

International Council of Nurses 22nd Asia Workforce Forum 20–21 November 2024, Kuala Lumpur

ICN AWFF Communiqué

1. Nursing leaders representing 11 National Nurses Associations across Asia, representing almost 11 million nurses, participated in the 22nd Asia Workforce Forum (AWFF) hosted by the Malaysian Nurses Association and held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 20–21 November 2024. The Forum was convened at a time when health care systems worldwide face unprecedented and escalating challenges, driven by multiple converging factors including chronic underfunding of health care, rising non-communicable diseases, population aging, and the impacts of climate change, ongoing public health crises and man-made disasters including conflicts, as well as the continued struggle to rebuild following the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are compounded by severe workforce pressures which include widespread nurse shortages, uneven distribution of nurses across, and within, countries and skillsets, concerning levels of nursing workforce migration, and an increasingly unsustainable work environment for many nurses characterized by systemic stress, burnout, and workplace violence. A key focus for the Forum was to assess the impact of these challenges on the nursing workforce and determine how they can best be addressed.
2. Since last year's AWFF, held in Bangkok, 1–2 March 2023, ICN has issued two landmark documents: the **Charter for Change**, launched on International Nurses Day, May 2023, and the **125th Anniversary Bucharest Declaration on the Future of Nursing**, adopted in October 2024. These collectively call for urgent action to protect, value, and invest in the nursing profession and outline the key policy actions necessary to create and sustain health care that is safe, accessible, and affordable for all. The Forum endorsed both documents as a roadmap for strengthening workforce and health systems and discussed how their recommendations can be operationalized within the Asia region.
3. The AWFF reaffirmed that nurses are the foundation and backbone of all health systems, addressing the world's increasingly complex health challenges and

ensuring population wellbeing. The Forum emphasized that nurses are essential to achieving **Universal Health Coverage** (UHC), which all participants' countries have committed to, and that investing in the nursing workforce is critical for improving global health, primary health care led services, and the achieving **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

4. The world's vast **shortage** of nurses has been designated a **global health emergency** by ICN, with several countries in Asia strongly affected. Prepandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated a shortage of approximately six million nurses worldwide, and by some accounts, this figure could reach 30 million by 2030 when accounting for increased coverage needed for growing health needs and Universal Health Coverage commitments.
5. Participants at the Forum recognized the severe and widespread effects of this shortage and reported nurse workforce patterns from their countries, which included: significant shortages and **escalating difficulties caused by chronic understaffing, including in any particular geographic regions, underserved communities, or specialty areas factors exacerbating these shortages, e.g. declining in the working-age population due to falling birthrates, resignations due to burnout underinvestment in the education pipeline, aging nursing workforce leading to higher retirement, and migration of nurses to higher-income countries, factors influencing increased demand on health systems, e.g. aging populations.**
6. ICN has expressed strong concerns about **inequitable international nurse migration** patterns and called for urgent implementation of **ethical** recruitment practices to prevent the depletion of nursing resources in vulnerable health systems. Whilst supporting the right of individual nurses to move, the Forum participants noted growth in migration of nurses in the Region and recognized the risk of detrimental impacts of unethical recruitment of nurses from low- and middle-income countries by a small number of high-income nations, which exacerbates workforce shortages in some source countries, and can deprive underserved populations of access to health care, and deepens regional and global health inequities. They supported the need for all countries to report to WHO on current trends in international nurse flows, and on progress with implementation of the Global Code of Practice on International Recruitment of Health Professionals

7. Participants agreed that there is an urgent and critical **need to create safe, supportive work environments that protect nurses' physical and mental wellbeing** and to enable them to recover from the stress, heavy workload and burnout which continues to drive nurses from the profession. The physical and psychological toll on nurses has reached critical levels, exacerbated by chronic understaffing, poor working conditions, and increasingly complex patient needs. The individual and organisational costs of high turnover were identified. Participants reported on a range of new policies aimed to improve recruitment and retention of nurses, including pay increases, retention payments, improved career structures (some with advanced practice roles), new shift patterns, efficiency in nursing practice through utilizing AI / ICT and promoting Digital Transformation. There was a strong focus on using “bundles” of relevant and co-ordinated policy interventions , rather than isolated or disconnected policies.

8. The Forum stressed the urgent need for all countries to engage in comprehensive, **strategic workforce planning** that is focused on investing in the long-term sustainability of the nursing workforce. This workforce planning must address not only the education of new nurses, but also the retention of experienced staff and ensuring equitable distribution of the nursing workforce, particularly to rural and underserved areas.. This in turn means directing increased funding towards improving working conditions and compensation and upgrading nursing education at all levels. This requires both expanding education capacity and ensuring education programs are focused on population health priorities and equip nurses with the skills and qualifications to meet evolving population health needs, both at initial education and with relevant opportunities **for Continuous Professional Development (CPD)**. Participants expressed strong concern that the nursing education sector in many countries need to be better funded and supported, including the training of nursing faculty who can train high-quality nurses to deliver sufficient well prepared “new” nurses to enable sustainable health systems.

The Forum also agreed that achieving effective planning and the necessary health system transformation requires the full integration of nursing expertise in health policy development and decision-making at all levels. It is critical that **senior nurses are fully involved in nursing workforce policies**, plans, regulations and management within their countries and internationally to ensure the nursing perspective shapes the development of resilient, accessible health systems that can address current and future challenges.

9. The Forum highlighted the growing recognition that **advanced practice nurses and nurse-led models of care are essential to meeting evolving health care needs**, particularly in primary and community care, which will be the critical success factor in achieving Universal Health Care. Advanced practice nurses are a safe, cost-effective resource that can support health system transformation, address changing population health needs, and improve health care access and outcomes, especially in underserved communities. Nurses must be recognized and enabled to work to their full scope of practice. Governments must lead in ensuring investment and policy support to ensure that there are sufficient nurses working in advanced roles and that all can function at their full scope of practice in support of UHC. This requires career structures and education/regulation systems that encourage and recognise nurses for their sustained contribution.

10. The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, **climate related health impacts, public health emergencies, and conflicts** around the world also places immense demands on nurses who are at the forefront of crisis response. A strengthened and resilient nursing workforce equipped for emergency preparedness and response is required to confront these evolving challenges, which will require sustained investment in disaster readiness and training and support for expanded nurse-led interventions.

Participants shared information about emergency preparedness, effects of climate emergencies, natural disasters, and conflict in their countries or the Asia region. The Forum also recognised the importance of solidarity and support for nurses in disaster or conflict zones through the #NursesforPeace campaign which provides direct support for nurses working in high-stress, high-risk environments, and advocates for protection of the nursing workforce in disaster zones including calls for international humanitarian law to be respected and for attacks on health care to end.

11. The **next State of the World's Nursing Report** will be released in 2025, alongside new Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery beyond 2025, with the aim of providing a comprehensive analysis of nursing at global and national levels, assessing workforce patterns and challenges, and demonstrating the profession's contributions to population health and Universal Health Coverage, as well as providing clear direction for necessary policy actions.

The Forum agreed that it is essential for the second SOWN report to be based on accurate, up-to-date data that fully reflects the distribution of nurses within and across countries and estimates population needs. Participants committed to working closely with their country's government and health organizations to ensure the contribution of accurate, complete, and timely information and insights.

12. It is critical that governments, in collaboration with health and nursing organisations, advance efforts to ensure implementation of the policy actions outlined in the Charter for Change and Bucharest Declaration as well as the Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021-2025, endorsed at the World Health Assembly, and regularly report on their progress.

Spending on nursing is not only a cost – it is an investment, which generates multiple returns for countries through improved population health, broader social development including education and career opportunities, and economic growth.