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Editorial

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Globalization, integration, digitization, and engagement have become commonly used terminologies reflecting the strategic and forward-looking nature of public health in the 21st Century, as public health programmes aim to make impact globally while acting locally.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution had laid the foundation 75 years ago in a visionary way of the important functions of the Organisation, the scope of support to countries, and the potential role country offices should play (1). Member States are at the centre of WHO's work across the globe, and technical assistance to them is channelled primarily through country

offices, which attempt to foster decentralization of WHO's work across the globe and provide avenues to consult directly with in-country stakeholders and agree on priority health needs (2).

The WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019-2023 (3) reaffirms the focus on country action and impact through strong measured results via coherent and seamless coordination at the global, national, and subnational levels. This transformative agenda is echoed and amplified in the Vision 2023, Health for All by All, of the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO), which defines in strong statements the commitment of the Regional Director and the senior management to expand partnerships and to give due attention and support to an enhanced WHO country presence, with the aim of "driving public health impact in countries" (4). One way to achieve this goal is to get closer to partners in each country through the country offices. By doing this, WHO will be contributing to the achievement of Goal 10, "Reduce inequality within and among countries," of the Sustainable Development Goals (5) and to the Universal Values Principle Two: Leave No One Behind (6).

Physical presence in countries has enabled WHO to advise on and support the development of national health policies, strategies, and plans. The country teams have worked collaboratively and effectively with governments during more than 7 decades (since 1948) of its existence, fostering cooperation with different entities at country level to implement programmes that support improvements to healthcare, build technical capacity, provide relevant expertise to key national health issues, and strengthen health systems. Through a participatory approach, WHO ensures that its programmes are relevant and respond to the needs and priorities of the respective countries (7). Strong collaborations between countries have enabled WHO to facilitate learning and knowledge sharing, as the Organization encourages countries to work together in finding common, as well as customized, solutions to their health challenges. The close relationship between the headquarters, regional offices, country offices, and countries have helped leverage expertise at all levels and contributed to trust-building with Member States over the years, thus facilitating the success of WHO programmes.

The collaboration with Member States is critical because their input is essential to finding appropriate solutions even in the most difficult and most challenging situations. On-site consultations over the years have enriched discussions and contributed significantly to problem-solving. Country teams support planning, capacity-building, preparedness and response, programme implementation and monitoring, and coordinate overall improvements to healthcare provision, including advocacy and resource mobilization (7). Country offices make it possible to design programmes and interventions that meet the needs of local communities, knowing that communities are diverse in culture and tradition even within the same country, and that the health needs of populations may differ by geographical location.

Within its decentralized framework, WHO has established over 150 country offices, through which its staff members support health advocacy, policy, and programmes at country, sub-country, and regional levels. The Qatar country office is one of the latest additions to the country offices network. It was inaugurated on 30 March 2022 by Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, in the presence of Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, and hosted by H.E. Dr Hanan Al-Kuwari, Minister of Public Health of Qatar (8). Its establishment followed those of Kuwait and Bahrain by WHO/EMRO in June and July 2021, respectively (8).

Prior to the opening of the Qatar country office, WHO had operated a desk office based in the regional office for the country, and through the office, Qatar had contributed significantly to several WHO initiatives, including the Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023, the COVID-19 pandemic response, and the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (9).

Investments by the Government of Qatar in healthcare infrastructure, technologies, and quality of care have contributed to transformations in the country's health system in recent years. These have attracted international recognitions as evidenced by several accreditations. With its National Health Strategy 2018-2022 (10), developed as one of the 8 sector strategies that make up the National Development Strategy 2018-2022, Qatar adopted a population-focused approach to healthcare that aligns existing services and resources to the needs of its populations, in accordance with several WHO guidelines on population-based approach to healthcare (11,12). The strategy is currently being implemented with technical and policy support from WHO.

The establishment of the country office, appointment of Dr Rayana Bou Haka as WHO Representative and Head of Mission to Qatar by the WHO/EMRO Regional Director, and the deployment of more staff to the country, herald a renewed partnership that is anticipated to go a long way in helping Qatar to achieve its goal of providing integrated, population-based healthcare that takes into consideration the huge impact that demographic factors have on the health of individuals. This is expected to strengthen the support provided to Qatar by WHO through high-level advisory, support for evidence-informed policy- and decision-making, as well as programme implementation and monitoring at all levels. It will in turn enhance the capacity of Qatar to contribute more towards the achievement of the health-related global goals and initiatives.

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