

**14th Round Table Meeting, Thimphu, Bhutan,
12-14 March 2019
*WHO Regional Director's Address***

Excellencies, partners, distinguished participants,

It is a privilege to be with you today and to participate in what is a unique and immensely valuable exercise.

That Bhutan has conducted this Roundtable Meeting for the past 14 years is testament to the wisdom of bringing together a range of partners, from a range of disciplines, to strengthen support to the Royal Government of Bhutan and its vision.

In acknowledging the Roundtable's significance for Bhutan's development generally, and keeping in mind the organization I represent, I will focus on health.

For many years Bhutan has been a global example when it comes to prizing health and well-being over other metrics of progress.

This is currently reflected in the presence of five health experts in the Royal Government's Cabinet.

It is also reflected in the fact that the Hon'ble Prime Minister himself, is a renowned and highly respected medical doctor.

Notably, it is manifest in the many significant public health achievements Bhutan has made in recent years.

In 2014, for example, Bhutan shared in the Region's success of being certified polio-free.

In 2016 it likewise celebrated the Region's achievement of maternal and neonatal tetanus elimination as a public health problem.

Bhutan was of course one of the first of the Region's countries to achieve that goal, having done so before the turn of the millennium.

Significantly, in 2017 Bhutan eliminated measles three years ahead of the Regional target, which made headlines everywhere.

In the same year, Bhutan was awarded the World No Tobacco Award due to policies that outpaced even the most pro-active countries.

In 2018 Bhutan was verified to have controlled rubella and congenital rubella syndrome – one of the few countries in the world to do so.

And I understand several significant achievements are around the corner.

In line with the Region's Flagship Priority of finishing the task of eliminating neglected tropical diseases, Bhutan is on the verge of eliminating kala-azar.

Bhutan is also on the verge of eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV, hepatitis and syphilis.

These would indeed be groundbreaking achievements, and would reverberate not only in our Region but across Asia and the world.

Nevertheless, as always, there is more to do and additional ways to help change the lives of all people everywhere leaving no one behind.

As I reiterated at last year's WHO Regional Committee, as well as at my re-appointment as Regional Director in January, it is imperative that we sustain our many achievements, accelerate progress, and harness the full power of innovation.

On each of these points, WHO and Bhutan's Ministry of Health are fully aligned.

First, let us focus on sustaining Bhutan's very substantial achievements.

Over the years Bhutan has been a leader both in the Region and across Asia in controlling and eliminating diseases that have taken a significant toll elsewhere.

That commitment must continue. To do so, resolve must be steadfast and the required resources secured to overcome last-mile challenges.

Second, we must strive to accelerate progress.

Despite Bhutan's topography, its immunization programme has forged exceptional gains that have been recognized the world over.

That means its primary health care system can do the same, especially when it comes to providing services for noncommunicable diseases. Commendably, Bhutan was the first country in the Region to introduce WHO's Package of Essential

Noncommunicable Disease Interventions, commonly referred to as the PEN package.

To accelerate its impact and the quality of PHC generally, increased budgetary allocations would help.

Though I appreciate Bhutan's health spending is considerable, further allocations would be welcome, and should be seen as an investment rather than an expense.

Third and finally, we must seek-out ways to harness and make full use of innovative technology.

As many of you appreciate, we just had back-to-back meetings in New Delhi concerning the positive role digital technologies can – and should – have in modern health systems.

The benefits for a country like Bhutan are clear to see.

While all people should have trouble-free access to primary care services, eHealth and mHealth tools can help fill gaps and supplement services as and where needed.

Excellencies, distinguished participants,

Though Bhutan has made remarkable strides in a range of areas, like all countries it faces persisting and emerging challenges.

But as this Roundtable demonstrates, it is well positioned to face those challenges head-on, and to develop, cost and implement the policies needed to chart transformative progress.

I trust Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan will do exactly that, guiding the country through a time of global change and at the same time as building on the wise and able leadership Bhutan's Royal Government has demonstrated for many years.

You can, as always, count on WHO's full support in each and every one of your endeavors.

I look forward to working with you to achieve the full scope of your vision and the entirety of your ambition.

Thank you very much.