



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you today to the intercountry meeting on health and human rights, which is our first regional activity in this relatively new area of work.

Recognizing that the right to health can sometimes be overlooked in light of other national priorities, WHO is supporting the organization of national and regional meetings to strengthen understanding of the linkage between health and human rights and to raise national and regional commitment to the right to health as one of the basic and fundamental human rights.

Over the past few years, WHO has produced three very important documents, all of which have been or are being translated into Arabic. The *25 Questions on health and human*

rights, Migration, health and human rights and *Health as a human right in Islam* are three key documents that establish the fundamental relationship between health and human rights and that highlight the social and cultural background of the issue, especially in relation to the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you all are aware, WHO is the leading agency in health; thus it is committed to strengthening the overall capacity to provide technical, intellectual and political leadership in this area. This aim is being taken forward through three main approaches: development of a health and human rights approach within the Organization; support to governments in integrating human rights into health policies and strategies; and, finally, advancement of health as a human right and other health-related rights.

In order to advance this new area of work we have to understand the surrounding environment. A number of other UN organizations are working in human rights, and although the legitimacy of considering health to be a basic human right comes directly from the WHO Constitution, there are many other international and regional legal instruments that give additional value and strength to the linkage between health and human rights. Success in this new area of work demands that WHO as the leading agency in health cooperates with other agencies working in human rights and related topics; it is an issue that cuts across the work of many different UN agencies.

Alongside the surrounding environment is the experience of our Member States with human rights in general, which will serve as a defining factor in how the work in the area of health and human rights will progress. For years the focus of civil society organizations and official government agencies has been political and civil rights, which are of course associated with the kind of political structures and governance that exist in the countries of the Region. WHO efforts are aimed not at shifting the efforts from political and civil rights but rather at bringing the health component of social and cultural rights to the spotlight and introducing this component to the working agendas of the active parties in the field of human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The linkage between health and human rights is a complex one; violation of or lack of attention to human rights can have serious health consequences. Health policies and programmes can promote or violate human rights in the way they are designed or implemented. Vulnerability and the impact of ill health can be reduced by taking steps to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. Because of the complex nature of this relationship, a step-by-step approach is being undertaken by WHO in introducing health as a human right to its Member States. WHO is currently engaged in the process of developing a strategy for health and human rights; I sincerely hope that this meeting will contribute positively to this strategy to make it a more culturally sensitive and country-driven strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Eastern Mediterranean Region has suffered from some of the worst crises in recent human history. A number of its countries are experiencing devastating circumstances which have affected the right to health and the health of the populations living in these countries. The human rights-based health approach is one tool that can be used to help overcome the difficult health conditions that do exist in these countries. Addressing affordability, equity, availability and accessibility from a human rights angle will support and strengthen the improvement and the advancement of health.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by urging all those present here today to exert all efforts necessary and to collaborate with all the relevant authorities, stakeholders, international organizations and civil society to increase understanding of this area and to establish self-sustainable programmes at the country level. This kind of networking will also move the process of integrating the rights-based approach to health into the human rights-related work of civil societies and into national health policies and systems.

Finally, allow me to thank you all and to wish you a fruitful meeting. I hope you have a pleasant stay in Cairo.