



6 October 2022 – We are just a few days away from the start of the 69th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean. The Regional Committee is WHO's main governing body at the regional level. The theme this year is "Reaching the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-COVID-19 age: accelerating universal health coverage and health security – Health for All by All", and this is summarized by the slogan "Together for a healthier and more sustainable tomorrow".

As you all know, this past year has been challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which is home to almost 700 million people. Along with some of the world's highest-income countries, the Region also contains several fragile states that were already severely affected by conflict, crisis and internal displacement. In addition to the direct effects of COVID-19 itself – with more than 28 million confirmed cases and more than 348 000 deaths reported across the Region by the start of this month – severe disruption was also caused to health services, economies and communities.

The Regional Committee will review reports on the work of WHO in the Region during 2021 and the first half of 2022. I am pleased to say that the reports include many examples of progress, showing that despite the disruption caused, the pandemic also brought opportunities, and spurred wide-scale investment and innovation.

Despite the challenges, we have all, by working together, made impressive progress in several areas, particularly in advancing towards universal health coverage by building stronger, better integrated and people-centred health systems, tackling communicable and noncommunicable diseases, and reaching out to refugees, migrants and displaced populations.

We have become experts in dealing with multi-hazard emergencies in the Region. In 2021,

WHO responded to 10 large-scale humanitarian crises, 31 major disease outbreaks and 27 other public health events – while all the time working tirelessly to strengthen preparedness for future health emergencies.

To build on lessons learned in dealing with COVID-19 and other emergencies, and support health system strengthening in every country of the Region, the Regional Committee session will include discussion of a technical paper setting out a regional agenda for building resilient health systems to advance universal health coverage and health security. This is a crucial concern, as multiple challenges continue to hamper the performance of the Region's health systems, particularly those in fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable settings.

There is a pressing need to promote health and well-being in response to challenges related not only to disease outbreaks, but also to the ecological, political, economic, digital and social determinants of health and health inequities – including climate change, pollution, rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, conflict, demographic change, population displacement, poverty and widespread inequity. During this session of the Regional Committee, participants will discuss ways to promote health and well-being in order to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

Among other issues to be discussed is the One Health approach, which seeks to mobilize multiple sectors, disciplines and communities to work together to foster well-being and tackle threats to health and ecosystems across the human-animal-environment interface. The One Health approach is essential to address threats from emerging zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19 and monkeypox, as well as other critical issues including antimicrobial resistance and food safety.

Participants will also consider a new regional strategy to support countries of the Region in using digital technology for health, and an analysis will be presented suggesting ways to optimize support from two of the most important global health initiatives: the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

We have ensured that this session of the Regional Committee will maintain the highest levels of engagement, discussion and contribution among participants, while also providing enhanced opportunities for interaction by creating an inclusive, attractive and enriching environment. This year, everyone can experience the Regional Committee, regardless of how distant they are from the real event, through a virtual simulation of the Regional Office. Building on successful

efforts last year, the virtual platform will facilitate hybrid attendance while also broadening the reach of the Committee's work. An extensive programme of virtual attractions will include a video exhibition of success stories from countries of the Region.

And as restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic begin to lift, a "Walk the Talk" event will be held in Child's Park, opposite the Regional Office.

The regional vision of Health for All by All underlines the crucial importance of involving all sectors and stakeholders, and of engaging communities in supporting the various public health and social measures needed to overcome challenges. As WHO's highest-level decision-making body in the Region, the Regional Committee offers a unique opportunity to further enhance the close connections between the Organization and all its partners, and to exchange evidence-based health information across the Region.

Thank you!

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