

Opening Address by

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

At the

***Regional Seminar on Decentralization of Health Care Services in
the South-East Asia Region – Perspectives and Challenges***

***6-8 July 2010
Bandung, Indonesia***

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Dr Budihardja Singgih, Director General, Community Health, Ministry of Health, Jakarta, distinguished participants, honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you all to the Regional Seminar on Decentralization of Health Care Services in the South-East Asia Region: Perspectives and Challenges.

My grateful thanks are extended to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia for agreeing to host the meeting in this beautiful city of Bandung.

It is indeed timely to review and discuss the issues relating to this important subject. It is timely because all countries worldwide are now attempting to achieve several time-bound health targets. Most important among these are the targets for the achievement of the health-related MDGs.

Decentralization of health-care services becomes an essential element of Health Systems Strengthening (HSS). This is to ensure improved effectiveness of public health interventions that can lead to the achievement of those goals. The aims of decentralization of health-care services are to improve the “efficiency” of their delivery and the “equity” of their outcomes.

Decentralization helps ensure availability and accessibility of the services to all people in need. Globally, such decentralization has been launched in various forms. However, its achievement and success varies from country to country. Unfortunately, in developing countries, decentralization of health-care services is rarely evaluated.

Distinguished participants,

During the past many years, decentralization is one of the common government policy measures. Much of decentralization has been motivated by political concerns. Decentralization is an important tool to improve the functioning of governance. It is a dynamic political process, a learning process, a mix with centralization. Decentralization should not go in isolation as a separate entity. It is an integral part of the country governance system.

Decentralization is very much context-specific. The contexts are:

- Political,
- Geographical,
- Social and economic.

Though the countries can effectively learn from the experiences of each other on decentralization, comparing decentralization “outcomes” between countries is not easy.

This Regional Seminar is a continuation of the:

- Regional Meeting on Revitalizing PHC in 2008, and
- Regional Meeting on Health Care Reform in 2009.

The primary intention of the seminar is to look at decentralization of health-care services within the context of health systems based on PHC and within the context of health-care reform. Among others, certain important components of decentralized health care systems may be particularly examined in this connection. These are such as:

- Referral systems to ensure effective back-up to health-care services in the community;
- The essential role of local governments in the management of health-care services; and
- The indispensable role of community health workforce at the grassroots level.
- Policy direction, supervision and oversight from the centre.
- Health policy reform.
- HR reform.

Decentralization in health needs to be made a part of the total government decentralization system. The capacity of the local government is the pre-requisite for successful decentralization. This capacity can be built through the processes that permit learning by doing on the ground. This capacity building requires institutional support from both local and central levels. Universities have important role to play in building

management and planning capacities of the local governments. Also, it may be kept in mind that successful decentralization depends on the strength at the centre.

Decentralization will not successfully take place if the centre is weak. Various disease-specific programmes, even though initiated from the centre, should be implemented through decentralized health-care systems in an integrated fashion.

The role of stakeholders other than the local governments must also be clearly defined for their effective involvement. These stakeholders include:

- The private sector
- NGOs
- Civil society, community
- Others.

This seminar is to provide an opportunity for sharing experiences among countries as to:

- what works;
- what does not work; and
- how to make such decentralization happen more efficiently and effectively.

This is just to re-emphasize while sharing our experiences. It needs to be kept in mind that the policy on decentralization is very context-specific; political, social and economic. Decentralization is a means to an end. It is an important process of national health services management. The process that has to be operated within multidisciplinary and multisectoral environments. With accumulated experiences in countries, we should be

optimistic that future endeavours in this area in the SEA Region will be more promising. There has been considerable debate on the various issues involved. However, decentralization is an essential measure towards the achievement of equity and social justice in health. With our richness in the past experiences and lessons, the challenges in front of us should be squarely faced in forging forward.

We need to be very pragmatic in our approach in dealing with decentralization issues. And we have to use system approach in an integrated manner in tackling the issues involved. When it comes to action, we need to be adequately realistic and practical.

To be successful in providing health-care services to all people, especially in the countries with resource constraints, decentralization is a must. WHO will continue providing a platform for information exchange in this important area. WHO will continue supporting countries that pursue decentralization within the context of health systems based on PHC and health-care reform.

I hope that the distinguished participants would find this seminar useful and worthwhile. When we go back home, we should have more ideas to pursue decentralization of health care services in our countries.

With these words, ladies and gentlemen, I wish the seminar all success.

Thank you.