5 April 2018, Geneva—On 7 April, World Health Day, the World Health Organization marks its 70th anniversary. Over the past 7 decades, WHO has spearheaded efforts to rid the world of killer diseases like smallpox and to fight against deadly habits like tobacco use.

This year, World Health Day is dedicated to one of WHO's founding principles: "The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

"Good health is the most precious thing anyone can have," says Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. " When people are healthy, they can learn, work, and support themselves and their families. When they are sick, nothing else matters. Families and communities fall behind. That's why WHO is so committed to ensuring good health for all."

With 194 Member States, across six regions, and working from more than 150 offices, WHO staff are united in a shared drive to achieve better health for everyone, everywhere – and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring "healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages".
The tagline for this year's World Health Day is "Universal Health Coverage: everyone, everywhere". WHO offices worldwide are organizing events to mark the day, with Dr Tedros joining celebrations in Sri Lanka.

70 years of progress

Globally, life expectancy has increased by 25 years since WHO was established. Some of the biggest health gains are seen among children under-5: in 2016, 6 million fewer children died before they reached their fifth birthday than in 1990. Smallpox has been defeated and polio is on the verge of eradication. Many countries have successfully eliminated measles, malaria and debilitating tropical diseases like guinea worm and elephantiasis, as well as mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

Bold new WHO recommendations for earlier, simpler treatment, combined with efforts to facilitate access to cheaper generic medicines, have helped 21 million people get life-saving treatment for HIV. The plight of more than 300 million people suffering from chronic hepatitis B and C infections is finally gaining global attention. And innovative partnerships have produced effective vaccines against meningitis and Ebola, as well as the world's first ever malaria vaccine.

Producing international reference materials

From the very beginning, WHO has brought together the world's top health experts to produce recommendations and international reference materials. These range from the International Classification of Diseases – currently used in 100 countries as a common standard for

reporting diseases and identifying health trends, to the WHO Essential Medicines ListÂ Â Â a guide for countries on the key medicines that a national health system needs. In the coming weeks, it will publish the world's first Essential Diagnostics List.

Making a difference on the ground

For decades, WHO staff have worked alongside governments and health professionals on the ground. In the early years, there was a strong focus on fighting infectious killers like smallpox, polio and diphtheria. The Expanded Programme on Immunization, for example, set up by WHO in the early 1970s, has, with the help of UNICEF, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and others, brought lifesaving vaccines to millions of children. WHO estimates that immunization averts 2-3 million deaths every year.

Responding to new challenges

In recent decades, the world has seen a rise in noncommunicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease. These diseases now account for 70% of all deaths. So WHO has shifted focus, along with health authorities around the world, to promote healthy eating, physical exercise and regular health checks.

The Organization has run global health campaigns on the prevention of diabetes, high blood pressure and depression. It also negotiated the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, a formidable tool to help reduce disease and death caused by tobacco.

Using data to target our efforts

Tracking progress in all of these areas requires a strong monitoring system. Data collected from countries across the world is stored in and shared through WHO's Global Health Observatory. This powerful tool helps countries get a clear picture of who is falling sick, from which disease, and where, so they can target efforts where they are needed most.

Remaining on constant alert

Every year, WHO studies influenza trends, to work out what should go into the next season's vaccine. And it remains on constant alert against the threat of pandemic influenza. One hundred years after the flu pandemic of 1918, WHO is determined that the world should never again be subjected to such a threat to global health security.

A renewed commitment to prevent outbreaks from turning into epidemics, and to respond better and faster to humanitarian emergencies, has spurred the creation of a new health emergencies programme that works across all three levels of the Organization. WHO is currently responding to outbreaks and humanitarian crises in more than 40 countries.

Next month, at the World Health Assembly, the Organization will propose a bold new agenda that builds on lessons learnt and experience gained over the past 70 years. It will focus on achieving universal health coverage for 1 billion more people; protecting 1 billion more people

from health emergencies and enabling 1 billion more people to enjoy better health and wellbeing – by 2023, the halfway point to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda deadline.

Historical details

WHO succeeded the League of Nations' Health Organization. Its establishment was approved by the UN Conference in San Francisco, USA in 1945. The WHO Constitution was drafted by a committee, chaired by Dr Brock Chisholm, who became WHO's first Director-General in 1948. The Constitution was approved by Member States during the International Health Conference in New York, USA.

http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2018/who-at-70/en/