Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this technical consultation on a Regional Strategy for the Control and Prevention of Cancer in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, taking place in the beautiful and majestic city of Marrakesh. I am grateful to the Lalla Salma Association for initiating this move towards developing a regional alliance among interested parties for more effective prevention and control of cancer in the WHO Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I am also pleased to note the presence of this large number of experts from different areas of cancer control and the participation of members of civil societies and partner organizations. This combination of cancer experts, opinion makers and change agents participating in a common forum is a unique event which leads me to the belief that this consultation will be a watershed in the history of cancer control and prevention in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Recent WHO estimates indicate that cancer is the fourth ranked cause of death among the adult population in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and north Africa, following
closely on the heels of cardiovascular diseases, infectious and parasitic diseases, and injuries. Not only does cancer kill over 270,000 people every year in the region, but over the years it is projected to increase in magnitude as a serious public health problem, rising in incidence and mortality, spiralling upwards as populations continue to grow in age and in number.

It is estimated that up to 40% of all cancer deaths can be prevented by reducing tobacco use, improving diet and physical activity, lowering alcohol consumption, eliminating workplace carcinogens and immunizing against hepatitis B virus and the human papillomavirus. Similarly, a large proportion of cancer cases can be cured if detected early, and the rest managed effectively with appropriate palliative care. While there may be some variation in the figure between Member States, I believe that significant improvement in the control of cancer can be brought about in all Member States with broad-based and effective coordination of technical, administrative and managerial approaches.

Pursuant to this line of thinking, the Regional Office embarked upon developing a regional cancer control strategy, with the intention of providing a foundation for the development of a coordinated approach. Such an approach must take advantage of the regional strengths and resources in order to overcome current weaknesses in cancer control, in the process emphasizing strong and sustained regional collaboration and coordination.

I must immediately stress the fact that a regional strategy of this nature cannot replace individual national cancer control plans, development of which will always remain within the domain of the responsible national authorities. However, there are certain benefits to be derived from having a regional strategy. To begin with, this strategy will sensitize national health policy-makers about the importance of effective cancer control programmes. It will also provide technical guidance and a basic template of approaches which may be introduced as broad-based public health measures, as well as specific clinical interventions, to hopefully minimize, if not reverse, the current rapid increase in cancer mortality and morbidity taking place in our Member States.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The intended audience for the regional strategy comprises national policy and decision-makers, directly or indirectly involved in cancer control, covering the spectrum of political, technical, financial and consumer interests; health professionals and technical experts in cancer control and prevention; international and bilateral stakeholders that have strong interest in or are involved with cancer control and prevention; and above all, civil society and consumer interest groups.

The objectives of this consultation, which reflect our underlying principles for developing the regional strategy, are to review and finalize the draft regional strategy for the control and prevention of cancer in the Eastern Mediterranean Region; to establish the general and specific priorities of action for cancer control and prevention in the Member States; and to develop a regional alliance and network of all partners and stakeholders involved in cancer control and prevention.

Creation of a regional alliance of interested partners for cancer control is a novel task for us and I am grateful that the Lalla Salma Association is giving us a helpful hand. I am confident that the alliance that will emerge will be a robust entity, well-prepared to respond to the emerging challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A point of concern is the inadequacy of resources for effective cancer control in most of our Member States. The resources available for cancer control in most of the Member States are not only inadequate, but are directed almost exclusively at treatment. Such an approach, although successful to some extent, is not appropriate because the curability of cancer is directly related to its stage at the time of diagnosis, and in the majority of our Member States, cancer is generally diagnosed when it is already at a relatively advanced stage.

I have been concerned about this resource shortage for quite some time. When preparations for this consultation were started, I instructed my staff to invite all the interested donors, technical partners and stakeholders to this consultation to explore avenues for overcoming this constraint which persistently cripples our efforts. The third day of this
consultation has been dedicated towards the creation of a regional alliance for cancer control, which I have already referred to. In this context I would strongly request you to devote sufficient time to establishing a mechanism for ensuring sustained availability of funds for effective cancer control. To my colleagues from the international and bilateral organizations, my urgent plea to you is that you do not leave this consultation without ensuring that sufficient funds have been committed to begin a new and dynamic chapter of our efforts in cancer control.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you a successful consultation.

Thank you.