



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

DR ALA ALWAN

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**LAUNCH OF THE REGIONAL INITIATIVE TOWARDS
THE ELIMINATION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION OF HIV
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

EMRO, 2 October 2012

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your presence here today at this important event for the launch of the regional initiative towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV in the Middle East and North Africa.

We are now more than 30 years into the fight against AIDS, and while challenges remain, we are changing the course of this disease. Our knowledge of HIV has greatly improved and our potential ability to control the HIV epidemic has never been as strong. Among the many tools at our disposal are the knowledge and the means to prevent HIV among children.

Yes, mother-to-child transmission of HIV is preventable, and it has virtually been eliminated in high-income countries. Recent global data indicate that progress is also being made in low- and middle-income countries. In our region, however, progress has been very slow. At the end of last year, less than 5% of HIV-infected pregnant women received antiretroviral medicines for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. This is the lowest coverage in the world.

The Global Plan towards the “Elimination of new HIV infections among children by 2015 and keeping their mothers alive” calls for renewed efforts to reduce new HIV infections in children by 90%. This goal is well positioned within the broader vision of improved HIV-free survival, maternal, child and reproductive health and is linked to the global commitment of achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

It is high time that we accelerate our efforts to protect babies and mothers in our region, at least as well as is done elsewhere in the world. Effective interventions are available; the revised 2010 WHO recommendations for HIV treatment, prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and infant feeding in the context of HIV provide an important opportunity to implement highly-effective interventions, even in resource-limited settings.

The estimated number of children infected with HIV in our region might seem relatively small and we acknowledge that eliminating new paediatric HIV infections in regions with low HIV prevalence can be a complex and challenging public health endeavour. However, we know that it is feasible and appropriate for us to work towards this goal.

In a world of many competing health priorities, reaching and sustaining elimination goals will require a high level of commitment and strong leadership at the national and regional levels.

To guide the way towards eliminating HIV in children and keeping mothers alive WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNAIDS have developed a regional framework for action with the technical advice of regional experts in HIV and maternal, neonatal and child health programmes. The framework demonstrates the region's commitment to the global vision of ending mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and provides a region-appropriate and systematic approach.

Let me take this opportunity to thank our colleagues in UN partner agencies and all those who contributed to the preparation of the regional framework, including participants of regional and country level consultations, clinical experts, government and civil society representatives, and people who are themselves affected by HIV.

Countries are urged to use the framework to develop country plans consistent with their HIV epidemic profile and local realities. The bold targets are intended to catalyse the implementation of quality PMTCT interventions at country level on a scale necessary to guarantee impact.

The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, together with its partners, is committed to supporting countries in their efforts to reach this goal.

Let us all commit to the people in our region and work hard to keep the promise that we can and will together eliminate new HIV infections in children and that we will keep mothers alive.

I thank you for your attention.