

Address by Ms Gunilla Carlsson, Minister for International Development Cooperation, Sweden to the Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly

Geneva, Tuesday, 21 May 2013

Mr President, Director-General Dr Chan, fellow Ministers, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this powerful Assembly. There is nothing more powerful than being responsible for the survival and healthy lives of women, men, girls and boys in every part of our world. I feel humble speaking in front of you who have millions of people's lives and health in your hands.

I have had the privilege of serving as the Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation for almost seven years now. My main objective is to contribute to enable poor people to raise themselves out of poverty, and during this time I have come to the conclusion that investments in women's and children's health is one of the most important choices we can make.

I strongly believe that every girl and boy, woman and man, should be allowed to make maximum use of their potential. As governments we can only provide the right environment to enable individuals to make the best possible choices for their own future.

If we empower people, respect their individual human rights and equip them with the knowledge, resources and freedom, and a safe and secure environment to express themselves, we have come a long way. However, individuals do not only have rights – they also have obligations, to make responsible decisions about their lives and ultimately their health, including their sexual and reproductive health.

Poverty reduction, human rights, sustainable development and health are intrinsically linked.

We know that the survival of children is closely related to the level of education of their mothers. Promoting gender equality in all areas of life and enabling girls and young women to have access to higher education is one of the most strategic investments we can make. We know that this is linked not only to lower child mortality but also to a decline in fertility rates and to economic growth.

The lessons from Sweden, and now also from countries like Bangladesh, is that when girls are allowed to access higher education they will have fewer children and delay both marriage and pregnancy until later in life.

And women entering the labour market will contribute substantially to economic growth. Equal rights and opportunities are not only important core values in themselves in society, they are also directly linked to survival and health.

As we know, Jim Kim has a background at WHO and he makes no secret of the fact that investment in people's health is close to his heart. The vision he presented recently at the World Bank's spring meeting in Washington, DC, builds on two interlinked dimensions – ending poverty and fostering prosperity. In this, health is both an important element in ending poverty and also an important dimension in ensuring well-being and prosperity.

I am a member of the High-level Panel appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General to advise on the post-2015 development agenda. We will present our final report in New York in just a few days' time.

We have listened carefully to people from across the world and the messages are clear. We need to continue the work that is ongoing in terms of achieving the present Millennium Development Goals, but we also need to increase our level of ambition and take account of the fact that the world has changed a lot since the year 2000.

Ending extreme poverty is a moral obligation for all of us, but it will not be enough. We need to ensure a healthy planet with healthy people, for now and for the future.

Sweden was pleased to work with the Government of Botswana, UNICEF and WHO on the global thematic post-2015 health consultation. An impressive number of organizations, researchers and think tanks, development actors of all kinds and individuals, contributed to the discussions and the final report, which was published just last month.

The conclusions are that we need to step up our efforts to achieve the present Millennium Development Goals and even to go beyond those targets. Almost 300 000 women still die every year because of pregnancy-related complications. No woman should die because she gives birth. Girls and young women aged 15 to 19 make up a majority of those who die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Early marriage and early pregnancy pose significant challenges to the life prospects of girls and young women, and must be prevented and opposed. Some 6.9 million children die before their fifth birthday. We can prevent this.

But the consultations also pointed to the fact that diseases such as diabetes, cancers and coronary heart diseases are no longer exclusive to the richer parts of the world, but rather are already closely linked to poverty and deprivation. We can prevent many of these diseases without major costs, and we must step up our efforts now.

Based on the lessons from the present Millennium Development Goals there was also a clear conclusion that we need a stronger focus on gender equality and equity, both in terms of access but also in terms of financing of health services. The concept of universal health coverage illustrates this well.

The report proposes a new overarching global health goal – maximizing healthy lives.

Let me share my vision and my priorities for what “Maximizing health for all people and at all stages of life” should mean in practice:

1. Starting at the beginning – at birth

We need to continue our efforts to reduce child mortality, but we need a particular focus on the neonatal period – the first month of life. Almost 40% of all child mortality occurs during this period. As this is closely linked to what takes place during pregnancy and directly after birth, we have an opportunity to address maternal deaths at the same time.

2. *Having survived the first month – childhood*

It is during the early years of people's lives that the foundation can be laid for a long and healthy life.

A healthy start in life means access to immunization, clean water and sanitation, and schooling. Malnutrition is still a problem in many parts of the world, while at the same time overweight and obesity are becoming an escalating issue for children. A "fat" baby is very often seen as a healthy baby, which is not always the case. For children, lack of physical activity is becoming an increasing problem.

3. *Growing up and becoming an adolescent – an important step in life, but also associated with risks*

All of us who have had the privilege of seeing our children grow up and become teenagers know that this period in life is about testing boundaries (and sometimes their parents' patience ...).

The interest in exploring and gaining new experiences is very positive and is completely natural for all young people, but it also means exposure to risks. During these critical years, young people make decisions in terms of smoking or not smoking, harmful or nonharmful use of alcohol and practising safe or unsafe sex.

Persistent gender inequalities, discriminatory social norms and misguided perceptions of masculinity mean that the lives and health of adolescent girls can be particularly at risk.

I think the concept of "misguided masculinity" holds many important challenges for us and I also think that it holds many answers for our common future. Men and women share responsibility for gender equality. We must make sure that our boys can take the step into adulthood as respectful and wise men who see themselves as equal partners to women.

Young people are not naive and if we equip them with the right knowledge, love and trust I know they will make the right – healthy – decisions.

4. *Becoming an adult, and possibly having children*

Leaving adolescence means that you will most likely start to work and possibly have children of your own.

Access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people is important, as well access to contraceptives and trained midwives. Every woman must be able to exercise her right to decide if and when she wishes to have children. And if necessary she should have the right to access safe abortion services.

We need more safe and healthy workplaces, but also functioning health systems.

In order to be able to work you need to stay healthy. This is quite obvious to everyone, but we are still not acknowledging the very clear link between health and sustainable economic development strongly enough in our policies and development strategies.

5. *Ageing – enjoying healthy advanced years*

The demographic trend is clear: as health improves, overall life expectancy is increasing. As populations are ageing, it is essential that we not only count numbers of years lived but also the number of healthy lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have taken you on a journey through life. In recent decades, we have achieved a lot in terms of improved health. The data from the Global Burden of Disease study published in December last year showed us that, compared to 1990, today we live five years longer but only four *healthy* years longer.

The conclusion is that we are living longer but not getting healthier at the same rate. This will have consequences for the cost for health services, and in terms of individual suffering.

We need to change our mental focus from disease and survival to health and maximizing healthy lives lived.

What we need is for all women and men, boys and girls, to be able to make more healthy choices.

The ultimate decision rests with individuals, but as governments we have responsibilities, and the engagement of civil society, researchers and private sector actors is crucial.

I believe that there is a strong case for all employers (private and public) to invest more in their employees' health. Healthy workers are more productive workers, and job satisfaction boosts profits as well as morale: a win-win situation that is good for business, good for people and good for society.

We need also an international system that is responsive to and supportive of the needs of people and countries.

I am delighted to be here today at the United Nations along with WHO, the World Bank and the African Union. The recent intensified dialogue between the United Nations system and the Bretton-Woods institutions is very promising and welcome. President Kim, your personal commitment to work across organizations means a great deal to us as well as yours, Dr Zuma, chairing the African Union countries.

The International Health Partnership lunch event today was an excellent example of how the health community is taking a lead in showing how the international system can work more effectively together. The messages from countries like Senegal, Myanmar and Ethiopia were clear in terms of how international partners need to evolve and change the way we work and behave. The responses from the international partners were just as clear – we are prepared to walk the talk.

Let me round off by sharing my perspectives on WHO.

There are few organizations that enjoy as much respect as WHO. Dr Chan – Margaret – when you speak, the world listens!

But there is room for improvement. I would like to see a WHO that focuses even more on its six core functions. WHO is and should be the natural health leader and convener. Providing evidence and guidelines is an essential function. There is a need to improve on making policy advice available and the provision of technical support. And finally, monitoring health trends is a function that requires independence and integrity.

The international health system, as it has evolved, needs an even stronger and sharper WHO. Times have changed and so must WHO.

By focusing more clearly on the six core functions and investing more in the management of performance across the organization, the quality of the work could potentially improve.

The good thing is that reforms have been initiated and are under way. This year we are looking forward to a more efficient and transparent system for the financing of the Organization. However, this is only a means to improve the quality of the work. Focusing on expected results, accountability and transparency is the key to success.

Margaret, you have my full support and – I believe – that of all our colleagues in this room to take bold and effective decisions, making WHO the modern and effective organization we all want.

Let me conclude by saying that our goal must be a healthy planet with healthy people who are able to make healthy choices, now and for the future.

Thank you.

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