

Address by

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on the occasion of the

**LAUNCH OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON SOCIAL
DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

Cairo, Egypt, 31 March 2021

Excellencies Dr Hala Zayed, Dr Ahmed Al-Saidi, Dr Tedros,
Honourable Professor Sir Michael, Mr Chaiban, esteemed Commissioners and colleagues,

I am very pleased to welcome you to the launch of the report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health for the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The report, titled “Build Back Fairer: achieving health equity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region”, is set to become a key reference for WHO and our partners for years to come. When the Commission was established in 2019, we made a commitment to the Member States and stakeholders to better understand health inequities and develop an action agenda to reduce social injustice in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR). I am delighted that the commitment has been fulfilled.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Chair of the Commission, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, and the honourable Commissioners for their invaluable work. I am also grateful to all the other contributors from Member States, , partner organizations and WHO Staff who have diligently supported the Commission process over the past months despite the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Colleagues,

Health is a fundamental human right. Health equity and equal opportunity are inseparable and are vital for a society’s welfare. Each and every person deserves to have the right to live a healthy life regardless of where they were born, live, work, or age. We have always known this, and the pioneering work of Sir Michael and others have made it an increasingly important issue around the world. However, progress in tackling health disparities and inequities has been slow worldwide, including EMR Region, and there are serious gaps between those with the best and the worst health and well-being in countries.

The challenge of pursuing health equity means striving for the highest possible standard of health for all people while giving special attention to the needs of those at greatest risk of poor health, based on their social conditions. Such an ambition requires working far beyond the

health care system. To meet this complex challenge, health equity has consistently been highlighted in development agendas, including in the Sustainable Development Goals and WHO's Thirteenth General Programme of Work (GPW 13). A similar commitment has been made in the form of WHO's vision for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, *Vision 2023*.

Reducing health inequities requires solid evidence not only detailing the scope of the challenge, but also identifying what can be done. With this in mind, we convened the Commission in November 2019. The Commission was tasked to share its findings and recommendations the following year, but its remit and proceedings were subsequently extended to include analysis of the impact of the pandemic.

Colleagues,

As you will see, the Commission report presents a stark picture of the need for action to improve health conditions in the Region, set against the backdrop of new demands presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds upon previous work conducted in the Americas and Europe while also covering features unique to this Region such as widespread conflict.

The available data reveals persistent health inequities and inequalities between and within countries of the EMR Region – and in some cases those inequalities are widening. Poverty and unemployment, conflict, gender inequalities, climate change and education all greatly affect the health and well-being of people in countries of the Region. Addressing these determinants will require sustained multisectoral action to meet the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, GPW 13 and *Vision 2023*.

The Report provides recommendations to policy-makers to guide action on determinants of health, and build back better and fairer from the devastating impact of the pandemic.

Colleagues,

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only highlighted inequities in the EMR Region, but it also provided a unique opportunity to tackle them. Protecting health is the highest priority for the public and should become the highest priority for governments: we have all seen the high cost of **not** investing in health.

This pandemic offers the chance to take ambitious steps to promote social justice and equity in health in the Region. Urgent action is needed to support disadvantaged groups facing increased poverty and ill-health and reprioritize national policies towards health and well-being.

To build back fairer, teamwork is required among many stakeholders. Governments, UN agencies, civil society, academia and communities have to commit to social justice and join forces to translate the Commission's advice into reality. We have already started discussions with partners on how best to achieve this.

Colleagues,

With this report, the Commission on Social Determinants of Health has charted a path towards a fairer and better future in the EMR Region. WHO is determined to make that future a reality.

I look forward to the contribution of their Excellencies the Ministers of Health, UN partner agencies, civil society WHO colleagues, our young people, and WHO colleagues,. Everyone's support is required.

Reducing health inequities and meeting the ambition of social justice is eminently achievable. Let us work together to achieve Health for All by All.

I thank you all for your commitment, hard work and dedication.