

## Message from the Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region, on World TB Day 2017



The WHO South-East Asia Region, which comprises a quarter of the world's population, accounts for nearly half the global tuberculosis burden. TB is the single largest cause of death due to any infectious disease. It is also the top killer of persons in the 15-49 year age-group. In 2015 an estimated 4.74 million people developed the disease and over 710 000 people succumbed to it in the Region.

Indeed, tuberculosis is a public health scourge responsible for untold suffering, premature mortality and impoverishment, and has significantly impeded development in our Region. The disease also continues to aggravate widespread poverty in our Region.

At present the annual decline in TB incidence is 1.5% to 2%. That means that if "business as usual" persists, not a single country in the South-East Asia Region will reach the WHO End TB targets.

To bend the TB curve we need to do more and do it fast. Available tools must be utilized more effectively; the development of newer tools must be fast-tracked; and universal health coverage – along with social protection – must be provided to all TB patients.

Several initiatives have been taken by the Regional office in the past year. We collaborated with the Government of India to organize a high-level meeting, "Fast-tracking access to quality diagnosis and treatment for Ending TB", to reinforce leadership commitment to end TB through bolder policy announcements and the launch of new initiatives. At the meeting, we also launched the *WHO Regional Strategic Plan 2016–2020: Ending TB in the South-East Asia Region*, that would help in updating national strategic plans of four Member States. We have been undertaking modelling exercises to estimate resource needs to fast-track interventions. Member States are being supported to adopt the recent WHO recommendations on diagnostics and a shorter regimen for MDR-TB is also being adopted.

However the most significant achievement has been the "Call for Action" issued at the Regional Ministerial Meeting held on 15-16 March 2017 in New Delhi. The Hon'ble Health Ministers of all Member States declared TB a priority and committed to invest resources for ending TB in the Region by 2030. This meeting was a precursor to the Global Ministerial Conference on Multisectoral Response to TB in the Sustainable Development Era, to be held in Moscow in 2017.

We are also in the process of establishing a "Bending the TB Curve Initiative" that will monitor progress of TB control in the Region and advise WHO and partners on the way forward.

Even as we underscore our achievements let us not forget that ending TB cannot be achieved by one single agency in isolation. It is a concerted responsibility of governments, civil societies, community organizations, and technical and funding agencies, and they all need to be committed to the cause. Let today be a day when we rededicate ourselves to end TB by 2030.

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