

On the right track

Francis Omaswa reports from the 67th Session of the World Health Organization Regional Committee for Africa



I am writing from the 67th Session of the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Committee for Africa opened on 28 August 2017 at Elephant Hills Resort in Victoria Falls, Republic of Zimbabwe; opened by President Robert Mugabe. Key participants included Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General (DG) of WHO, Dr. Asamoah Baah Deputy WHO DG, Dr A. Nascimento do Rosario President of the 66th Regional Committee from Cape Verde, David Parirenyatwa, Minister of Health and Child Care of Zimbabwe, the African Union Commissioner for Social Services, and Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, as well as delegations from the Member States of the WHO African Region and partners.

It is an uplifting experience to see all these leaders united here including the African Union (AU) Commission. They all placed health of the people at the centre, not just in words, but I feel that these leaders are sincere in what they are saying to us. Do we care? How do we show that we care? Are the questions that are being asked here? For example President Mugabe stated 'Let us therefore push health to take its deserved prominence on our agendas in our sub-regional groups, at the African Union level and indeed on the global forum'. President Mugabe also noted that Africa is disproportionately represented on the global disease burden for communicable and non-communicable diseases. 'We must ask ourselves why this is so, and more importantly, what can we do to arrest and reverse these trends', and called for building of formal healthcare systems to respond. Indeed Zimbabwe has taken practical steps to finance health from domestic resources. It was the first country to have an HIV levy and has followed this up with a health tax on phone calls.

Dr. Tedros demonstrated that he cares by telling the story of a woman he met in Yemen who was begging for her child to be saved when she herself was only skin and bones. It is these type of people that our work is

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about. He has set out a new mission for the organization which is to 'keep the world safe, improve health and serve the vulnerable'. This mission is set within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will guide global development including public health. To achieve the mission, Dr. Tedros outlined five strategies that will define WHO's work under the 13th General Programme of Work (GPW) for the period 2019–2023 currently under development.

The strategies are the ability to prevent, detect and respond to epidemics including polio outbreaks and antimicrobial resistance; provision of health services in emergencies and rebuilding health systems in fragile conflict and vulnerable states; helping countries to strengthen systems to progress towards universal health coverage; drive progress towards the specific SDG health targets; and provision of a governance platform for health. Dr. Tedros concluded his remarks by reminding the delegates that 'We are here because we care about the health of the world's people. They must be foremost in all our minds this week. The challenges we face are great. So must be our ambitions'.

My take away message is that Africa is on the right track after listening to the WHO Regional Office present its Performance Report and Transformation Agenda. The WHO African Region is showing promise of becoming the effective partner of countries that we have the right to expect. On top of this improved collaboration with the African Union Commission and the African CDC that is hosted at AUC is critically important for mobilising political support for health in the continent. Both President Mugabe and Dr. Tedros had already confirmed that it is political commitment that will be the determinant of the success of SDG implementation and the health outcomes therein.

I want as I have done in the past to call upon African techno-professionals and civil society to take advantage of this new mood and to support our new and old leaders by providing the technical support that is critical for decision making and moving forward. Research evidence, data and information and advocacy will be needed as critical inputs for the transformation that the WHO Regional office working for.

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