

Opening Address by
DR AHMED AL-MANDHARI
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the
SIXTY-FIFTH SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE
Khartoum, Sudan, 15-18 October 2018

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Your Excellencies, Ministers of Health and Heads of Delegations, Director-General, Honourable guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to welcome you all to the sixty-fifth session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.

This is my first Regional Committee as a Regional Director. I would like to start by thanking you all – our Member States, partners and esteemed WHO colleagues – for the welcome and support you have given me during the first months of my time in office.

I would also like to pay tribute to my predecessors, in particular Dr Mahmoud Fikri, whose tenure was cut so tragically short by his untimely passing last year, and Dr Jaouad Mahjour, who ably stepped in as Acting Regional Director.

Your Excellency, Professor Mohamed Abu Ziad Mustafa, Federal Minister of Health of Sudan, please allow me to extend a sincere vote of thanks to you, your predecessor Professor Bahr Idris Abo Garda, and through you to His Excellency the President of the Republic and the Government of Sudan for hosting this meeting and for your excellent cooperation, disciplined preparations, generous hospitality and cordial reception.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a special year in the history of WHO for several reasons. It is 70 years since this Organization was founded and 40 years since the Declaration of Alma-Ata on Primary Health Care. When world leaders adopted the WHO Constitution, they truly believed that health, as defined by the Constitution, is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” and they recognized the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental human right. Thirty years later these principles were reaffirmed at Alma-Ata, where primary health care was also recognized as critical to achieving Health for All.

Today, I would like to renew the call for Health for All, but I want to stress that Health for All can only be achieved **by effective engagement of All**. We need to engage everyone – governments, professionals, nongovernmental organizations, our sister United Nations agencies, communities, civil society and individuals – as proactive agents for change. It is only **by working together, putting hands together and establishing alliances** that we can ensure the attainment of health to all people in our Region. This is highlighted in our new vision in the Region.

Your Excellencies,

The presence of our WHO Director General, Dr Tedros, is an important driver and catalyst. His speech to Sudanese health stakeholders last night was inspiring.

Dr Tedros, welcome to our Regional Committee. Let me assure you that the transformation agenda you introduced is growing not only roots in our Region, but also branches, leaves and flowers and we are expecting to reap its fruits.

Today, we are changing the way we are working. We have begun with ourselves in the Regional Office. I am shaking the tree to let the dry leaves fall and remove the obstacles that hinder us from being a dynamic, agile Organization.

For this reason, Your Excellencies, immediately after I took over as Regional Director, I launched an extensive consultation process to carefully study the existing situation, analyse strengths and weaknesses and identify appropriate strategies and actions to improve our ways of doing business, optimize our operational models, be closer to where we should be and enhance the Organization's visibility and image in the Region.

I am going to say more about that process, and share some of its first fruits with you, later today when I introduce the Annual Report. But I would like to begin by outlining some key facets of my vision for the Region.

Your Excellencies,

My conviction is that the greatest asset of our Region is its people. We have a long and proud history of scholarship, innovation and imagination. We need to draw on our rich tradition and find imaginative solutions to improve public health.

The energy, enthusiasm and creativity of our young people should be harnessed and nurtured; they must contribute to our vision; they know better the digital world; they are our future leaders in health.

I believe that innovation and technology are essential to give WHO and our national partners the tools we need to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. We are establishing a working group to develop a strategy on integrating advanced technologies such as electronic medical records, telemedicine, eLearning, m-health and social media into our health work.

Your Excellencies,

I believe working with communities must be at the heart of what we do. Bringing services into these communities ensures that health needs are addressed, especially for the most vulnerable including women, children, people with disabilities, displaced populations, refugees, migrants, nomadic groups and the inhabitants of rural and slum areas.

The challenges that confront us are enormous. Many of our countries, and millions of our people, are afflicted by the dreadful consequences of emergencies. But I refuse to view them simply as victims. The people of the Eastern Mediterranean are resilient, clever and caring. They are a precious resource. Even the poorest and most vulnerable have something to offer if we can find proper ways to engage them.

For me, community members are not merely recipients of services; they can actively contribute. Self-care, self-examination, healthy lifestyles and caring for the environment are only possible by people empowered to be responsible for their health and that of their families. Community-based initiatives that were introduced in this Region many years ago, such as healthy villages, healthy cities, healthy markets and health-promoting schools, empower communities to become a key partner in addressing health issues at the local, national and regional levels – and even internationally. I will make community engagement a higher priority.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have visited various countries in the Region; I have met with policy-makers and many experts. Without exception, I have been overwhelmed by the welcome I received, and very impressed by the innovative health approaches I have seen. I have learned a lot. Each country in our Region has something to offer, be it financial, material, innovation, technology, human resources or ideas. I am convinced that our countries have a lot to share with each other and the world. They have many experiences and best practices to exchange. I look forward to visit the remaining countries – to learning more, sharing more and doing more to achieve Health for All by All.

As Regional Director, my duty is to catalyse and facilitate the exchange of ideas. I can propose a vision or strategies or actions, but it is only you, our Member States, who can take this vision and drive its implementation.

Your Excellencies,

The new global strategy for WHO, GPW 13, was adopted by the World Health Assembly last May. We committed to contributing to the “triple-billion” goals to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. At this session of the Regional Committee, we are presenting four technical papers that explore how to implement GPW 13 in our Region. The vision of Health for All by All is an essential counterpart to that work.

Collaboration, innovation, appropriate technology and bringing services closer to the communities who need them are the pillars of our work for the future. I dream of a Region that is stronger and united. I will encourage a participatory and cooperative approach with and among Member States in tackling the health problems that face us.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to leave you with this image. It is the famous redwoods near San Francisco. The redwoods there are among the oldest trees on earth; some of them are more than 1000 years old. Interestingly, the roots of these trees grow at the surface and never go deep in the soil. Their roots move towards each other and form an intricate network so that the trees support each other to stand tall and keep from falling.

This is a lesson from the Creator: together, we can support and strengthen each other.

You are the regional leaders of a noble profession. You are committed advocates of well-being and happiness. I salute your dedication and leadership. Let us work towards a safe, secure, productive and united Region.

I trust we can make it.

I believe we can make it.

We can make it.