On the eve of World Health Day 2010, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is calling on all countries and governments in the Region to work and act now in order to address the mounting health challenges in our increasingly urbanized world. Urbanization and health, the theme of this year's World Health Day, is being highlighted globally under the slogan, "urban health matters". The key message of World Health Day 2010 is to make health a priority in urban policy.

For this occasion, WHO has launched the "1000 cities, 1000 lives" campaign with the aim of encouraging at least 1000 cities around the globe to participate in marking the day. So far, more than 1000 cities, 164 of which are in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, have joined the campaign. The cities are implementing a variety of activities throughout the year, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of the theme. The Regional Office is marking the day with a celebration on 7 April, to be inaugurated by Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, and other prominent figures from countries around the Region, including the Governor of Cairo, Mayor of Tehran and former Minister of Health of Pakistan.

Urbanization is a fast growing trend worldwide. It encompasses many health challenges, some of which directly or indirectly impact on the health and livelihood of urban dwellers. For the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, with over one third of them living in slums without adequate basic services, and the proportion is growing. It is estimated that by 2030, two-thirds of the global population will be living in urban areas.

The Eastern Mediterranean Region is no exception. Unplanned urban growth puts populations at increasing risk of poor quality of life, poor health coverage, poor infrastructure and sanitation, unsafe drinking-water, higher vulnerability to disasters, and hence higher risk of disease, injury

and mortality.

By acknowledging and embracing this reality, WHO takes the leadership in one of the greatest challenges facing the world this century: urbanization. Therefore, the involvement of all stakeholders, policy makers, ministries of health and of internal affairs, municipal authorities, mayors and governors, partners and donors, nongovernmental organizations and United Nations agencies, media and community groups is key to improving health in our cities.

The World Health Day 2010 campaign is an excellent opportunity to galvanize the multisectoral action needed to improve health and sustainable social and economic development in urban areas. In this regard, the Regional Office is launching a set of fact sheets that highlight priority public health issues in urban areas and outline the necessary actions to be taken. For example, skilled attendance in pregnancy and childbirth and birth spacing, counselling and service delivery should be given special attention in order to improve the health of women in urban slums, who are more vulnerable. To reduce the impacts of emergencies and to link disaster management with sustainable development in urban areas and the community as a whole, community-based disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness programmes are the critical interventions. The World Health Day campaign also provides an occasion to promote the importance of nutrition in health and development and an opportunity to raise awareness on the importance of food safety in urban settings.

"Improving urban health requires an integrated approach and a planned response from government, academia and civil society" said Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, who added "only then will we fill the basic development gaps in our cities."

"World Health Day 2010 should be a springboard for changing social norms and improving community understanding and acceptance of the need to integrate physical activity into everyday life. This cannot be done without building a supportive environment that enables people across the socioeconomic spectrum to make healthy choices", he added.

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