In 1978, the Alma-Ata Declaration proposed a forward-thinking vision that has been the foundation of primary health care (PHC) for more than forty years. Moving away from the predominant biomedical focus, the declaration was founded on principles of social justice and equity, acknowledged the importance of addressing the wider determinants of health through preventive measures, emphasized intersectoral action; and placed patient and community engagement and empowerment as key to achieving health for all.

These principles were reiterated at the 2018 Global Conference on Primary Health Care in Astana, Kazakhstan. The Astana Declaration defines PHC as an orientation toward health systems that are integrated, community based, and the product of user engagement and empowerment, thus facilitating the needs of all throughout their life course. PHC in the twenty-first century is conceptualized by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund’s Operational Framework as health services and essential public health functions at the core of integrated health systems, multi-sectoral policy and action, and empowered people and communities.

Implementing the Astana vision requires a shift in focus from curative care to health promotion and disease prevention, as well as the development of new models related to service delivery, financing, and governance for PHC. These requirements reflect the need for resilient, adaptive, and comprehensive PHC systems based on local context and codeveloped by empowered people engaged in their own health.

Increasingly, it is recognized that it will not be possible to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including universal health coverage, without stronger PHC. Universal health coverage means that all people, including those who are marginalized or vulnerable, have access to quality health care services that put their needs at the center without financial hardship. As such, the Astana Declaration identifies PHC as the most effective, efficient, and equitable approach to enhancing health, and foundational to achieving universal health coverage.
Yet, PHC implementation and PHC systems reforms are challenged by the lack of contextualized knowledge and a dearth of research on effective approaches to strengthen PHC, especially in low- and middle-income countries. There is a need to advance the science and practice of PHC, with a forward-looking view of the innovations, challenges, and shared responsibilities in driving PHC forward.

This book contributes to bridging the knowledge gap on contextualized evidence to enhance PHC by providing lessons from successful PHC implementation in low- and middle-income countries, and informing current strategies to operationalize the Astana Declaration.

We believe this publication will provide PHC stakeholders with relevant and useful insights on effective approaches to enhance PHC policy and practice worldwide. These lessons will also provide critical evidence to strengthen PHC systems and position primary health care as the backbone of universal health coverage, with a view of moving toward Health for All in the twenty-first century.

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