28 May 2024, Geneva, Switzerland – A partnership event to highlight health challenges and opportunities and the WHO journey in the Eastern Mediterranean Region was held in Geneva on 25 May, ahead of the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly. Hosted by the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Hanan Balkhy and fellow senior officials, the event included a high-level panel discussion to look ahead to the next 5 years.

Titled “From Crisis to Opportunity: Health in the Eastern Mediterranean”, the event was opened by WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the WHO Regional Director. It served as a forum to exchange views on how to enhance collective efforts to remove barriers to health, access and equity in the Region. High-level attendees of the event included several ministers of health from the Region, public health leaders, senior representatives of United Nations agencies and development partners, and diplomatic officials of permanent missions in Geneva.

As well as review critical health challenges the Region has experienced over recent decades, the panel discussion highlighted opportunities and the concrete strategies that aim to help accelerate tangible progress in the Region. The focus was the WHO vision and proposed regional flagship initiatives.

The panel discussion also addressed factors that fall beyond the scope of the health sector and yet have a direct impact on people's health. These include conflict, poverty and economic decline, mass displacement, and food and water insecurity.

The panellists were Her Excellency Dr Hanan Al-Kuwari, Minister of Public Health, Qatar; His Excellency Dr Abdullah Al-Rabeeah, Supervisor General of King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre; Dr Mehdi Karkouri, Chair, Association de Lutte Contre le Sida, Morocco; and Dr Shabnum Sarfraz, Global Director for Gender and Health/Deputy Executive Director, Women in Global Health. The panel discussion was moderated by Professor Carole Presern, Professor of the Practice of Global Health Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"Amid crisis, there is an opportunity – a chance to do things differently, and to achieve major health gains," said Dr Balkhy, responding to a question about her first 100 days as Regional Director. "Scenes from the field proved that hope is still there even in the most difficult settings."

She further spoke of humanitarian emergencies on an unprecedented scale; record numbers of refugees and internally displaced people; health impacts of the climate emergency; shortages of

medicines, vaccines and skilled health workers; and growing burdens of substance use and mental health disorders.

Dr Balkhy shared some insights from her ongoing tour of the Region, which has included 9 country visits so far. In Pakistan, children are given oral polio vaccine drops as part of the ongoing regional efforts to finally eradicate polio. In Hama, Syria, a hospital newly rehabilitated by WHO saves many families from the agonizing choice between feeding their children or paying for transport to seek medical care hours away. In Sudan, collective efforts have led to a fall in cholera, dengue and malaria cases.

In Afghanistan, efforts are being made to sustain women's education in the field of health care. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, a focus on family-based medicine is keeping families at the centre of health solutions, enhancing preventive care, and building a more effective and resilient health system. And in Al-Arish, Egypt, the Regional Director visited a hospital where she saw critically ill Gazans being provided with the highest standard of medical care, free of charge.

Responding to a question about her strategy for the next 5 years, Dr Balkhy announced her 3 flagship initiatives, namely: Securing equitable access and supply chain; Investing in a resilient health workforce; and Accelerating control of substance use. Said Dr Balkhy: "For better access to health care, we need equitable supply chains. We also need to train and retain enough health workers to meet the Region's health needs, now and in future. And we must do our utmost to prevent harm and overcome the treatment gap for people with substance use disorders."

Panellists shared their reflections on how to work together and contribute to these 3 flagship initiatives. This led to fruitful discussions on how to help drive positive health outcomes in the Region. They noted the resilience of people and the wealth of talent in the Region, praising the role of the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in building knowledge and sharing information.

The panellists also expressed, however, that countries can do more work to better support each other, given the diversity and disparities in the Region and unique needs to be addressed.

They highlighted the responsibility of the health system and the social and gender norms that can restrict access to health, leading to unnecessary deaths. Disparities in life expectancy,

mortality rates, education opportunities and labour force participation are obvious. There is a need for the voice of women to be heard in policy-making and to further invest in women's health, in peace and in prosperity for everyone, everywhere, with the support of WHO.

Panellists addressed access to health, especially in conflict settings. They highlighted the importance of adopting innovative and research-based approaches to manoeuvre around problems and challenges on the ground, as well as the importance of engaging affected communities.

Medicine security was also raised. Among the suggested solutions to this issue were producing more medicines locally; supporting low- and middle-income countries to improve their ability to access medicines through pooled procurement mechanisms; and enhancing production capacities in the Region.

The move from funding partners to full partners was also among the points highlighted. Panellists called for donors and receiving countries to be engaged in the conversation and for the voice of civil society to be heard – and for civil society to also be recognized as a key player.

Interventions from the attending ministers and senior partners focused on how to rebuild and ensure the resilience and continuity of health systems affected by conflicts and emergencies; how to complete each other, not compete with each other, as countries of the Region; group purchase programmes that bring the benefits of bulk purchasing; and how to establish health programmes to retain health workforce in the Region.

On closing the event, the Regional Director called on all partners in attendance to work together: "Let's join hands to help everyone in our Region enjoy the healthiest possible life," said Dr Balkhy. "Accelerate action. Expand access. Ensure equity."

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