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Cognizant that every human has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the World Health Organization (WHO) is promoting the health and well-being of all by all. To achieve this mission in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), a strategic vision was adopted calling on Member States and partners to anchor solidarity and action to achieve Health for All by All in the Region (1). The vision focuses on the need to address the environmental causes of diseases while targeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and fulfilling the human rights to live in a healthy environment.

As we commemorate the World Heath Day 2022 this year, health systems in the EMR are under extreme pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis. WHO has been on the frontline in the battle against COVID-19, while working with partners to minimize the adverse health impacts of climate change. The fight against COVID-19 and against climate change are continuous, entailing the urgent need to create sustainable wellbeing in healthy societies that do not breach ecological and biodiversity limits. COVID-19 is a warning siren from the nature to our species; and an opportunity to reflect and reset how we live, how we interact with each other, and with other species and mother nature. Recovery from COVID-19 is a historic opportunity to position human health, and environmental protection, at the centre while we rebuild our resilient and sustainable health systems.

Our countries face a mix of traditional and new environmental risks, which are naturally caused by local conditions and circumstances (such as poverty and conflicts), and global phenomena (such as climate change, urbanization and increasing drug resistance). Environmental risks are responsible for 23% of the total burden of disease in the EMR, including the premature yearly death of 1 million people (2). Unfortunately, disadvantaged and marginalized communities are the most vulnerable to these risks. It is devastating to know that 99% of people are inhaling “unhealthy air” (3) and more than 40% do not have access to basic water and sanitation services (4). The recent WHO burden of disease in the EMR estimates that 500 000 deaths are attributable to air pollution, 80 000 to unsafe water and sanitation, 40 000 to eating unsafe food, and other deaths are attributable to other environmental risks (5).

Management of these risks goes far beyond the health sector and needs to focus on upstream preventive interventions. Prevention policies must be integrated into public health promotion strategies, primary health care models and medical practice systems. However, environmental health work and policymaking are practically beyond the jurisdiction of the health sector alone, they require establishing partnerships with other upstream sectors addressing issues of development and services, ecosystem health, pollution control, emissions, and waste reduction.

Addressing health and environmental issues with a coherent and integrated approach within the framework of sustainable development certainly establishes new and effective patterns. Environmental health work in the Region focuses on supporting the leadership of the public health and environmental protection sectors in regulating and monitoring environmental health factors and nexuses with the burden of disease (including Coronavirus), promoting preventive interventions, and catalyzing adequate environmental health services and actions by relevant sectors (e.g. water, municipalities, energy, agriculture, industry, transport, etc.). Ultimately, this close “healthy” link reduces the burden of health care costs and environmental damage, preserves natural resources, and ensures the sustainability of life in all its forms.

It is important to remind ourselves of the recently committed Geneva Declaration-2021: “Recent pandemics have exposed the fractures in society and highlighted the ecological, political, commercial, digital and social determinants of health and health inequities, within and between social groups and nations. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, rapid urbanization, geopolitical conflict and militarization, demographic change, population displacement, poverty, and widespread inequity create risks of future crises even more severe than those experienced today” (6).

WHO classified climate change as the biggest threat facing humanity today, and we are working in the EMR and globally to deal with this and other environmental threats. During the latest conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change COP26, eleven countries from the Region committed to develop climate-resilient and sustainable health systems (7). We will advocate for more countries to join this major initiative during the coming COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in UAE to safeguard our planet and protect our health. In addition, WHO will work with countries of the Region in addressing all the other environmental risks, to save lives, improve wellbeing and substantially reduce, even eliminate, the risks through bold preventive action at national and regional levels (8,9).

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