Foreword

This issue of the *WHO South-East Asia Journal of Public Health* presents a range of articles on public health in the region but has a particular focus on Sri Lanka. The country’s strong performance in the Millennium Developments Goals (MDGs) related to health is well recognized, especially with regard to maternal health and child survival. As with all countries of the region, focus has now moved towards addressing the new opportunities and challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In many respects, this shift from MDGs to SDGs mirrors the change in the current health priorities in Sri Lanka resulting from demographic and epidemiological transitions. It is thus timely to analyse the situation, to review lessons learnt and to help inform future actions. It was in this spirit that the *WHO South-East Asia Journal of Public Health* invited experts to assess aspects of Sri Lanka’s past and future health challenges through a series of articles in this issue of the journal.

With respect to communicable diseases, commitment to the national immunization programme continues to result in high coverage, and several vaccine-preventable diseases are approaching elimination status. In neglected tropical diseases, earlier this year, Sri Lanka and Maldives were the first countries in the World Health Organization (WHO) South-East Asia Region to be declared officially free of lymphatic filariasis. As described in this issue, Sri Lanka has now applied to WHO for certification of malaria elimination, and reaching the target of elimination of rabies by 2020 now lies within grasp. Nevertheless, communicable diseases remain a threat, notably dengue, for which a comprehensive prevention and control programme has been put in place.

The burden on Sri Lanka’s health system has shifted from communicable to noncommunicable diseases. As the leading causes of mortality, morbidity and disability, noncommunicable diseases carry serious socioeconomic consequences not only for the country but also for individuals and families. The urgent need to prioritize prevention and control of these diseases and to tackle their social determinants has been recognized in the *National Multisectoral Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2016–2020*. Healthy Lifestyle Centres were introduced in 2011 as part of health-system strengthening for the early detection and management of noncommunicable diseases and their risk factors. This issue includes an analysis of progress to date with this network of centres.

Universal health coverage is not only a target but also a central tenet of the SDG on health, and thus is fundamental to all aspects of meeting the country’s health-development needs. As explored in this issue, although Sri Lanka is well positioned in this area, emerging concerns about service provision and financing will need to be addressed, as will mechanisms to ensure sustainable access to medicines. A notable challenge is the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. This gap is particularly pertinent, since Sri Lanka is home to one of the fastest-ageing populations in the world. Significant work done to date has resulted in a range of policies and initiatives to meet the health-care and social-care demands resulting from this rapid demographic transition. A healthy, economically active, elderly population will be an asset in a society with a shrinking workforce. Yet, as discussed in this issue, more still needs to be done, perhaps including application of the lessons learnt from past successes in reducing maternal mortality to address community-based care of the elderly.

I hope that all readers will find this issue a useful study of the strategies by which past successes were accomplished in Sri Lanka and how future ambitions in health may be realized.

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