Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General

Closing speech for the 71st World Health Assembly

Palais des Nations, Geneva
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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Sometimes the challenges of our world can feel overwhelming.

Poverty. Hunger. Inequality. Pollution. Violence. War. Disease.

But we come together as the nations of the world because we choose not to be overwhelmed.

We choose hope. We choose a better future.

In the past year I have visited several conflict zones, and seen the suffering in the people who pay the heaviest price for decisions made by other people.

Everywhere I go, I have the same message: health as a bridge to peace.

Health has the power to transform an individual's life, but it also has the power to transform families, communities and nations.

This week, you have charted a new course for WHO. You've made a firm statement about what you want us to do, and the results you expect to see.

The General Programme of Work you approved gives us a strong mandate, and an ambitious agenda to get on with.

Now it's time to implement it. We have no time to lose. Five years is no time.

Everything we do must be evaluated in light of whether it will help us to make progress towards the "triple billion" targets.

We will invest in and reinforce anything that helps us to do that.

As you know, universal health coverage is the foundation. Investing in stronger health systems will help make the world fairer, safer and healthier.

As President Kagame said on Monday, universal health coverage is an opportunity, not a burden.

I wish to thank the many countries who made concrete commitments this week to strengthen their health systems. WHO stands ready to support you with world-class technical know-how to turn those commitments into realities.

In the coming weeks, months and years, we look forward to engaging in policy dialogue with each Member State to identify areas in which the best health systems can be made even better, and the weakest and most fragile can be supported and strengthened.

That is what WHO is for.

This week, we have seen proof that the reforms we have made in our emergencies programme are working. The work started by my predecessor, Dr Margaret Chan, is paying off.

The Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee has given its stamp of approval to our work on emergencies, and has recognized that we are better positioned to act with greater speed and predictability.

The current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has demonstrated exactly that.

I am proud of the way that we have worked seamlessly at all 3 levels of the organization.

Let me assure you that I am personally committed to ensuring that we do everything we can to stop this outbreak as soon as possible.

We have come a long way, but there is always more we can do to make the world safer.

I appreciate the hard work you did this week to negotiate the resolution on the International Health Regulations, which will help to improve public health preparedness and response by strengthening core capacities.

The new Global Preparedness Monitoring Board that we launched with the World Bank this week is another vital brick in the wall of global health security.

I'm very grateful that Dr Gro Brundtland and Mr Elhadj As Sy have agreed to co-chair this new mechanism.

You have also made important commitments to turning back the tide on diseases that have plagued humanity for centuries.

You have committed to implementing a roadmap to reduce deaths from cholera by 90% by 2030.

You endorsed our 5-year strategic plan on polio transition, to strengthen country health systems that could be affected by the scaling down of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

You passed resolutions on tuberculosis and noncommunicable diseases that will help us prepare for the High-Level meetings at the UN General Assembly in September, to ensure we make the most of these historic opportunities.
You approved our new Global Action Plan for Physical Activity, which is essential for our fight against noncommunicable diseases.

The very successful Walk the Talk event last Sunday, and the regular yoga sessions during our committee meetings, have helped to liven up the Assembly and are important statements that we practice what we preach.

You asked us to develop a 5-year roadmap to address access to, and the global shortage of, medicines and vaccines. This is a major cause of financial hardship. I look forward to presenting that roadmap to you next year.

For the first time, you committed to reducing the unacceptable burden of deaths and disabilities from snakebite.

You've resolved to take action on assistive technologies and rheumatic heart disease.

And you have agreed to increase the development and use of digital technologies to improve health and keep the world safe.

I am also pleased that you approved a resolution committing to us to receiving 50% of our interns from developing countries, and to paying them a stipend, by 2020. This is an important step towards making WHO fairer.

I would particularly like to thank the Wellcome Trust, which has generously offered to support 150 interns from low- and middle-income countries in the next 3 years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The GPW calls on us to measure our success not by outputs, but by outcomes – by the measurable impact we deliver where it matters most: in countries.

Ultimately, the people we serve are not the people with power; they're the people with no power.

The people of Bikoro, who look to us to protect them from Ebola;

The mother in Yemen, who looks to us to keep her child alive;

The people who face a daily choice between sickness and poverty because they cannot afford health care.

So the true test of whether our discussions this week were successful, or just more talk, will be whether they result in real change on the ground.

As I said on Monday, there are three keys to our success:

First, a transformed WHO. This is a job especially for the Secretariat, with support from you, the Member States;

Second, political commitment. This is a job especially for you, the Member States, with support from the Secretariat;

I especially want to thank my brother Martin Chungong from the Inter-Parliamentary Union for his partnership.

This week we signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with IPU to strengthen the role of parliamentarians in achieving UHC, and we agreed to have a meeting of parliamentarians here at the World Health Assembly every year.
We're also hopeful that a resolution on UHC will be passed at the IPU Assembly in March next year.

And the third key to success is partnership. This is a job for all of us: the Secretariat, the Member States and all of our partners who can help us achieve our mission.

I urge each of you to go home with a renewed determination to work every day for the health of your people.

Do not accept the status quo. Do not believe that some problems can never be resolved. Choose to believe instead that it is within your power to make real, lasting change.

The commitment I have witnessed this week gives me great hope and confidence that together we can promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable.

I thank you.