

# Building a responsive and results-driven World Health Organization in Africa

The following is the text of the acceptance speech by Dr. Matshidiso Rebecca Moeti, World Health Organization Regional Director for Africa, at the 136th Session of the World Health Organization Executive Board Geneva - January 2015

I am deeply honoured by the decision of the Executive Board to appoint me as the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa. I would like to thank the Member States of the WHO African Region and the Executive Board of WHO for giving me the opportunity to lead the Region, and to work with our Member States to give new impetus to progress towards our common goal of making better health for Africans a reality. I also thank the government and people of Botswana, my country for their support for my work, candidacy and campaign. I take up my new position in all humility, fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead.

Allow me to introduce myself briefly. I have worked in health for more than 35 years, about 20 of which have been at international level. But the basis for all this was laid by my background as a child being the daughter of two physicians in then-apartheid South Africa, living in a township near Johannesburg, with my parents among the few doctors providing services to a community living in poverty and deprivation. My understanding of the need for justice and fairness in health grew out of the daily observation of the struggles of families to stay healthy, since the consulting rooms were in an extension of my parent's small house. It was consolidated by all that I have learnt working in the public health system of my adopted country Botswana.

I have since then had the privilege of occupying positions of increasing responsibility at the country, regional and global levels in WHO, UNICEF and UN-AIDS, following my experience in Botswana's public health system. I've been privileged to work with a range of programmes covering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and also, as the Director of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), an emerging problem in our Region. In the recent past, I have worked as the Deputy Regional Director in WHO/African Regional Office for two-and-a-half years under the leadership of Dr. Luís Sambo. The year 2015, in which I take office, is a very significant one. During this year, we shall assess how well countries were able to push themselves in meeting health targets. It is also the year that we conclude the planning and launch the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The African Region has made considerable progress over the years, although there remains much to be done. Significant declines have been seen in the incidence of HIV, tuberculosis and malaria; a number of the neglected tropical diseases that have plagued this part of the world for centuries are close to being eliminated; immunisation rates have soared over

the past 10 years and deaths from measles have plummeted; and Africa now has a new vaccine that promises to make outbreaks in the meningitis belt a thing of the past. There have also been declines in maternal and child mortality, with some African countries showing the fastest rates of decline in the world. However, the Region continues to face several challenges. For the past few months, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa has been the top priority that has engaged us all.

This tragedy has had a devastating impact on families, livelihoods, security and socio-economic development in the severely affected countries. It compelled a response that went well beyond the health sector and the actions of Ministries of Health and WHO, and is demanding the investment of millions of dollars to ensure that the rest of the Region and the world are prepared to limit any spread should cases occur. I would like to respectfully pay tribute to the governments of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia for their leadership and steadfast action in responding to the epidemic; and to the people of these three countries who've shown extraordinary courage and adaptability in facing up to this completely unknown threat in their midst. There has been an unprecedented outpouring of support from across the globe, from African countries and the African Union, from development partners, non-governmental organisations and philanthropists. The Executive Board Special Session on Ebola emerged with a bold and comprehensive resolution that articulates a very clear agenda for action - by Member States, WHO and development partners.

I am committed to working closely with Dr. Margaret Chan, with colleagues in our Headquarters, the Regional office and country offices, to ensure that we continue to deliver effective and timely WHO support to the countries, working within the coalition led by the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response. After months of extraordinary effort by the governments and people of the three countries, and partners, including WHO, the tide appears to be turning in the epidemic. However, we will need to sharpen our vigilance and focus on finding and tracing all chains of transmission, treating all those who are infected, and achieving zero cases in each of the countries. This means putting field epidemiologists, data managers and contact tracers on the ground in the required numbers, working side-by-side with skilled community mobilisers, and definitively confirming this progress.

My most urgent task as I take office will be to help

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the affected countries in their efforts to get to zero cases. I am equally committed to providing the technical support and advocacy needed for these countries to rebuild their health systems, which have been destroyed by this unprecedented epidemic and following up on the work that I know is already on-going between Headquarters and Regional office staff. I intend to strengthen the capacity of the WHO Secretariat in the African Region to lead and coordinate our preparedness for the response to epidemics, through budget re-allocation and resource mobilisation, re-structuring if necessary and recruitment, and will be guided by the resolution adopted during the Special Session.

This brings me to the first of five priority areas on which I promised action to the WHO African Region Ministers in Cotonou at the Regional Committee in November. Improving health security by tackling epidemic-prone diseases, emergencies and new health threats. Tragic as it is, this Ebola epidemic provides an opportunity for the world to take action and progress towards achieving robust national health systems that are adequately staffed and financed, that are resilient to shocks and health threats, and that are able to reach all people with good quality preventive and curative services. Within this, is the need for better preparedness to confront and deal with outbreaks of communicable diseases and emergencies due to other hazards. Today's inter-connected world demands that countries work hard to live up to their commitments within the International Health Regulations, and that international solidarity be central to addressing collective vulnerability.

The readiness of the African Region to deal with health threats, within the framework of the International Health Regulations, is profoundly in need of additional investment and strengthening. We will pursue fundraising for the African Public Health Emergency Fund, which was established by the Regional Committee and endorsed by Heads of States at the African Union Summit in July 2012. We will ensure its appropriate fit within the global contingency fund proposed by the Special EB Session. This outbreak has also highlighted the need to mobilise hitherto untapped African capacity to be ready to deploy as part of the surge capacity for epidemics and emergencies. I shall promote and support the establishment of a multi-disciplinary African Health and Emergency Corps, within the framework of the

global public health reserve workforce, in collaboration with our Headquarters and partners. We shall also work very hard in driving progress towards equity and Universal Health Coverage in our Region. We will start by providing support to the recovery of the health systems in the Ebola-affected countries. However, I would like to emphasise that most countries in the African Region need intensive and sustained support to strengthen their health systems. I am excited by the determination of the global health community to tackle this long-standing barrier to improved health in the Region. I also believe that the commitment expressed by Member States, translated into increased domestic investment in health and sound national health strategies, and accompanied by the support declared by international partners, will deliver the progress that has been desired in the past decade. I eagerly look forward to leading my colleagues in the Region to work on this. We will also support the work to ensure that the MDGs are concluded while pursuing the Post-2015 Development Agenda. At the same time, we will need to tackle the growing burden of NCDs and to ensure that they don't replace communicable diseases as the major cause of ill-health.

The African Region played a leading role in the negotiation of the global tobacco treaty and now we aim to build on this, focused on prevention and avert the looming NCD epidemic. We will also support our Member States to improve their ability of the Ministries of Health to tackle the social determinants and work successfully with other sectors in promoting health.

Finally, building a responsive and results-driven WHO Secretariat in Africa will be central to my term as the Regional Director. Much has been said about WHO's reforms in relation to the Ebola epidemic response and my task is to take the reform agenda forward, and the intention is to fast-track, with support from our Headquarters, certain key areas of reform. We must build our organization to be more effective, efficient, responsive, accountable and transparent. We will put in place a strong team to take the organization forward in the Region and I will speed the work to improve our recruitment and performance management practices. Our impact is most important at country level and I would like to ensure that our competence is sharpest at that level. We will review the implementation of the reform selection of WHO Representatives and ensure that their skills and leadership capacity are optimally suited to the countries where they are posted. I am determined to reinforce our accountability for both programmatic results and the management of the resources that you entrust to us. We will train, guide and monitor the performance of managers and their teams on WHO's new Accountability Framework, and I intend to lead by example and be personally available for all aspects of this accountability drive. I start on this inspiring journey comforted by the fact that a good foundation has been laid by those who led the African Region in the past. They have done truly remarkable work and I am particularly grateful to Dr. Luís Sambo, the Regional Director Emeritus, for his leadership, support and mentorship over the past 10 years. I wish him all the very best as he returns to his country and his family.