



**Address by**  
**Dr ALA ALWAN**  
**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**  
**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

to the

**JOINT WHO AND LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES MEETING TO ENHANCE THE  
ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN HEALTH AND THE  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AGENDA IN THE EASTERN  
MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

**Cairo, Egypt, 23–24 August 2015**

Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this joint WHO and League of Arab States meeting on enhancing the role of civil society organizations in health and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I would like to thank Dr Haifa Abou Ghazaleh, the Assistant Secretary General, League of Arab States, in charge of the Media and Communications sector, and her team for their efforts in making this event a reality.

Let me start by sharing with you some of the key health priorities that WHO has been addressing in the Region over recent years.

One of our first priorities has been improving maternal and child health and supporting country progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 4 and 5. Between 1990 and 2013, there was a reduction in child mortality of around 46% and maternal mortality by 50% but still more could have been achieved given the advances in our knowledge and experience and the availability of cost-effective interventions. WHO has worked closely in partnership with other agencies to provide support to countries with the highest burdens of maternal and child mortality by developing and implementing national maternal and child health acceleration plans that included selected evidence-based and cost-effective interventions along the continuum of care and based on country priorities.

Another priority has been communicable diseases. More than 1.3 million children did not receive DPT3 vaccines in 2013. The focus of WHO's work with countries has been on vaccine-preventable diseases, including measles and polio, which remain endemic in our Region, and on

achieving MDG 6 to combat HIV, TB and malaria. Another area of focus has been addressing the threat to health security and the need to strengthen country capacity to detect, assess, prevent and control emerging disease threats. A review of national capacity showed that only seven countries in the Region were declared ready in the case of an outbreak. This highlights the challenges in light of the emergence of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and the threat posed by the recent outbreak of Ebola virus disease.

A third priority is noncommunicable diseases, which account for over 60% of all deaths in the Region. While life expectancy has increased, so has the magnitude of premature deaths caused by cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases. Rates of tobacco use have also increased, with prevalence of waterpipe use among younger people increasing alarmingly. Regional intake of fat, salt and sugar is high, and as a region we have some of the highest levels of physical inactivity. This is fuelling the epidemic of obesity among adults and children, and contributing to increasing rates of diabetes and hypertension. People are dying at too young an age from NCDs, and this is having a negative impact not only on quality of life but socioeconomic development.

In order to respond to the NCD crisis, in 2011, at the UN General Assembly meeting, governments endorsed the United Nations Political Declaration on the Prevention and Control of NCDs. The Political Declaration identifies key areas for action and a set of cost-effective interventions, known as “best buys”, to reduce the burden of NCDs. In October 2012, the Regional Office developed a regional framework for action, a roadmap for countries of the region to implement the Political Declaration, including cost-effective interventions in the four key areas of governance; prevention and reduction of risk factors; surveillance, monitoring and evaluation; and health care.

A fourth priority has been health systems development with focus on two key areas – universal health coverage, ensuring that all people obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them, and financial risk protection, to prevent people from being pushed into poverty when they are forced to pay for health services out of their own pockets.

A final priority is emergency preparedness and response. Our region is prone to manmade and natural disasters. The number and magnitude of crises are unprecedented, with more than half of the countries in the Region affected by crises and emergencies. The humanitarian crises in Syria, Iraq and Yemen are categorized as level 3 – the highest level of humanitarian emergency.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The role of civil society organizations is crucial in supporting efforts to address health challenges in the region. We have seen civil society organizations playing a key role in responding to the various needs of populations in countries where governments have been destabilized. We have also witnessed a duplication of roles and responses demonstrating a lack of coordination and

collaboration between organizations themselves and with government. At a time when resources are scarce, we cannot afford this duplication of efforts.

Without greater mobilization of civil society organizations, with a shared agenda, and mechanisms for collaboration and coordination, efforts to address population health needs will remain ad hoc.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The upcoming discussion on the SDGs is important. These goals will set the agenda for countries for the coming decade. We need to ensure that the role of civil society organizations in health is enhanced, especially in light of regional challenges. There is a need to work together and support each other's efforts towards a common and single goal: "Healthy people in a safe and healthy environment".

I am confident that this meeting will provide a strategic platform for collective thinking on practical ways to strengthen the role and engagement of civil society organizations in health and the SDG agenda.

Thank you and I wish you a successful meeting.