



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR AFRICA

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MESSAGE FROM THE WHO REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR AFRICA,
DR. EBRAHIM M. SAMBA, ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY 2002
(24 MARH 2002)

The African region contributes to about 25% of the global burden of TB. Estimates reveal that over 200 million of population in the Region are healthy carriers of the TB germ. In the face of a looming HIV epidemic, the current TB epidemic has a potential to escalate tremendously if urgent measures are not taken to address it. Currently WHO estimates that more than 1.6 million new cases of disease and over 600,000 deaths occur in the region each year. This situation is complicated by the fact that between 30-50% of all new TB cases are co-infected by HIV.

TB is one of several illnesses that affect the poor. This is quite evident in our Region where a significant proportion of the population in most countries live below the poverty line. Thus TB, vigorously being fuelled by the HIV epidemic has taken, and continues to take a huge toll on the very poor in the society.

WHO estimates that TB alone accounts for an annual economic toll equivalent to US\$12 billion from the incomes of poor communities. HIV sero-prevalence rates of 10-15% that are common in many of our Member States can translate into a reduction in growth rate of GDP per capita of up to 1% per year. Further studies also show that on the average, TB causes 3 to 4 months of work time lost, leading to 20-30% loss of average annual potential earnings in annual household income. For families of those that die from TB, there is a further loss of about 15 years of income due to premature death of the TB sufferer.

It is common knowledge that improving the health of any community is undoubtedly a concrete way of reducing poverty and inequity in society. Investments in health are indeed investments in human potential. Thus, addressing the diseases of poverty is a way of putting back billions of dollars into the national economies of poorer countries.

It is against this background that WHO is commemorating this year's World TB Day, which is meant to be a yearlong campaign, with the theme: "Stop TB, fight poverty". This is a call to all our governments and the international community to expand DOTS, increase access to TB treatment and to Stop TB. In October 2001, WHO and her partners launched the Global Plan to Stop TB that has as its cornerstone, the acceleration of the expansion of DOTS in all countries in order to ensure that every TB patient has access to adequate TB treatment. This indeed is a challenge to all of us – governments and partners alike! Furthermore, with the creation of the Global TB Drug Facility (GDF) and the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria (GFATM), the enabling environment has been set for a more intensified action by governments to accelerate the expansion of DOTS throughout all our member States.

Current statistics indicate that though many countries (40 out of 46) in our Region are implementing the DOTS strategy, the coverage is still below expectation. Only 16 out of the 46 countries (35%) have attained nationwide coverage. An average treatment success rate of 68% for the Region also falls below the global/regional target of 85%.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to challenge and encourage all our governments and partners to take advantage of the new opportunities that have availed themselves to supplement their own resources and launch an intensified offensive against the scourge of TB in our respective countries. I will further challenge each Member State that has not yet attained a 100% DOTS coverage to aim to achieve this over the next three years. We have no excuse to fail this time because the DOTS strategy is effective and inexpensive, and new funding mechanisms (e.g. the Global Fund for AIDS, TB & Malaria and the Global TB Drug Facility) are being made available to countries to tackle TB and other poverty-related diseases in a more determined way.

We have the means and the will to make effective TB control, even in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a reality in our Region. Let us all therefore combine our strengths and make DOTS services accessible to all those who need them. That will be money very well spent to contribute significantly to the fight against poverty in our Region!

Signed

Dr Ebrahim M. Samba

