



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA HEALTH POLICY FORUM
CONFERENCE ON “BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER HEALTH”

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Excellencies, Ministers of Health and Finance, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentleman

It gives me great pleasure to address this august audience of senior policy-makers from the Member States, health professionals, and representatives of civil society organizations and various development partners from the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East and North Africa Regions, on the occasion of the conference on “Better Policies for Better Health” and the launch of the Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum. I would like to express my appreciation for the effort by the Department of Health, United Kingdom, in initiating an independent Health Policy Forum in the EMR/MENA Region. Indeed the establishment of such a Forum will complement the work of the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in the area of health policy and systems development in the Region.

I am pleased to note that the mission of the Forum is in line with the overall mandate of the World Health Organization, which is to promote and protect the public health interests of its member states. In addition, the focus of the activities of the Forum will be to commission and disseminate quality research to influence health policy, particularly among the low and middle income countries of the Region.

The need to reform the health sector and to build on the earlier achievements of the primary health care programmes, based on the universal principle of Health for All, is being increasingly recognized by many ministries of health. Despite improvements in health outcomes in the Region over recent decades, new challenges emerge continuously in the face of the growing health needs of the population. The changing demographic, epidemiological and risk profile of the population; the rising expectations of a more educated population; the fast growing private health sector; the rapid changes taking place in medical technology; emerging and reemerging diseases; and the overarching aim of national governments to achieve universal health coverage are some of the motivating factors to reform and improve the overall performance of the health system.

Ladies and gentleman,

The presence here today of senior policy-makers, government officials and parliamentarians, including representatives from the ministries of health, social affairs, financing, planning and international cooperation, highlights the importance of health and its multi-dimensional nature. In addition, representatives from civil society, academia and media, and development partners active in the Region comprise the repertoire of key stakeholders in health.

The conference serves as an appropriate platform for the launch of the Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum. At the same time it fulfils the objectives of: 1) providing evidence regarding the importance of health for development and clarifying the ways in which health contributes to human development and economic growth; 2) presenting analytical insights into selected health and health system issues; 3) promoting multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas; and 4) identifying policy and research priorities for the Forum. Indeed WHO's report on Macroeconomics and Health has raised awareness among national policymakers, many of whom I see here, of the importance of investing in health and its contribution to social and economic development in countries.

Ladies and gentleman,

Among the many regional initiatives taken by the Regional Office to strengthen health policies and systems are capacity development workshops on various aspects of

the health system, for policy-makers as well as WHO's own staff; assistance provided to establish or strengthen health policy and planning units in the ministries of health; and the multi-country studies undertaken to produce evidence that can guide national policy-makers. These include policy analysis in areas such as the effect of trade liberalization on health services, contracting out of health services, role of and partnership with the private health sector, governance of the health system, measurement of equity in health financing and level of catastrophic health care expenditures, patient safety and the social determinants of health. Much of this is presented before national policy-makers in intercountry meetings and documented through regional and international publications.

In addition, WHO is continuously engaged in the review of national health systems and policy dialogue with its Member States to improve the performance of the health system. These health system reviews are often undertaken in collaboration with other development partners so as to send a unified message to policy-makers.

A recent initiative of the Regional Office was to establish a regional health system observatory to assess and monitor health system reforms in countries of the Region. I am glad to state that the observatory was recently launched on the World Wide Web and is accessible to all. The Observatory has been established entirely through regional funds and operates as a health policy forum bringing together researchers and public health professionals from all sectors, including civil society, the private sector and academia.

Ladies and gentleman,

The establishment of a Middle East and North Africa Health Policy forum is a welcome initiative and in my earlier communication with the Department of Health, United Kingdom, I expressed that WHO would fully support this initiative in order to make it independent, successful and sustainable, and to be able to complement the efforts of the development partners in being able to influence national health policies and programmes. Nevertheless, based on my personal experience of the Region I would like to bring to the attention of this eminent audience matters which need to be carefully deliberated. First, the Forum should under no circumstances be allowed to become a fraternity of privileged professionals. Second, the Forum should be owned and led by representatives of countries of the Region and not by its funders. Third, the Forum should

be protected from the global and regional politics that is often played in this volatile region. Finally, the Forum should not just be independent in its views but also financially viable to ensure its long-term sustainability. Let me assure all present that WHO has and will continue to provide the necessary technical assistance to sustain this initiative.

Since 1998, the Regional Office has also supported the development of a health policy forum in the Maghreb sub region called RESSMA (Maghreb Network for Health Systems and Health Care Financing) which is based in the National Institute of Health Management (INAS) in Morocco. This virtual network has already carried out some analytical work on priority policy issues, including social health insurance and globalization, and is providing for the 9th year an annual course on costing and cost analysis in health systems, attracting participants from French-speaking countries in the MENA and African region.

Ladies and gentleman,

This conference is an appropriate blend of the global experiences and the regional perspectives in public health. I am pleased that many distinguished speakers are participating in the presentations and the discussions. I am sure that the recommendations of the conference will be carefully considered by the national policy-makers. I look forward to the final report of the conference and to see how the recommendations might contribute to further streamlining the efforts of WHO in the area of health policy and systems development in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I wish the organizers and all participants a successful conference and take this opportunity to once again reiterate WHO's wholehearted support for the success of the new Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum.

I wish you all a pleasant stay in Cairo.

Thank you.