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Editorial

Ahmed Al-Mandhari [1]

[1]Regional Director, World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt (Correspondence to: Ahmed Al-Mandhari: almandharia@who.int).

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From 9 to 12 October 2023, WHO Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region came together at the Organization's regional office in Cairo, Egypt, for the 70th Session of its main regional governing body, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean. This year's meeting was particularly significant, marking not only the 75th Anniversary of WHO itself, but also my final session as Regional Director. As such, it was an important opportunity to take stock of the public health situation across the Region. With that aim in mind, participants were presented with 2 major new publications: an analysis of progress towards the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Region (1) and a report on the implementation of WHO's regional vision during my term (2).

Unfortunately, the main conclusion of the SDGs analysis was not positive: while there were significant variations among countries of the Region as regards both the current health situation and progress rates, overall, EMR countries were not on course to meet many of the health-related SDGs by the target year of 2030. Indeed, there has been a marked decline from the findings of a previous Region-wide study conducted in 2020, with setbacks across many indicators on health, health risks and determinants, and access to services. This result was anticipated considering the severe disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the economic issues and ongoing complex emergencies faced by half the countries in the Region. The scale and impact of emergencies have been unprecedented and have escalated in the past 5 years: the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance in the Region increased from 63 million in 2018 to 140 million as at September this year (3). That figure will even be higher now, given the grave emergencies currently being experienced in the Region.

However, there are also grounds for hope, and I remain committed to the optimistic principle at the centre of WHO's regional vision, Vision 2023 – the idea of "Health for All by All", which proposes that every country, community, family, and individual can make a valuable contribution to improving health and well-being (4). The report on the implementation of that vision, which I presented to the Regional Committee, includes numerous examples of achievements and innovations from every country and territory of the Region and across a huge range of public health programmes and initiatives, proving that success is possible in a wide range of settings. The critical task for WHO, governments and partners, therefore, is to identify and share best practices and scale up the application of such practices to accelerate progress towards achieving the health-related SDGs.

During the Regional Committee session, Member States agreed to step up action in several key areas. The Committee endorsed a new regional framework for action to address noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) during emergencies because although NCDs cause 66.5% of all deaths annually in the Region, NCD services are often neglected in emergency preparedness and response plans (5). The framework will guide Member States in implementing a set of strategic interventions and priority actions to help ensure that people living with NCDs continue to receive the support they need even in the most difficult circumstances.

The Committee endorsed a regional framework for strengthening public health readiness for mass gatherings (6), building on the Region's strong expertise in planning for and managing the potential health risks associated with mass gatherings.

Another new framework for action was adopted to support efforts to address the massive health implications of climate change (7), as temperatures and other climatic hazards continue to change twice as fast as in other regions of the world, fuelling environmental degradation, natural disasters, weather extremes, food and water insecurity, economic disruption, and conflict (8).

The Regional Committee issued a call for action to enhance and scale up the health workforce in EMR (9), to tackle the critical shortages and skills gaps exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was a focus on addressing some of the most significant risk factors for disease and injury in the Region, including extension until 2030 of the implementation period for the regional strategy and action plan for tobacco control, and an endorsement of a regional strategic action framework to strengthen road safety systems (10,11,12).

Delivering on these and other ambitious commitments requires strong, sustained leadership and coordination. As I end my tenure in January 2024, Member States had the critical task of nominating Dr Hanan Hassan Balkhy of Saudi Arabia, among other candidates, as the new WHO Regional Director (13). Her nomination will be submitted to the WHO Executive Board at its 154th Session in January 2024, and she will assume office on 1 February 2024.

It has been a huge honour for me to serve as WHO Regional Director for the past 5 years. While I will greatly miss my dear colleagues in WHO, our stakeholders and partners in the Region, I look forward to more fruitful interactions with them whenever opportunity affords as we welcome our exceptionally capable new leader.

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