



Address by

**DR MAHMOUD FIKRI
REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

NOUR FOUNDATION STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

It gives me real pleasure to be here as part of this meeting. Visual impairment and blindness result in a worsening of the life experience of affected individuals and their families, often affecting those who are the poorest in our societies. It is heartwarming to see charitable organizations like the Noor Foundation, which focuses on the prevention of visual impairment, be so involved and proactive in raising awareness and making the lives of those affected easier.

The Noor Foundation was established by H.E. Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashed Al-Maktoum, the President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and the ruler of Dubai, who has not only put Dubai on the map and made it into the global city it has become but also a hub of excellence.

In my roadmap, which outlines a set of strategic actions to guide WHO's work with Member States for the next five years, we have identified the elimination of trachoma as a regional public health priority and believe that with our combined efforts this neglected tropical disease can be eliminated in those countries most affected.

Trachoma is a disease of the eye caused by infection with the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*. It is known to be a public health problem in 41 countries and is responsible for the blindness or visual impairment of about 1.9 million people globally.

In 2016, in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 10.8 million people lived in trachoma endemic areas and were at risk of trachoma blindness. Tragically, blindness from trachoma is irreversible, and yet this disease is fully preventable, and curable too if addressed in time.

Together, we need to educate the public. The infection is transmitted through contact with eye and nose discharge of infected people or is spread by flies that have been in contact with discharge from the eyes and nose of an infected person.

In 1998, the World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA51.11 on the global elimination of blinding trachoma as a public health problem by the year 2020. We only have a few years

before that target date, and we need to pursue this goal diligently. The recommended elimination strategy, known as SAFE, was adopted by WHO in 1996. Its acronym stands for:

- **Surgery** for *trachomatous trichiasis*
- **Antibiotics** to clear ocular *C. trachomatis* infection
- **Facial cleanliness** to reduce transmission of ocular *C. trachomatis*
- **Environmental improvement**, particularly improved access to water and sanitation.

In the Region, in 2016, more than 11 000 people received surgical treatment for advanced trachoma – more than a three-fold increase in the number who had received treatment in the previous year – and in the same year 1.8 million people were treated with antibiotics. While antibiotic coverage increased in 2016, the increase was small and much more needs to be done, which is why with the WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Trachoma by 2020, WHO in the Region is working on a trachoma action plan. The plan will focus on high-burden countries, such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen. It aims to build on the achievements made by Oman and Morocco – two countries that have successfully eliminated trachoma – and by Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq, who expect be declared free of trachoma soon.

While trachoma may be the world's leading infectious cause of blindness, both regionally and globally, it is not the only infectious, or non-infectious, disease causing preventable blindness. Other diseases cause a significant burden of blindness. In the Region, approximately 25 million people are visually impaired and 5 million are blind – 200 000 of whom are children.

The good news is that 80% of blindness can be prevented or cured so is therefore avoidable.

I would like to alert you all to the upcoming World Sight Day on 12 October. The Day is a global annual event which aims to raise awareness and focus global attention on blindness and visual impairment. Let us seize this opportunity to work together, to raise awareness in the Region of the avoidable causes of eye diseases, and of trachoma, in particular, use social media to reach people and educate them on how we can prevent these disabling diseases, and raise the funds we need to reduce visual impairment and work towards the elimination of trachoma in our Region and beyond.

Let's work together to make this happen.