



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

**INTERCOUNTRY WORKSHOP ON INTEGRATING THE WHO GLOBAL STRATEGY ON
DIET AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTH IN SCHOOLS**

Tunis, Tunisia, 27 June–2 July 2009

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this intercountry workshop on integrating the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health in schools. First let me thank the Government of Tunisia and His Excellency Mr Mondher Zenaïdi, Minister of Public Health, for so kindly hosting this workshop, which follows the bi-regional workshop on the Global School Health Survey. Also I would like to express my appreciation to you all for your participation in this workshop, which focuses on addressing two key risk factors for child overweight and obesity, and noncommunicable diseases, namely unhealthy diet and physical inactivity.

Noncommunicable diseases have become the population's predominant health problem in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Evidence indicates that the prevalence of certain noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension, is increasing rapidly, particularly in the higher income countries. In order to reduce the impact of major risk factors such as unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, the World Health Assembly adopted the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health in May 2004 and WHO developed a school policy framework on diet and physical activity. The global strategy was a call to Member States to develop and implement policies and programmes that promote healthy diets and increase levels of physical activity.

Subsequently, the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean developed a regional framework on diet and physical activity for national policy-makers. The regional framework suggests several approaches to address the issues of unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, including in schools. The Regional Office has also developed a guide to developing policies on diet and physical activity in schools, which will be discussed in this workshop.

Countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region are in social and cultural transition. This transition is also reflected in the lifestyles of young people, who increasingly prefer places like fast food outlets to socialize or play computer games during their spare time. Children need to acquire the knowledge and skills to understand the implications of unhealthy diet and sedentary lifestyles and to make healthy choices about how to lead their lives.

Schools are strategic settings in which to raise awareness about the health risks of overweight and obesity. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the indicators related to diet and physical activity are alarming. The Global School Health Survey indicates that in Egypt 21% of young people are at risk of becoming overweight and in the United Arab Emirates 42% of school students spend more than three hours a day in front of the television, playing video games.

Schools are key settings in which to promote child health. They are strategic points at which to increase health literacy on diet and physical activity. However, investing in behaviour change through knowledge and skills alone will not suffice to bring about desired sustainable changes. Governments must encourage schools to create environments that are conducive to making healthy choices. Member States need to ensure that there are policies in place to encourage young people to eat healthily and to exercise at school by making healthy food services and sports facilities available.

I am very glad to note that efforts to address overweight and obesity among adults and youth are being undertaken in Tunisia, under the leadership of HE Mr Zenaidi; for example, the Zouhair Kallel Meeting which will give special focus to child obesity, and the research conducted on overweight and obesity in Sousse in order to track and document cardiovascular risk factors from childhood. I look forward to seeing similar initiatives in the other countries.

Dear Colleagues,

The purpose of this meeting is to review the regional guide for developing policies on diet and physical activity in schools and to develop country action plans for policy development. The guide builds on the school policy framework on diet and physical activity developed by WHO headquarters. It is intended to assist in the development of school policies to promote healthy diet and physical activity in schools and around them. You have been invited to this workshop with two objectives. The first is to finalize the guide and ensure that it is tailored to the social and cultural context of the Region. The second objective is for you to propose at least one specific policy that can be adopted by schools and develop a country plan of action to ensure its application. Your country plan should consider the involvement of those dealing with child overweight/obesity. We strongly recommend that the central government take the lead in demonstrating real commitment through action on the school education curriculum, establishing mechanisms to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, and taking action on physical infrastructure to provide an environment conducive to health.

This guide is a work in progress and is expected to be finalized only once you have adapted and used it in your country. It is not meant to be prescriptive and countries are encouraged to adapt the proposed interventions based on their own priority needs and social and cultural context, and finally to make use of already existing mechanisms and tools.

I am confident that you will work hard in reviewing the guide and ensuring its practicality, and that you will develop realistic and meaningful policies to promote healthy diet and physical activity in school settings in your countries.

I wish you all success in your endeavour and a pleasant stay in Tunisia.