

**Address by**

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**to the**

**SEVENTIETH SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE  
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

**Cairo, Egypt, 9–12 October 2023**

Your Excellencies, Members of the Regional Committee,  
My dear brother Dr Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General,  
Heads of Diplomatic Missions,  
Honourable Representatives of United Nations Agencies and Community-based  
Organizations,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May peace, mercy and the blessings of God be upon you.

It is my great pleasure to join you all today for the 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean at the WHO Regional Office in Egypt, during WHO's 75th anniversary year.

This is my last Regional Committee in the role of WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. Given the difficult times the world is going through, particularly in our Region, it is a moment for me to look back with pride at every path we have charted together, every hard time that we have faced, every obstacle we have overcome, and every success we have, by the grace of God, attained.

Your Excellencies,

It has been an honour to serve you and serve with you. However, I think it is only human to also reflect on regrets, work that remains undone and the challenges ahead – this is essential as we cannot rest until we can proclaim that we have achieved Health for All by All.

In discussing the realities of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, one must generally begin by noting the prevalence and impact of conflict. This year has been no different and we have been reminded how quickly gains made can evaporate in the face of conflict or natural disasters. This is painful for all of us who believe in the right to the highest attainable level of health and well-

being for all, especially for colleagues who serve in emergency settings where that often seems a utopian dream and success is a matter of simply preserving life.

But we stand and deliver, and do so proudly – there is no room for backtracking. One of the most serious struggles we face is not just to preserve life, but hope – we cannot give in to complacency; it is simply not an option. I cannot accept the notion of our being overwhelmed by “fatigue” when we are called on to dig deep and find resources to serve the most vulnerable and I hope neither can you.

Political stability is fragile and nature often shows us who is really in charge. We are all too aware that any one of us might be impacted in our lifetime, so it should be a given that we extend generosity to those who have got the short end of the stick. And that is what we have seen from all of you in responding to the numerous challenges we have encountered. In 2010, this Regional Committee endorsed a health solidarity fund, and I would like to use this opportunity to call on all Member States to consider contributing to that fund, which I believe should be revitalized to facilitate rapid live-saving responses and smart investments in health.

In terms of non-negotiable best buys on health, noncommunicable diseases account for the largest share of premature deaths and disability, including in our Region. This is compounded in acute conflict settings as those with chronic conditions requiring regular medical attention or medication face significantly higher risks when those services are disrupted, or they themselves are displaced. Tragically, we have lost many people who were left high and dry by the absence of crucial services like dialysis, pediatric therapeutic feeding, or proper obstetric care, or through the interruption of immunization programmes against infectious diseases and other essential health services.

While responding to humanitarian needs, we must continue to push for forward-looking approaches even in the midst of crisis. This means protecting investments in human capital, preserving systems and innovating to bridge the acute crisis towards a better tomorrow. This approach was endorsed by world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly last month.

In this regard, it is also critical that we also forge ahead when times are more stable, allowing us to shape the future today rather than waiting for tomorrow. This will ensure a smoother path for future generations, just as previous generations did for us.

The link between health and climate change is very real, and average temperatures in our Region are rising faster than the global average. Along with loss of biodiversity, disruption of ecosystems, and reduced food production from crops, fisheries and livestock, we face increased mortality and morbidity from increased temperatures and the spread of infectious diseases – even those we thought we had left in the rearview mirror. This is not some future calamity for which we need to develop contingency plans; it is happening now and we need to take decisive action now. In this Region, we can be proud that the upcoming COP28 climate conference in the United Arab Emirates will highlight this by bringing together the health and climate communities for the first ever dedicated health day on 3 December this year.

Words like integration, alignment and defragmentation have been overused, but I am proud of the efforts we have made to decompartmentalize health by pursuing holistic approaches that put people at the centre. This is clear from our report on our work over the last five years, which I will present in more detail later, and WHO remains committed to help translate these words into concrete, actionable plans and operational delivery.

Above all, it is clear that we must keep working together to achieve our vision of Health for All by All. Slogans come and go, but the spirit should remain as a driving force. To make this vision effective and meaningful, we must all work together – and keep working.

Too often, incentives favour siloes and divide-and-conquer approaches. We all have preferences and areas of expertise, but if we put those ahead of people's right to the best possible health outcomes, we have already failed. Here, I want to emphasize that working together within the health sector means consolidating strategies, responses and resources. By and large, we know "what" works; the "how" benefits from setting aside narrow individual objectives by combining broad-based buy-in and finances to deliver sustainable results behind clear, country-owned priorities, plans and leadership. WHO is proud to use its convening power to make this happen.

One such example means joining forces with Multilateral Development Banks and other resource partners to help strengthen and enhance the resilience of primary health care-led health systems through the Health Impact Investing Platform, spearheaded by WHO's Director-General and President Hoyer of the European Investment Bank. WHO in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is proud to partner in this with priority countries aimed at delivering care that people can see at a level of quality they can trust. Let me take this opportunity to recognize the wise leadership in all this of my dear brother, Dr Tedros.

We must embrace the opportunity presented by the fact that 90% of all essential interventions for universal health coverage can be delivered through a primary health care approach. How could we ignore the potential to save lives and increase life expectancy? I trust that the reaffirmation of this at the UN General Assembly last month will translate into renewed momentum here in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Of course, health cannot not just be achieved within or by the health sector. It is intricately linked with the human condition itself, and I would argue one of the true acid tests of the Sustainable Development Agenda with its five Ps of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. Health and well-being must be a cross-cutting priority.

Individuals value health as a priority, but this is largely not reflected in policy priorities and various analyses continue to rank insufficient political will as one of the most persistent barriers to progress on health. But by contrast, having worked with Your Excellencies and seen leadership in action – whether by Qatar on sports and health at the 2022 Football World Cup and beyond, Jordan on tobacco control with His Majesty the King boldly voicing his unequivocal support, Egypt on spotlighting population, health and development by hosting a global congress. I know the passion for health leadership in this Region and I know that the will is here in this room, but we need to translate valuable lessons into practice and work together to push health to the top of political agendas, investment priorities and plans. While the average

per capita spent on health needs to increase globally, I hope to soon see the Eastern Mediterranean Region surpass the average as a testament to what we know to be true of our Region – that we can do anything we set our minds on – not only to allocate and spend more money, but to do better with the funds we have, including addressing persistent inequalities in the right to health within the Region.

I want to briefly mention a couple of frontier issues that we must keep in mind. The world is undergoing significant demographic transitions, with parts of the world getting older and others younger. This has direct implications for health and our ability to safeguard it. To make informed decisions, we need to understand both the supply and the demand sides of health, what drives change at different levels and why. I am very pleased that WHO is consolidating its work on incorporating behavioural insights into its work – and we are strengthening our capacity in the Region to support Member States in this critical area.

By 2050, two in every three people will live in cities, and we will be more connected across borders than ever. Rapid urbanization necessitates solutions to ensure healthy environments for all. For informed decision-making, we also need to keep abreast of technological developments – to harness the benefits of digital and AI-powered health care solutions, we need adequate regulation, and to counter mis- and discommunication and politicization of health, we need to build trust and an all-in compact with the global citizenry. All these place additional demands on the health workforce, those everyday heroes and heroines who always deserve our support. Health is delivered by people to people.

On that note, I would like to thank you for your partnership, friendship and collaboration over the past years. We have navigated through challenging times characterized by unprecedented difficulties. We have faced setbacks and disappointments, but we never gave up – we kept pushing forward, and we made a difference to countless lives. We should celebrate the progress we have achieved together. Every step has taken us closer to the ultimate goal.

Lastly, tying in with our Regional Committee theme, “United for a healthier future”, many of you will recall the deliberate focus last year on young people – from the Walk the Talk youth ambassadors to our opening video focusing on our collective responsibility to fight for a healthier tomorrow for our children. This year, we are sticking with that approach, and invite you all to follow a panel on youth health during the Regional Committee session. I am also proud to announce that, following the establishment of the global WHO Youth Council, the Eastern Mediterranean is the first region to follow suit and will next month launch the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Chapter. I have no doubt these young leaders will go from strength to strength in shaping our policies and programmes, and their voice and agency will help push things forward. We will all benefit.

The principle of Health For All by All means recognizing health as an inherent and universal right that should be afforded to all our people in the Region, irrespective of who they are and where they are from. It also means accepting that we all have a role to play. That includes me, regardless of my formal position. So my pledge to you is that I will continue to be a loud advocate for collective solidarity and strive for a healthy future for all until my last day in my

current role, and after that in all my future positions. For me, there can be no legacy more precious than that.

In conclusion, I pray that this Committee is successful in its work and that we all attain its objectives.

I now invite you to watch a brief video highlighting the importance of unity, solidarity and collective action.