



Message from

**DR MAHMOUD FIKRI**  
**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

to the

**REGIONAL CONSULTATION ON ACCELERATING ACCESS TO THE  
CONTINUUM OF HIV CARE: FOCUS ON HIV TESTING**

**Beirut, Lebanon, 12–14 July 2017**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure I welcome you to the consultation on accelerating access to the continuum of HIV care, which will focus on HIV testing. I take this opportunity to thank H.E. Mr Ghassan Hasbani, Minister of Health and Deputy Prime Minister, and the national AIDS control programme for hosting this meeting.

This is the first meeting on HIV to take place since I took office as the Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I would like to convey to you my commitment to HIV and to helping our region achieve the global targets of 90-90-90 by 2020, where 90% of people living with HIV know their HIV status, 90% are on antiretroviral therapy (ART) and 90% are virally suppressed.

By the end of 2015, the estimated number of people living with HIV in the Region had reached 330 000. With a continuously growing epidemic coupled with low coverage of ART, standing at 14% of people living with HIV, the number of deaths among people living with HIV was 15 000.

The limited access to HIV testing is the first and biggest bottleneck for increasing access to HIV care and treatment in the Region. In spite of commendable increases in the number of people living with HIV who know their status in several countries, 50% to 95% remain unaware of it. People at risk of HIV, particularly key populations, continue to face major barriers to accessing HIV testing services, and thereafter to linking to care and treatment services.

Without helping people living with HIV to know their status, we will not be able to provide them with treatment. Today, we have a wealth of evidence, technologies and experiences from around the world that enable us to increase access to HIV testing and increase the number of those receiving HIV treatment.

In 2015, WHO published its first Consolidated guidelines on HIV testing services, making evidence-based recommendations on HIV testing approaches that match the needs of different population groups and on testing strategies and technologies that provide quality assured results as well as providing programmatic guidance to help in planning and implementing sound HIV testing services. In 2016, WHO issued a supplement to those guidelines recommending HIV self-testing and partner notification as additional approaches to increase access to HIV testing, particularly for those who would not test or would not be reached by the existing testing services.

More specifically in our region, the Regional Office in 2016 collaborated with the Regional Arab Network of AIDS Associations and the Association for Freedom and Equity to conduct an assessment of the values and preferences of key populations and people living with HIV regarding HIV self-testing and partner notification. The assessment revealed limited knowledge of those approaches to HIV testing, yet, where they are known, they are welcomed by the communities and are perceived as effective and needed services to facilitate access for difficult-to-reach population groups.

In your meeting, you will go through the WHO guidelines, hear about the values and preferences of people living with HIV and key populations of our region regarding HIV self-testing and partner notifications, and reflect on and plan how to accelerate access to HIV testing and linkage to care, the first step in the continuum of HIV care services. I wish you rich discussions and a fruitful meeting

Finally, I thank our colleagues from WHO headquarters, UNAIDS and other UN partners for their support. I also wish you all a pleasant stay in Beirut.