22 May 2017 | GENEVA - In her final opening address to the World Health Assembly as Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan offered some advice to delegates "as you continue to shape the future of this Organization".

She called on the Health Assembly to make “reducing inequalities” a guiding ethical principle. "WHO stands for fairness," she said. Countries should also work to improve collection of health data and make health strategies more accountable.

Protecting scientific evidence should form "the bedrock of policy", said Dr Chan, citing vaccine refusal as one of the reasons that the "tremendous potential of vaccines is not yet fully realized".

She stressed the importance of continued innovation, citing the research partnership between WHO and others to produce an effective and highly affordable meningitis A vaccine that has transformed the lives of millions of people in Africa. “Meeting the ambitious targets in the Sustainable Development Goals depends on innovation,” she said.

She then asked governments and partners to safeguard WHO’s integrity in all stakeholder engagements. "The Framework for engagement with non-state actors is a prime instrument for doing so,” and to "listen to civil society": “Civil society organizations are best placed to hold governments and businesses, like the tobacco, food and alcohol industries, accountable. They are the ones who can give the people who suffer the most a face and a voice."

In closing, Dr Chan asked government representatives to: "Remember the people…Behind every number is a person who defines our common humanity and deserves our compassion, especially when suffering or premature death can be prevented."

New President of the Health Assembly

Earlier in the day, the Health Assembly elected Professor Veronica Skvortsova, Minister of Healthcare of the Russian Federation, as its new President. Five Vice-Presidents were also

appointed from Cabo Verde, the Cook Islands, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Somalia and Suriname.

Some 3500 delegates from WHO's 194 Member States – including a large proportion of the world's health ministers - are attending the Health Assembly, which ends on 31 May. They are currently debating ways to advance the 2030 agenda, focusing on building better systems for health.

Election of New Director-General

Tomorrow, Member States will elect a new Director-General, who will take office for a five-year term on 1 July 2017.

The three nominees for the position, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of Ethiopia; Dr David Nabarro of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Dr Sania Nishtar of Pakistan, will each address the Health Assembly for 15 minutes tomorrow afternoon, starting at 14.00 (CET). Dr Tedros will speak first, followed by Dr Nabarro and then by Dr Nishtar. The three addresses will be webcast.

The election will take place by secret ballot and its result will be communicated once the process has been completed. The Director-General Elect will take the oath of office in a public ceremony, which will be webcast.

Topics covered during the Health Assembly

Over the next days, delegates will approve the Organization's programme budget for 2018-19 and discuss a wide range of health-related issues. They will make decisions relating to WHO's response to health emergencies, the International Health Regulations, and Pandemic Influenza Preparedness. Important discussions will take place relating to polio; antimicrobial resistance; access to medicines and vaccines; the health of refugees and migrants; improving vector control; adolescent health and chemicals management. The Health Assembly will also examine a number of topics relating to noncommunicable diseases, including dementia, cancer, and preparations for the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on NCDs to be held in September 2018.

A series of daily, webcast, technical briefings will start on Wednesday 24 May with a session on Reaching everyone, everywhere with life-saving vaccines. Subsequent briefings will focus on Universal Health Coverage: sustained commitment and concrete achievements (Thursday, 25 May) and Health and the environment, inheriting a sustainable world (Friday, 26 May).