



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from
DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
to the
INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON DEVELOPING A REGIONAL STRATEGY
FOR THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION ON COMMUNITY-BASED
REHABILITATION
Pakistan, 16–18 July 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Intercountry Meeting on Developing a Regional Strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean Region on Community Based-Rehabilitation.

WHO estimates that around 600 million people are living with some form of disability worldwide; almost 10% of the world population. Currently, more than 40 million people with disabilities are estimated to live in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Epidemiological transition resulting from population growth, ageing, emergence of chronic diseases and medical advances that preserve and prolong life, have an impact on the incidence of disabilities. In addition to people with permanent physical disabilities, many others may require rehabilitation services for a period of time because of temporary disability caused by conditions such as fractures, trauma or postoperative recovery. Road traffic injuries are common in the Region, leading to even higher numbers of disabilities. Moreover, the Eastern Mediterranean Region is highly prone to disasters, both naturally-occurring and man-made, which result in a high number of disabilities. Pakistan, the country which is hosting this meeting, provides a tough example of large scale disabilities due to natural disaster.

While endorsing the growing trend towards expanding effective primary prevention for diseases and injuries and all causes of disabilities, we should not ignore the increasing number of affected people who need rehabilitation services to attain the highest possible level of functional ability in the shortest possible time. People already affected by disability, or those who may become affected despite all preventive efforts, have the right to a healthy and dignified life. We must recognize the real need for rehabilitation and full participation of persons with disabilities. This is not only a need, nor a demand, but it is also their right.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting provides a wonderful chance to turn words and promises into deeds and action—to make a difference in the real lives of people with disability, by tapping existing opportunities. For some years now, the Regional Office in its pursuit of health for all, has advocated the approach of community-based initiatives, covering at present a population of nearly 18 million people in 17 countries of the Region. Recognizing the crucial role of empowered communities, community-based initiatives address the major determinants of health within a broad perspective of development, and create access to the essential social services with an optimum level of equity at the grassroots level. They represent an excellent platform for integration of different health-related interventions including the rehabilitation programmes.

People with disabilities can receive more care and support if the community in which they live is organized and trained for this purpose. Communities need to be educated with regard to how they can provide effective and efficient contribution to the lives of disabled people, so that they can overcome the obstacles they face from day-to-day. Without the involvement of the people with disabilities, their families and their community resources it will be impossible to achieve reasonable coverage for the great majority of people with disabilities. Community-based rehabilitation seeks to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to rehabilitation and other services and opportunities—health, education and income—as do all other members of society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Other opportunities include the different structured approaches that have evolved in recent years, towards addressing the rights of people with disabilities. The latest

achievement was the adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the UN General Assembly, on 13 December 2006. The ratification process for this legally binding instrument began in March 2007.

The United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, issued following the 1982 “World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons”, should also be noted. The Programme emphasized the need to approach disability from a human rights perspective. The United Nations declared the years 1983 to 1992 as the Decade of Disabled Persons, and in 1993, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Standard Rules. However, many years after the adoption of these Standard Rules, their application in different countries remains uneven.

WHO has taken a number of steps. In 2001, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, which aims to help operationalize data collection and improve monitoring, was officially endorsed by the Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly. In 2005, the Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly issued an important resolution (WHA58.23) aimed at substantially improving the lives of people with disabilities and which urged Member States, among other things, to promote and strengthen community-based rehabilitation programmes; and to strengthen national programmes, policies and strategies for the implementation of the UN Standard Rules.

At regional level, in 1999, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean collected information through its Member States and nongovernmental organizations working on disability. The results highlighted the need for rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities in order for them to reach and sustain their optimum level of independence and functioning and to assist them to increase their level of independence in their daily living. A regional meeting on the implementation of the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities also held in Cairo, at the Regional Office, in May 2006.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task ahead is a difficult one: to draw up a strategic plan for community-based rehabilitation in the Region in order to ensure that people with disabilities participate fully in their communities and enjoy the same rights as everyone else in all social and economic aspects of life.

We need to consider ways in which to make use of the successful experience in community-based initiatives in the Region. I would like to urge your assistance in engaging communities in the development of a locally-based disability profile and in training them on directing local resources for the support of disabled. In this manner, we will move forward, towards a community where people with disabilities are no longer marginalized and alienated, but part of a cohesive society in which they are given an equal chance to become active members in the development process.

I wish you a successful meeting. May God bless you all.