

***Address by***

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

***At the***

***Partners for Health in South-East Asia***

***16-18 March 2011,  
New Delhi, India***

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Excellency, Ghulam Nabi Azad, the Honourable Minister of Health and Family Welfare, the Government of India, excellencies, honourable guests and partners, ladies and gentlemen,

With great pleasure, I warmly welcome you all to the WHO Regional Conference of Partners for Health in the South-East Asia (SEA) Region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Global health is a multi-stakeholder process. The organizations that you represent here today, have an important role to play in global health governance. This meeting is being held at an important juncture in many aspects of health development worldwide and in SEA Region.

Several noteworthy achievements attained in the field of health during the past century are now under threat; this is especially true for developing countries. We now face the threat from the combined effects of global crises that started at the beginning of this century, in particular the food, fuel, economy and climate change crises.

As the world strives to address these global challenges, development budgets for health are being placed under tremendous pressure. New and innovative ways must be found to effectively tackle the prevailing gaps in under-funded health priorities, including health systems strengthening, and control of chronic noncommunicable diseases.

Although significant progress has been achieved towards improving the health of the people in the SEA Region, we simply must do more. Our Region bears a staggering 40% of the world's disease burden for 26% of the world's population. Thus, the health challenges being faced by the Region are vast, both in number and magnitude. The Region still struggles with a number of communicable diseases that are now virtually unheard of in other parts of the world.

Neglected tropical diseases, such as kala-azar, lymphatic filariasis and yaws still thrive in some countries. The rapid increase of people living in cities with improperly planned urbanization represents a major threat to health; roughly 40% of the urban population in the Region live in slums or shanty towns, exposing themselves to many basic health problems.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Disadvantage and ill-health are closely linked. So, the urban poor suffer disproportionately from a wide range of sicknesses. With huge numbers of people living at close quarters, and with only 60% people in the Region having access to proper sanitation, the struggle against communicable diseases continues.

Malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, vector-borne diseases and HIV/AIDS will continue to subsist under these conditions. Progress made thus far in malaria and tuberculosis control is being compromised by the emergence and spread of drug-resistant pathogens. This burden of communicable diseases is being further compounded by the growing challenge of noncommunicable diseases or NCDs. The Region has about 240 million smokers, a large percentage of adults who do not undertake adequate physical activities, and at least 80% of its population do not eat sufficient quantities of vegetables and fruits.

The biggest killers in the SEA Region are cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancer. Indeed, the Region is facing the double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Distinguished participants,

Despite the high-level commitment of governments, the SEA Region contributes to one third of maternal deaths worldwide. Child mortality is showing a declining trend; but it is still unacceptably high in several countries. The challenges in meeting the desired targets for maternal and child mortality reduction are linked to: low financing for maternal, newborn and child health care; low coverage of comprehensive and evidence-based interventions; and weak health systems infrastructures.

The infrastructures of our health-care services are fragmented and suffer from huge deficits in human resources and appropriate facilities. Catastrophic expenditures on health care are recognized as the major cause of impoverishment and poor health. These are only some of the issues and challenges facing the

SEA Region. Through inclusive partnerships, we must collectively address the related social, economic and environmental factors in the most comprehensive manner. These factors contribute, directly and indirectly, to the double disease burden in the Region.

It is our common responsibility to take full advantage of the momentum gained from our past experiences and use it as an impetus to invest more in saving lives and ensuring better health for all people. No single government, no single organization, no matter how resourceful or powerful, can successfully pursue such a formidable challenge alone.

Health is indeed a cross-cutting area that must be addressed in the true spirit of partnership. By bringing together our combined wisdom and efforts, we can make a difference and help prevent unnecessary suffering, morbidity and deaths.

Let us join hands and work together to meet the formidable health challenges that lie ahead. The efforts made today to promote and protect the health of all people will reverberate throughout the Region – and throughout the world – far into the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all a very successful meeting.

Thank you.