Today, the 7th of April, is World Health Day. It is an occasion not only to mark the day on which WHO was founded but also to draw attention to a subject of major importance to global health. On World Health Day this year, WHO is shedding light on vector-borne diseases.

Vectors are small organisms that carry diseases and spread them from person to person and place to place. They can put our health at risk, at home and when we travel. For example, malaria, dengue and leishmaniasis are all transmitted by vectors. Dengue and malaria are especially dangerous, since they can cause serious illness and can cause death. They are transmitted by mosquitoes. Leishmaniasis is a disease that is caused by sandflies. It disfigures people who are infected, and this often results in social stigmatization and exclusion. The slogan for this year’s World Health Day is “Small bite: big threat” and it aims to raise awareness about the threat posed by vectors and vector-borne diseases and to stimulate families and communities to take action to protect themselves.

As our world changes and develops around us, and as we travel more frequently and easily to other countries, so the threat posed by these diseases is also changing. Over the years, some of them have spread to areas where they did not occur before, and they have expanded and intensified their transmission in places where they are already present. Climate change, population movement, uncontrolled urbanization, poor housing, and lack of safe water and sanitation all contribute to this. As yet, there are no vaccines to prevent vector-borne diseases, except for yellow fever. But there are things people can do to protect themselves. Keep the environment clean. Use personal protection, such as insect repellent. Sleep under bednets, cover water containers, and get rid of stagnant water from places where mosquitoes breed, such as unused containers, flower pots, old tyres, broken glass and roof gutters. These measures really can save lives.

Communities have a big role to play. For example, in helping to raise awareness and organizing for expert help in spraying houses and sites where vectors breed. Nongovernmental organizations, media and influential voices can also play an instrumental role in promoting community awareness and behavioural change.

Above all, governments must play their role in ensuring public health and in putting the necessary measures in place to prevent, control and eliminate these diseases. Good epidemic preparedness and response are essential. I urge governments to ensure that they have strong surveillance systems and that proper and rapid diagnosis and treatment are available to save lives. WHO is always there to provide support.

But the health sector cannot do it alone. Collaboration between different sectors is essential to control vectors and protect people from disease. Ministries of health, agriculture, irrigation and municipalities, as well as communities, need to work together to implement an integrated vector management approach. In this way we can tackle more than one disease at a time, and focus on reducing the use of chemicals to control vectors. A joint approach is more effective, more cost-efficient, more environmentally sound and more sustainable than when each sector works alone.

We must not underestimate these vectors. We must build on the experiences of the past, sustain our commitments, and accelerate our efforts to control and eliminate these diseases in our region.

Let us make this World Health Day a day to scale up efforts to control the very big threat caused by a small bite.