

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and honour to be with you here today, in such distinguished and influential company.



Let me thank you, Dr Alwan, for identifying the health of mothers and children as a priority for WHO in the Region in the coming five years. And let me thank your partners in the United Nations H4+ group – Unicef, UNFPA, UNAIDS, UN Women, the World Bank – as well as your many other partners, in sharing and supporting this initiative.

It goes without saying that this is an issue that is very close to my heart, as indeed it must be to all of you here.

Improving the health of mothers and children is a priority for everyone in this room. This is why

we are all here today. We have to act, and I welcome the efforts being made to accelerate progress in this area.

Saving the lives of mothers and children... it is an emotive phrase. What does it make you think of?

For me, this phrase conjures up pictures. Pictures of children with AIDS in Malawi, deprived children in Kenya, and stunted children in Cambodia.

And now here, closer to home, it conjures up images of mothers and children in our own communities, vulnerable mothers, refugee mothers and children, and children suffering from severe forms of malnutrition and stunting in many countries of our region, children caught up in political turmoil around the region...when they should be home and safe and moving towards a brighter future.

The hard truth is that every year, in this region, around 39,000 women die as a result of pregnancy-related complications and around 923,000 children under five die of avoidable causes. That's 107 women and 2500 children a day; painful numbers, indicating neglect and shortcomings in health care.

And behind every number there is tragedy and the faces of those left behind. Faces of husbands bereft, wondering how they will cope without the support and companionship of their partners. Siblings left without playmates. Other children left to grow up motherless, without the guidance and protection only a mother can give.

Did you know that children who have lost their mothers are five times more likely to die in the first year, and if they survive they are more vulnerable to malnutrition, diarrhoea and other diseases?

They are also less likely to attend school and are more at risk of domestic violence.

For me the saddest fact is that almost all these deaths are avoidable. 82% of under-five deaths occur in just five countries of the region.

We are in the habit of thinking that this is a wealthy region. So how is it that in our own back yards, our own countries, our neighbours' countries, women and children are dying in such numbers? How is it that our maternal and under-five mortality are the second highest in the world? How can we tolerate this?

This is a young region. More than 40% of the population of the region is aged below 18 years, 12% below the age of 5. This is a tremendous resource for the future.

Imagine the potential all these young minds have to offer their families and their countries. This region is so exciting to be part of right now. Everyone should have the chance to contribute...But, sadly, so many of our children will not get that chance.

As you may know, I have long had a particular concern for poverty and hunger alleviation. So it was no surprise to me to learn that mortality among mothers and children is particularly high among malnourished children, among pregnant adolescents, and in poor areas, rural areas and areas that lack proper, or even adequate, health care.

For those children that make it to their teens, malnutrition will have affected their growth; and not just their physical growth but also their intellectual potential. Vulnerable children grow into vulnerable adults; vulnerable girls grow into vulnerable mothers and remain at risk throughout their lives. These factors are all interlinked.

Our development as a region, as individual nations and communities, is dependent on our ability to nurture our children, to give them the best we have to offer, and to ensure they have equal access to education, to health, and to ensure they grow into healthy mothers and fathers, healthy citizens.

Above all, women and children anywhere, everywhere, have a right to life.

When the Millennium Development Goals were set by the United Nations, working as one, in 2000, I was as proud of the world's leaders as anyone. Everyone knew it wouldn't be easy. But everyone committed themselves. And I know that you here today remain committed.

Some countries in this region have managed to achieve, through hard work and sufficient resources, very low maternal and child mortality rates and have achieved or are on track to achieve MDGs 4 and 5. This is something we should all be proud of and I commend those countries.

Other countries struggle with circumstance: poverty, high birth rates, low education levels, conflict, war, all of which feed the vicious cycle of malnutrition, ill health and early death. This, we cannot be proud of.

The region as a whole, and we will be judged as a whole, will not, based on current progress, achieve these MDGs. And so we have three years now in which to achieve so much. It is time to identify the causes of failure, and agree on the way forward and the resources needed to achieve the MDGs.

This meeting is therefore timely. It comes in response to The United Nations Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, launched in 2010, and to the report of the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health that was established as part of that strategy. In its report to the World Health Assembly in 2011, "Keeping promises, Measuring results", the Commission came out with 10 compelling recommendations for tracking results and resources, thereby making all stakeholders accountable for their commitments to implement the Global Strategy and achieve progress towards MDGs 4 and 5.

Another UN Commission, on Lifesaving Commodities for Women and Children made recommendations in September 2012 on how to increase access to lifesaving medicines and health supplies for the world's most vulnerable people.

These initiatives are why we are here today.

You are the Ministers of Health and senior health officials of the ten priority countries in this region. I know you are committed to saving the lives of women and children in your countries. And I know that the United Nations H4+ partners, and other governmental and nongovernmental partners represented here today are also committed to this goal.

Your presence in Dubai, today, to support this landmark declaration is not a mere coincidence. This country has seen an unprecedented amount of work, spearheaded by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, towards saving the lives of mothers and children across the Nation. In fact, the UAE has reduced child mortality from 22 per 1000 live births in 1990 to seven per 1000 in 2011. That is more than a two-thirds reduction.

Like many of us in this room, our Prime Minister, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed, believes strongly in maternal health. In 2004, the UAE achieved its goal when the maternal mortality rate dropped to 0%. It has remained so since.

We are very proud of what has been achieved and although we still have some work to do, we certainly have come a very long way.

Now is the time to get together and agree on how it will be achieved, on what can be achieved by 2015 and what must continue to be achieved beyond 2015.

Most of what needs to be done is common sense. The right measures, more resources, in the right place, at the right time. This is what mothers and children need. This is what they have a right to expect. It is time to put our collective wisdom and capabilities together and help them achieve their right to life....their right to health.

Thank you.

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