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Editorial

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Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic have provided an opportunity to intensify efforts towards the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (1). Innovations in digital health and advances in science witnessed during the pandemic can be harnessed to improve equitable access to healthcare and build resilient health systems. We also have stark reminders that without addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups and societies, a simple expansion of service delivery efforts may even exacerbate existing inequities in healthcare (2).

The WHO plays its leading role in global health by promoting, providing and protecting health, while empowering health systems (3,4). However, several challenges that have profound implications for public health place limitations on the capacity of health systems to deliver effectively, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) (4,5).

In 2023 alone, the EMR witnessed large-scale health and humanitarian crises: the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye (6,7); the political crisis in Sudan; the floods in Libya; the earthquakes in Morocco; and most recently the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza and West Bank, which has caused the death of over 28 000 people, the displacement of millions, a widespread damage to the health system, and death of healthcare workers (8–11). This was in addition to already existing challenges in several other countries and the impact of climate change on water and air quality (12). The heightened frequency of emergencies in the EMR, exacerbated by severe climate events, has impacted health systems in almost every country in the region (13).

These challenges underscore the undeniable interconnection between health, environment, development, peace, and political stability. They remind us that every humanitarian crisis is, at its core, a health crisis, and that achieving the health-related SDGs remains a distant prospect without peace (3).

The EMR is a diverse region with countries in different income categories as well as varying health and healthcare priorities and areas of action (4). Tackling the healthcare challenges and putting EMR back on track to achieve the SDGs requires accelerated commitment by all players at the regional and country levels.

In the past 5 years, remarkable progress has been made in strengthening health systems in the region. The “Report on the implementation of Vision 2023 for the Eastern Mediterranean Region”, presented to the Seventieth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean highlights some of the key achievements (4).

During the next 5 years, WHO will intensify efforts to advance “Health for All by All” in the EMR. In alignment with the WHO Global Programmes of Work 13 and 14 (14,15), priority will be in 5 areas: (i) increasing access to healthcare, (ii) enhancing country capacities to respond to emergencies, (iii) strengthening health systems, (iv) expanding partnerships for financing as well as knowledge and skill sharing, and (v) strengthening country capacities to boost cooperation and influence global health (14).

In my first year as the Regional Director, we will pursue 3 flagship initiatives that encompass the regional priorities. First, on increasing access to healthcare, we will pursue an end-to-end

supply chain approach that aims to establish a full cycle of actions for addressing priority needs of countries, using the best available evidence (16–18). Second, acknowledging the enormity of the health and social burden caused by substance abuse in the region (3), we will amplify our efforts in supporting countries to respond to this global challenge. Third, we will amplify efforts in addressing the challenges constraining the availability, distribution, retention, and quality of services provided by healthcare workers (19).

We will work with Member States and partners towards achieving Universal Health Coverage in the EMR by strengthening health governance capacity, monitoring policy implementation, promoting investment in resilient health systems, ensuring that essential medicines and supplies reach all populations, and enhancing service delivery and quality (13,20). We will promote public health, socio-behavioural, clinical, and experimental research and support the translation of the knowledge and evidence from our research into policy at the regional and country levels (21). This is essential if we must achieve the health-related SDGs.

Our success hinges on the collective efforts of all relevant stakeholders, therefore, we will foster collaborations and partnerships within and beyond WHO to build skilled and sufficient healthcare workforce and strengthen health systems sustainably to meet the needs of populations across the region.

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