-supported effective vaccines sharing scheme within the region, this goal is achievable. At regional level, the immediate issue is to close the vaccine gap between producing/high income countries and middle/low-income countries in the region with as yet low access to vaccines. The High-Level European Expert Group recommends that WHO Europe considers convening a joint pan-European conference on ways to close this gap.
There is no strong evidence at this stage justifying a third dose for all people in the region, although immunocompromised patients as well as vulnerable elderly people may be considered for third doses to keep them safe. Equity across countries should be seen as priority in Europe at this time. Before delivering 3rd doses, all at-risk populations in all countries of the region should be offered the first two doses of vaccine.
2. **Aligning border control measures at EU/EECA and European Region levels**, with the facilitation of WHO. Avoiding border closures, particularly when epidemic levels do not differ significantly between neighbouring countries.
3. **Reducing the risk of acquiring COVID-19 in children so as to allow for schools to remain open** to ensure learning continuity, particularly for those below 12, who are not yet eligible to vaccination, by focusing on indoor ventilation, mask wearing, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and smart frequent testing; and further by promoting vaccine for teachers and school personal who are in charge of children.
4. **Promoting masks-wearing indoors**, including public transportation, and encouraging home office and distant meetings when possible.
5. **Implementing and continuously monitoring public health intervention measures**, balancing their epidemiological and societal footprint, including **non pharmaceutical interventions**, backward and forward tracing, sustained but targeted quarantines, with economic support.
6. **More equally distributing the sequencing capacity** within the entire region, to help better identification and tracing of variants. This may require consolidating a network of laboratories across Europe and putting in place adequate sample shipment and information sharing.
7. **Building a Regional Public Health surveillance system** as a pan-European initiative, based on existing tools, with agreed shared core data and format, and made publicly available on near-real time, allowing for short-term forecasting.
8. **Developing research capacities and data collection** to better understand, prevent and treat long Covid and all long term direct and indirect consequences of Sars-Cov-2 infection and of the pandemic.
9. **Launching a far-reaching pan-European R&D programme**, in coordination with EU initiatives, for research, development and clinical evaluation of different treatment components against COVID-19. New effective therapies would be a major addition in case of new variants escaping from vaccine efficacy, and of substantial support to countries with low vaccine coverage.
10. **Assessing how to better organize and conduct periodic evaluations** and learning from experience.

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