



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

CONSULTATION ON LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Consultation on Life Skills Education. Let me begin by thanking all the national and international participants whose contributions will undoubtedly enrich the deliberations of this consultation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me share with you some thoughts on the occasion of this first consultation on life skills education. The development of a regional resource to introduce life skills education in our Member States as a health promotion and prevention strategy is an important initiative.

We all know that the 22 countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region vary in population size, economic status and general health indices. During the past few decades, the societies of the Region have experienced rapid social changes, modernization, globalization and westernization, and many have experienced conflict, including wars and civil strife, sanctions, internal displacement and disasters. During situations of stress and social change, not all individuals can adapt to and cope with a rapidly changing environment. An individual may experience insecurity and frustration which may be expressed as obesity and eating problems, violence, risk-taking behaviour, substance abuse and suicide. Adolescents and young people are one of the most vulnerable groups to these health hazards. Indeed, the societal changes witnessed by the Region have resulted in health problems for a large number of young people and high vulnerability to risk-taking behaviour, clearly reflected in a number of health related parameters, such as increasing obesity, increasing incidence of traffic injuries, increasing use of substances of abuse, and increased risk-taking behaviour especially related to injectable drug use and extramarital sexual exposure.

According to the World Health Report 2003, 40% of the population in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is under 15 years old. It was with this relatively high proportion of young people in mind that the Regional Office initiated health-promoting preventive programmes to meet the needs of the adolescents for knowledge and skills.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Life skills education is considered an important interventional programme that addresses several health-related behaviours, such as smoking, violence, substance abuse, and risk-taking behaviour, involving adolescents and youth. WHO headquarters has developed a school-based intervention manual "Skills for Health" to address those important issues. "Skills for Health" is a health-promoting manual that can be used by school counsellors to train students on communication skills, advocacy, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, decision-making and skills for managing stress.

The Regional Office is currently involved in a regional adaptation of the Skills for Life manual, to reflect the sociocultural backgrounds of the Region, and to add the experience of the ongoing life skills education programmes in some countries. I understand that the overall goal of the effort is the development of a life skills education package as a health promotion programme for youth in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I appreciate the systematic way by which the activity has been pursued: reviewing the international literature and achievements in the domain of life skills education; reviewing WHO initiatives in the field of school-based health programmes and life skills education and reviewing the Eastern Mediterranean Region experiences. These will provide the basis for developing the school-based life skills education document.

Countries like Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as others, have already given high priority to the integration of life skills education in schools. The current effort to bring together the various regional experiences and combine them with the international experiences is timely.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this consultation you will review the draft manual and assist in finalizing it. Here, I would like to thank the Government of Saudi Arabia for its support in translating and printing the manual it for wider use in the Region.

Last week, during the United Nations special meeting to review the progress of AIDS, Mr Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General, and Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director said “The AIDS epidemic has entered a new and critical phase, and so must the response. The only way we will get ahead of the epidemic is if there is universal access to HIV prevention and treatment. This needs to be the world’s immediate goal.” In the context of addressing health issues like AIDS, traffic accidents, obesity, substance abuse and violence, life skills education is an important intervention. I would like to view life skills education as a preventive intervention similar to vaccination, for which we plan and from which we expect measurable prevention.

When behaviour is a major cause of health and disease, avoidance of unhealthy behaviour and learning healthy behaviour should be planned early in life and through learning of skills which can give psychological immunity. Life skills education provides us with the means for an intervention whose results can be measured. Therefore, the challenge for all of us is to institutionalize the life skills education in the education system in our Member States, just as we have done for immunization.

Let me say in conclusion, I am delighted that this Consultation will contribute to making disease prevention and health promotion a reality in schools in the Region. Once again, I thank all our guests and assure you of our continued cooperation. I wish you all success in this Consultation.

God bless you all.