

Opening address of H.E. Dr Ahmed bin Mohamed bin Obaid Al Saidi, Minister of Health of Oman, to the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, Muscat, Oman, 27 October 2013

Your Highness Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq al Said, Minister of Heritage and Culture and Patron of the Regional Committee

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Peace be upon you

I am pleased to cordially welcome you all to the opening ceremony of the Sixtieth Session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, which is being held for the first time in Muscat. We are honoured and grateful for the choice of the Sultanate of Oman as the venue for this important event and we wish you all a pleasant stay.

Your Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen

The technical meetings of the Regional Committee were held earlier today and discussed five high priority health topics. For the next three days, we have a very busy agenda and will be discussing significant issues that will shape a new strategic vision for health in the Region. The challenges faced by the Region and the changes recently witnessed have simultaneously highlighted strengths, unearthed some weaknesses and identified disparities in capacities to address and respond to health problems. This requires a scaling up of efforts and improvements in the quality of performance.

Your Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen

Over the last few decades, governments in the Region, together with partners who have shown interest, commitment and constant support, have succeeded in implementing many programmes and initiatives with a view to preserving public health. This meeting is held at a time of major developments and changes from the perspective of health and the emergence of several priority health issues which make it imperative to exert even greater effort and commitment to improve the health of our populations.

Today, a number of countries in the Region are witnessing political, social and economic changes. The last two years have been eventful and unearthed significant variations in the response of health systems to these changes. This has underscored the need for prompt implementation of measures to bridge the gaps.

Despite all efforts, demographic changes among populations of the Region continue to increase as a result of increased life expectancy, increasing numbers of older people and growing urbanization with social and economic transformation, radical shifts in the epidemiology of diseases and their burden on individuals, households and societies at large.

Alignment between the requirements of health development and increasing health expenditure constitutes a key challenge to prevent a decline in indicators of health care. In response, unconventional strategies need to be adopted in order to finance health expenditure.

Your Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen

Strengthening health systems and enhancing health equity are essential to advance comprehensive development. Each journey of development, no matter how successful, needs periodic checks and assessments to measure strengths and weaknesses and to follow the right course. Therefore, sound planning based on scientific evidence is the proper approach which helps delineate a roadmap for societies to be able to address challenges and attain expected goals.

In Oman, we acknowledge the importance of planning and are interested in reviewing and evaluating the health services that we provide and in addressing the challenges that lie ahead with the aim of providing high quality health services that meet the aspirations of Omanis and expatriates alike. This has motivated us to develop a clear vision of our health situation until 2050 and draw up a roadmap of which activities should be undertaken until that date.

Likewise, WHO and countries in the Region face two major tasks. Firstly, WHO restructuring and financing should be revisited. As you may know, great support is needed for WHO programmes in order that they are able to assist all countries in strengthening their health systems in the face of health emergencies. Secondly, there is a need to integrate universal health coverage into the development agenda of all countries. Hence, we should work together to identify the key health system issues and address them in light of the respective needs and circumstances of each country.

We should continue to promote an approach based on primary health care, which is concerned with health throughout the life course. Meanwhile, work with partners across other sectors should be intensified. Unfortunately, important measures for the prevention of noncommunicable diseases are not taken seriously enough even though the United Nations Political Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases has laid out a clear and specific vision for actions which should be observed by all.

The increasing incidence of noncommunicable diseases poses a significant challenge to the capacity of health care systems. These challenges need to be addressed and the method of health care delivery reconsidered. One thing I would like to highlight is that establishing partnerships with governmental and nongovernmental sectors is imperative and should be undertaken.

Your Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen

These important issues and others will be discussed by the Regional Committee over the next three days, including universal health coverage, the regional strategy on health and the environment, saving the lives of mothers and children, the International Health Regulations

(IHR), prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases and the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems as the cornerstones of scaling up health systems, in addition to other new technical, management and financial issues.

This Regional Committee session will provide a good opportunity to discuss the implications that these issues have on the effectiveness of our health systems and to identify ways to draw upon the strengths in the Region and to underscore the inevitable need to work together under all circumstances and at all times. I am hopeful that the ideas and experiences will be translated into action on the ground and that effective resolutions will be issued that will contribute to enhancing the mutual work to be done in the Region.

Your Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased and honoured to convey to you the directions of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to contribute an amount of US\$ 5 million to polio eradication efforts. I take this opportunity to extend the sincerest appreciation and deepest gratitude to His Majesty for this most generous gesture.

In conclusion, I would like to express the deepest appreciation of His Highness Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq al Said, Patron of the Committee. I also express my heartfelt thanks to Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, all staff at the Regional Office, Dr Abdullah Saleh Assaedi, WHO's Representative in Oman, and to all staff at the WHO country office in Oman. Also, I would like to thank all heads and members of the committees who supervised the preparation and organization of this event.

I wish you all success and appreciate your participation in the Regional Committee proceedings.

Good luck