

Address by

**DR AHMED AL-MANDHARI**

**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

on the occasion of

**THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGIONAL OFFICE  
TOWN HALL ON YOUNG ENGAGEMENT IN HEALTH**

**4 December 2018**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Dr Diah Samirnasih, Senior Advisor to the Director-General of WHO

Representatives of our partner UN and non-UN organizations

Dr John Jabbour, WHO Representative in Egypt

My dear young fellows from different walks of life, colleagues from WHO's Regional Office,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As-salamu alaykum and welcome to this first Town Hall on Youth Engagement in Health at  
WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office.

I am very proud and excited to be with you today in this room.

I am proud to see, through your presence here, that young people in Egypt and the Eastern  
Mediterranean Region consider health an important subject and want to be seriously engaged  
in health protection and promotion.

And I am excited that the engagement of young people in health will bring additional  
momentum, energy and optimism to the implementation of WHO's vision to improve health  
in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Dear colleagues,

As you are aware, this is a challenging time for our Region. Several countries are facing  
conflicts, social disruption, a heavy burden of disease, economic decline and other negative  
trends. However, the Region as a whole, and especially countries such as Egypt, have one  
particularly valuable asset: a large number of young people.

I joined WHO as its new Regional Director in June 2018. From the beginning of my tenure, I  
have said that the high proportion of young people in countries of the Region is a significant

reason to be optimistic that we can bring about change in health and well-being indicators in this Region.

Drawing on the wisdom of experienced colleagues from across the Region, recently we developed our new Vision 2023 for the Region. This vision is a call for solidarity and action to achieve Health for All by All. Improving health is not controversial, concerns everyone and can pay big dividends in enhancing development and prosperity in the Region.

We have set four strategic priorities to make our vision a reality:

1. We will work to expand universal health coverage.
2. We will endeavour to address health emergencies.
3. We will strive to promote healthier populations and not just control diseases.
4. And to achieve all this, we at WHO will transform ourselves as an organization.

Colleagues,

Young people have a role in each of these four strategic directions and accompanying actions to improve health in the Region. The world today has the largest generation of young people in history with 1.8 billion between the ages of 10 and 24 years. In this Region alone, almost two-thirds of the population are under 30, making it the most youthful region in the world with a median age of just 22 years. If we want to expand universal health coverage in Egypt and other countries, young people must be part of that endeavour. To protect the lives of people from natural and man-made hazards, youth must be included in preparedness and response activities. To go beyond disease control and promote healthier and happier populations, I cannot imagine any action plan that does not involve youth.

Even to transform WHO, as an organization, I am counting on my young colleagues who are staff members, interns, consultants and volunteers with us. Many of you here today – those who are not directly associated with WHO – are equally relevant to this transformation process because your enthusiasm, innovative ideas and energy add to our efforts to change the way we at WHO serve our Member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The health of young people themselves is a powerful factor to encourage youth engagement in health issues. As one of the largest population segments in the Region, young people are also one of those most affected by the dual burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases. Key health issues for youth in the Region include tobacco consumption, high rates of physical inactivity and obesity, and road traffic mortality and injuries. None of us working to improve public health – WHO, governments, civil society and nongovernmental organizations – can address these problems without the active involvement and contribution of young people.

So how can we best engage young people? That is the fundamental question we want to ask you through this Town Hall.

We recognize there are bigger issues for you at this stage of life: setting a direction for your life, getting employment, settling down in life and above all enjoying the best years that life has to offer. However, I am sure you will agree that health is also critical. Good health is an asset for you and for us all. If you are healthy, if your society is healthy, you will prosper faster. Your aspirations for a better life will be realized quicker than anticipated and your sense of fulfillment may be even greater than you had hoped.

Therefore, I call upon you to benefit from this opportunity. Speak your mind today. Give us suggestions on how to engage with you, how to work with you to make health in Egypt and our Region better, how to make your own health better and how collectively we can bring hope and optimism to this Region.

Lastly, I would like to remind you of the words of someone wise who once said:

إِنَّ لِمَ يَشْتَرِكُ الشَّبَابُ فِي صُنْعِ الْحَيَاةِ فَهَنَالِكَ آخَرُونَ  
سَوْفَ يُجْبَرُونَهُمْ عَلَى الْحَيَاةِ الَّتِي يَصْنَعُونَهَا.

*If youth do not participate in building life, others will force them to accept the life they choose for them.*

My young colleagues,

Let us work together to improve your health, and through young people, bring positive change in the health of millions of people in our societies.

I trust you will have good and productive time in this Town Hall today.

I leave you in the able hands of my colleagues.

Thank you.