GENEVA--Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, addressed the World Health Assembly today. She stressed the links between climate change and health, including those related to the spread of vector-borne diseases. Her address was followed by a technical briefing that underscored the need for multisectoral action in order to achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and agreement on a new resolution on meeting those goals.

Climate change and health

Ms Figueres thanked Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, for first insisting on the need to reach an agreement on climate change because of its effects on health.

Congratulating the world's heads of states for reaching last year's Paris Agreement on climate change, she called on governments to act on the agreement. She encouraged health ministers to take the lead, noting that one of the most urgent aspects of climate change is its impact on health. Nevertheless, only 15% of the countries that have drawn up plans for climate change refer to health in those plans.

Ms Figueres also stressed the importance of taking action to prevent health problems, noting that the great majority of health interventions currently focus on treatment.

She ended with a warning that if the world does not fundamentally change its approach to energy within the next five years, there is a risk that damage to the atmosphere will be irrevocable and continue to impact on health for decades.

Sustainable Development Goals

Delegates agreed to strengthen national health systems to progress towards universal health coverage, as a key way of achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

The resolution highlights the need to strengthen a range of essential public health functions. This will involve investing adequate, sustainable resources in health-system strengthening; enhancing the education, recruitment and retention of health workers; tackling social, environmental and economic determinants of health; and improving the monitoring and analysis of health outcomes.

In September last year the United Nations General Assembly adopted the SDGs, an ambitious set of 17 goals with 169 targets for achieving a fairer, safer and healthier world by 2030.

The health-related targets are concentrated in, but not limited to, Goal 3: "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." They include a target of achieving universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services

and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

Universal health coverage, supported by resilient national health systems based on strong primary care, is widely regarded as the best defence countries can have against outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Ebola and Zika, as well the burgeoning burden and costs of noncommunicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes. With its focus on equity, it represents an essential strategy towards the fulfilment of one of the core principles of the SDGs: leaving no one behind.