

23 November 2021, Cairo – After almost three years with no physical meetings together, the WHO representatives in the countries of the Region and senior managers at the Regional Office regrouped for a collaborative retreat, with “Countries at the centre” as the main theme and core objective.

“These retreats serve not only as an appropriate and opportune platform for open discussion and interaction, but also as a pivotal grounding for laying out strategic issues, challenges, and the means to find solutions and implement action points to move forward”, said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

He explained that the development of the proposed action plans was done through a participatory and consultative process to achieve consensus among the participants, and in this regard, he called it a “body of wisdom” for WHO in the Region.

Highlighting the learning curve, experience and wisdom accumulated during the last two years, due to the pandemic and other health challenges, as well as the political contexts in the Region, Dr Al-Mandhari emphasized the need to “move as one body, one family, carrying the same values we have carried for many years,” which continue to be re-emphasized through numerous initiatives, including the process of WHO Transformation. “We need to make sure that we are always moving in the right direction,” he said.

The Regional Director highlighted the significance of the retreat for sharing beneficial ideas and as a way to regroup and readjust WHO Transformation priorities. Given the armed conflicts, economic challenges and dire humanitarian emergencies in the Region, he observed that “we need to be agile, ready to adapt, and to continue moving in the right manner.”

The agenda of the retreat comprised a versatile list of sessions, each equipped with its own set of objectives. A key topic for discussion was the need to establish a collective understanding of the challenges and shortcomings in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the 13th General Programme of Work (GWP13), and the regional Vision 2023, which necessitate an acceleration of progress and increased impact in order to meet WHO’s objectives. This includes: readjusting the “purpose”; a review of the multidimensional positioning, internally and externally, of WHO for greater visibility and impact; and reaffirming WHO as a respectful workplace and environment, preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and

harassment (PRSEAH), ensuring a zero-tolerance approach continues to be observed on PRSEAH and approving measures for preventive action.

Another vital topic for discussion was strategic and operational planning, with a focus on the country level and on approaches to enhance the quality and coherence of WHO's delivery. This includes WHO's strategic positioning through the Country Cooperation Strategy (CCS), Common Country Assessment (CCA), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), as well as operational planning for the Programme Budget 2022-2023 and Country Support Plans (CSP).

Additionally, stress management was highlighted during the retreat as a topic of interest, as participants sought to understand and acknowledge the negative impact of stress on the productivity levels and well-being of staff, and to agree on preventive and supportive stress management measures, especially in the many hardship duty stations.

The WHO representatives in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Yemen, and others, addressed the challenges in conflict-ridden countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing the obstacles that impeded their work and the strategic and operational solutions put in place to support successful delivery amidst these conditions. The participants also discussed the core emergency programme, where the main challenges highlighted included a lack of staff. As well as the various challenges noted, potential responses were also illustrated, including a staff development strategy, increased sustainable funding, and technical training, among other actions. Furthermore, participants also discussed how to better build synergies between the work on emergency preparedness, recovery and response and the work undertaken under universal health coverage and healthier populations, the other two pillars of WHO's strategic approach.

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