



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Address by**

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**to the**

**HIGH-LEVEL REGIONAL FORUM ON A LIFE COURSE APPROACH  
TO PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 24–25 February 2014**

Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank all of you for being here today. It is a great honour to organize this special event under the patronage of Her Royal Highness, the UN Messenger of Peace and Chairperson of Dubai Healthcare City Authority, Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, wife of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, whose passion, commitment and dedication to the improvement of people's health is well known.

It is an honour also to be joined by so many ministers of health, education, youth and sports, urban planning and transportation by and senior officials from Member States of the Region and experts from all around the globe.

Indeed this event is unprecedented. It is probably the first time in this region that WHO has held an event that brings together so many high-level delegates from different sectors to discuss and agree on concrete actions that need to take place to promote physical activity among the general population.

So what is so important about physical activity that it requires this high-level attention?

The answer is simple: Physical inactivity is a real public health problem. Inadequate physical activity is one of the four main risk factors responsible for the alarming increase in the

magnitude of noncommunicable diseases like heart disease, cancers and diabetes, and which are today responsible for more than 60% of deaths worldwide. A large proportion of these deaths are premature, occurring during the most productive period of life, and resulting not only in enormous human suffering but also impeding socioeconomic development, particularly in developing populations. . Physical inactivity is estimated to be the main cause, globally, for around 27% of diabetes, 30% of ischaemic heart disease and 21% to 25% of breast and colon cancer. It is the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Approximately 31% of the world's population is not sufficiently physically active to prevent these serious health problems and to obtain the protective health benefits that moderate activity can confer. The data from our region shows a wide, and indeed alarming, variation in the levels of physical inactivity, ranging from about 30% of the population to as high as 70% in some countries. More disturbing is the fact that, based on WHO estimates, our region is the least physically active among all the WHO regions. Very few countries have programmes and policies in place to support physical activity. Reasons for this include the lack of awareness about the adverse health implications of physical inactivity, existence of barriers to physical activity, lack of effective national initiatives, and inadequate commitment and engagement of the various government sectors.

In this respect, it is important to emphasize that physical activity refers not only to sport and strenuous exercise. It refers to any kind of activity that involves mobility, including recreation, cycling and walking.

So, what should our countries do to improve physical activity?

Globally, Member States have committed to a range of actions to reduce the impact of this risk factor. In 2004, the World Health Assembly endorsed a global strategy on diet, physical activity and health (resolution WHA57.17), which called on Member States to develop national plans to promote physical activity. In 2011, Heads of States and Governments at the United Nations, as part of the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, renewed the call for Member States to take concrete actions to reduce physical inactivity. And last year, the World Health Assembly endorsed a voluntary global target of a 10% reduction in physical inactivity by 2025.

At the regional level, at the 59th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, Member States adopted a framework for action to implement the United Nations Political Declaration. This includes the implementation of the global recommendations on physical activity and conducting mass media campaigns on the importance of healthy diet and the benefits of physical activity. In October last year, the Ministers of Health and their delegations highlighted the need to scale up work to implement the regional framework for action.

Later this year, the United Nations General Assembly, will review the progress countries are making in implementing the political declaration which will include action taken to promote physical activity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Everybody has the right, and should be able, to walk freely, and to have leisure sites and sports available and accessible, regardless of age, gender and culture. If we are serious about addressing physical inactivity; all sectors will need to work together to achieve the common goals and commitments laid down in the United Nations Political Declaration.

Urban planning sectors should ensure that streets and parks are available for people to walk in and exercise safely. The education sector should ensure that physical education and activity are an integral part of the school curriculum. The transportation system should be easily accessible so that people rely less on their personal cars. Employers should provide employees with the opportunity to exercise at the worksite.

Promoting active and healthy populations requires multisectoral collaboration, if it is to reach all age groups and be successful.

The aim of this forum is primarily to raise awareness of the global commitments to promoting physical activity. We also hope that this forum will witness the birth of a strong regional movement aiming for collective action to achieve healthy and active societies in this region.

These two days will be an opportunity to share global and regional success stories and experiences in promoting physical activity, to draw lessons and to agree on a clear outline for a multisectoral roadmap for promoting physical activity in countries of the Region.

I hope also that this forum will represent a platform for creating a multisectoral network of experts and institutions on physical activity that would implement the recommendations of the United Nations Political Declaration and the regional framework for action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish you a fruitful forum and I look forward to hearing your recommendations for promoting physical activity in the Region in order to reduce the avoidable burden of death and disease.

Thank you