

Inaugural Address

by

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO/SEARO***

at the

***Regional Consultation on
Social Determinants of Health***

***WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India
15-16 September 2005***

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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia**

Sir Michael Marmot, Chair of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health;

Distinguished commissioners;

Representatives from Member States, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and civil society;

Colleagues;

Ladies and gentlemen,

- I extend a warm welcome to you all to the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, and to this Regional Consultation.
- I am delighted that you have accepted our invitation to participate in this meeting.
- We are fortunate that not only the Chair, but also several of the commissioners are present.
- In this connection, I would like to commend our Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook, for his vision to establish the Commission on Social Determinants of Health.

- With the prevailing socio-economic, political and environmental challenges, the establishment of this Commission will greatly help in responding to the urgent need for better knowledge and evidence for planning for health.
- The Commission will certainly be very useful in developing a technically sound basis for tackling health problems in a more efficient and effective manner.
- This global initiative will take us a long way towards ensuring health equity and social justice.
- Focusing on the root causes of ill health, and on the factors contributing to good health in the development process will lead ultimately to better sustainability of health gains from the investment in health and health related sectors.
- This global exercise will greatly contribute to a more rational policy and strategy formulation, and to a more focused programme planning for sustainable development in health.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The gap in health between the haves and have-nots in the world is ever widening.
- There is a deepening crisis in access to basic health services, particularly among the poor, underprivileged and vulnerable.
- The South-East Asia Region is home to a quarter of the world's population, and of about 40 per cent of the world's poor.
- The Region carries about 30 per cent of the global disease burden.

- In spite of the increased coverage in health services through primary health care, still, 25 to 30 per cent of the population does not have access to essential health protection.
- Tackling health inequities among countries and within individual countries are indeed formidable challenges.
- Poverty, rapid urbanization, unhealthy lifestyles, low level of education, gender imbalance, and adverse effects of globalization aggravate the inequity.
- Epidemiological and demographic transition, as well as constant social changes has important implications on the health of the population, and on the manner in which health services are planned and provided.
- Our sociocultural beliefs and values also have major implications on people's health.
- However, the exact magnitude of these factors are yet to be fully and clearly understood; this is in order to serve as a better basis for development planning in health.
- Rapid urbanization in the South-East Asia Region is heavily taxing the available civic amenities and services.
- Most of this phenomenon takes place particularly in the high density or slum areas, with the associated problems of drug addiction, crime, violence, indoor and outdoor pollution, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and many more.
- To solve these problems effectively, there is an urgent need to forge strong partnerships with all sectors and stakeholders, in order to create a viable and supportive environment.

- An environment that will ensure maximum multisectoral inputs to the health development process.
- We must accept that the health sector alone is really not enough to bring about effective changes to ensure health equity and social justice.
- In fact, many solutions to health problems and health-related issues lie in sectors other than health.
- This understanding of the multisectorality of health needs to be universally recognized at all levels of development, and not only at the top.
- Sectors other than health should take full responsibility for their particular areas of health; and take determined actions to solve those health problems, as far as they are concerned, by using their own sectoral resources.
- Realizing the expanded health concept, and expanded role of health in the development process, we should be happy to see sectors other than health running health programmes in the specific areas of their concern.
- All sectors and all sections of society must work in a synchronized manner towards the same health goal, if the goal of health for all people is to be realized.

Distinguished Commissioners,

- Issues of trade, debt, technology transfer, capital flight, brain drain, and more – all have implications on the health of the public.

- Certain aspects of globalization contribute to a higher standard of health.
- At the same time, globalization increases health risks and inequalities.
- More knowledge and more evidence on these implications are the essential tools for us to move forward in the most efficient and effective manner in pursuing health goals.
- Given this scenario, I am happy that we are re-emphasizing the need to look critically at health determinants and health risks.
- This consultation is providing us a forum to review various issues relating to social determinants of health, exchange views and identify ways in which our Region can take forward the work of the Commission.
- In the South-East Asia Region, efforts have been made to address determinants of health through various programme areas, including our efforts in reorienting public health education and practice.
- Under this initiative, we are focusing particular attention on the determinants of good health and disease risk factors, which are the domains of health promotion and disease prevention.
- The Regional Office has already given the necessary impetus to capacity building in public health systems, with emphasis on health interventions that are focusing on health determinants and health risks.
- We believe that for this approach to be satisfactorily implemented, we have to really work within the multisectoral and multidisciplinary environment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The Meeting of Health Ministers in 1997 adopted a Declaration on Health Development in the South-East Asia Region in the 21st Century.
- This Declaration reaffirmed the basic principles of Health for All, and reiterated the close interplay between poverty and ill-health.
- The foremost challenges identified by the Ministers were:
 - closing the gaps and inequities in health in our societies;
 - ensuring basic health services to all, especially the poor, women and other vulnerable groups; and
 - upholding health ethics and placing health at the centre of development.
- We, in this Region, have based our development planning on these strategic directions, which emphasize special efforts to tackle health problems from their root causes.
- This has been undertaken through consistent advocacy at policy and political levels, with the view to enhancing the incorporation of relevant knowledge and evidence in the process of health planning and development.
- The work of this Commission will help us expand the scope of our work in this regard, and help us go more in-depth in this challenging task.

- In addition to the technical contents, we need advice and guidance from the Commission on directions, tools and mechanisms for addressing social determinants in various on-going and new WHO collaborative programmes at regional and country levels.
- This Consultation is a good opportunity to learn more about the Commission's work; its vision, mission and strategy to move forward.
- More importantly for us, is to learn how the Region and Countries can contribute effectively to the work of the Commission, and vice versa.
- Our interaction with the Commissioners will provide us an opportunity to chart out concrete steps to reduce health inequalities, ensure social justice and accelerate the development of health for all.
- It is my sincere hope that the Commission will lay the foundation for awareness building, and for promoting debate and action on social determinants of health in the Region.
- I wish the consultation a grand success, and wish all participants a pleasant stay in Delhi.
- Thank you.

