

TEXT OF SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE DELEGATION OF PORTUGAL

(Mr Moita de Macedo) Fourth plenary meeting, 20 May

Agenda item 3: Address by the Director-General

Mr President, dear colleagues, distinguished delegates, excellencies. First of all I would like to join the previous speakers, honourable President, in congratulating you on being elected to conduct the work of the Health Assembly in our Organization.

Regarding this time of economic crisis, Portugal has come to a turning point of its “Adjustment Programme”. A Programme that was challenging to implement and required the participation and cooperation of an entire population. The Portuguese people have had to make difficult compromises. Our citizens were and still are involved in this process. The adjustment was addressed and adapted by each sector. In the domain of health we cannot forget the importance of all the different dimensions, including the pharmaceutical industry, as part of the adjustment.

The health system, as we know, is certainly not immune to the effects of austerity. We knew that economic constraints could represent risks to health at the individual, family and community levels. We couldn’t ignore this. Despite the difficulties, public health initiatives and programmes remain ongoing, ensuring health protection, health promotion and disease prevention among the general population, including migrants and minorities.

So today we can confirm the resilience and strength of our National Health Service, since the major indicators continue to show a positive trend and maintain quality health gains. In fact, the infant mortality rate last year was under three per thousand and the maternal mortality rate declined to eight per hundred thousand. Also, according to the World Health Statistics 2014 published this month by WHO, Portugal is among the top ten countries in the world with the longest female life expectancy at birth.

Nevertheless, we assume the commitment to assess the impact of the economic crisis on major health indicators, and its medium- and long-term effects.

In the context of the Portuguese National Health Plan, we believe that citizens are co-producers and multipliers of health initiatives, aiming at better health. That is why we invest in health citizenship and literacy as a major goal for all.

And, therefore, one of our drivers is the creation of resilient communities; our work on strengthening public health capacities and emergency preparedness, surveillance and response is directly linked to this Health Assembly's main concerns: the connections between health and other sectors, including the effects of climate in the profile of morbidities, that is to say, vector-borne infectious diseases.

We keep a close eye on these subjects: as you are all aware, Portugal has recently faced a dengue epidemic on the Atlantic island of Madeira, and it was fully controlled, with a fatality rate of zero.

We established a frontline unit for vector surveillance, with several agencies of the Ministry of Health and academia. We deepened our know-how in assessment, planning the interventions and monitoring the results, which, we are certain, may be a powerful tool for helping other Member States when dealing with changes in climate and their repercussions on the characteristics of infectious diseases.

On the other hand, Portugal has also developed a system which provides us with updated information on heat waves, named ÍCARO (Icarus). This tool allows us to issue alerts and quickly take appropriate measures.

Our expertise in these matters is therefore vast and can be disseminated through Member States, either in an emergency scenario or as part of WHO's programme of work. We have been committed to exploring new initiatives in cooperation, namely with the Portuguese speaking countries. This is a never ending teamwork, a partnership we feel should be broadened.

We believe that it is important to continue to encourage research and innovation in infectious diseases. Research groups in Portugal have recently received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in order to produce a vaccine against malaria.

As a final remark, I would stress that it is largely understood that from now on the development agenda will be based on the premise of sustainable development – for which health is a precondition, an outcome, and an indicator of success.

Portugal is firmly committed to playing an active and constructive role in the discussions on the post-2015 framework and will continue to contribute, bearing in mind the need for guaranteeing the sustainability of the system while ensuring universal access and quality.

Still, we need to continue to work on the current challenges faced by the health systems when addressing access to new medicines, for example those for hepatitis C. The prices for new hepatitis C medicines have a significant impact on every country's health budget. Portugal is currently looking to collaborate with other countries to address the situation of these medicines now and in future similar cases, in order to maintain a sustainable health system. Also, we would like to set the challenge to Member States to implement measures for better regulation and clear prices for medicines and medical devices in health systems.

Thank you very much.