



REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Sixty-fourth session

Cotonou, Republic of Benin, 3–7 November 2014

**ADDRESS BY DR LUIS G. SAMBO, WHO REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR AFRICA,
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE SIXTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE
WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA**

- Your Excellency Dr Boni Yayi, President of the Republic of Benin,
- Mr Francois Obovi, Minister of Health of the Republic of Congo, Chairman of the Sixty-third session of the Regional Committee,
- Honourable Members of Government and Heads of institution of the Republic of Benin,
- Honourable Ministers of Health and Heads of Delegation of Member States,
- Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General,
- Ambassadors and Heads of diplomatic missions accredited to the Republic of Benin,
- Dear colleagues from agencies of the United Nations system,
- Distinguished Guests,
- Dear participants,
- Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to take the floor before this august assembly to welcome you to the Sixty-fourth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa. The holding of this session, initially scheduled from 1-5 September, was postponed to this day because of contingencies related to management of the current Ebola virus haemorrhagic fever epidemic which is seriously affecting our Region.

- Your Excellency Dr Boni-Yayi, President and Head of State of the Republic of Benin,

I want first of all to express my profound gratitude to you and to the Beninese Government and people for the warm hospitality accorded us and the excellent arrangements made for the holding of this meeting. The hosting of this meeting by your country is a testimony to the quality of the long-standing ties of cooperation between Benin and WHO and your personal commitment to health development in Africa.

This session of the Regional Committee is holding in an extremely difficult context because of the Ebola virus epidemic which is putting our health systems to the test and jeopardizing the progress made in socioeconomic development in the affected countries. So far, more than 13 000 cases and nearly 5000 deaths have been recorded. The magnitude and the spread of this epidemic has taken all of us by surprise. In addition, it is the first time that the Ebola virus haemorrhagic fever epidemic is hitting West Africa so intensively. Nevertheless, the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Senegal have been able to contain the epidemic from its onset and WHO has already declared both countries Ebola-free. Moreover, the recent information received from Liberia indicates a downward trend in the number of new cases reported. This issue will be discussed during our deliberations.

This Committee session coincides with the implementation of the WHO reform which seeks to ensure a greater WHO leadership and coordination role in global health governance. This Regional Committee session is also being held in a transition period between the Millennium Development Goals and the start of Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the United Nations in the post-2015 agenda. The current context is also characterized by economic growth in Africa which should provide opportunities for in-depth reforms to improve health systems capacity and performance.

- Mr President of the Republic,
- Honourable Ministers,
- Distinguished Guests,

Despite the many challenges facing the African Region, progress has been made towards achieving the health-related MDGs in the past decade. Infant mortality has dropped from 80 to 63 deaths per 1000 live births; under-five mortality has fallen from 129 to 95 deaths per 1000 live births; and maternal mortality ratio has declined from 670 to 500 deaths per 100 000 live births. The past decade has also seen progress in terms of reduction in the disease burden. For example, the incidence of HIV/AIDS has been reduced by 26% and the number of AIDS-related deaths by 34%. Malaria incidence has fallen by 39% and mortality by 62%.

Since the introduction of the conjugate vaccine in 2010 in 12 Sahelian countries, no confirmed case of meningococcal A meningitis has been recorded among the immunized population. The number of poliomyelitis cases dropped by more than 95% between 2005 and 2013. Nigeria, which is the only endemic country, has made remarkable progress, recording only six cases of poliomyelitis in 2014 compared with 49 cases over the same period in 2013. We continue to work with the governments and partners concerned to stop the transmission of the poliomyelitis virus in our Region this year. During the same period, we eliminated leprosy and are about to eradicate guinea-worm disease. Concerning river blindness (onchocerciasis) we have reached the threshold for its control.

- Excellencies,
- Ladies and gentlemen,

Those are some of the health outcomes obtained through the combined efforts of governments, African communities and partners.

In spite of this progress, major challenges persist. The disease burden is still high, mortality indicators remain worrying and there is still the risk of epidemic outbreaks. Humanitarian crises continue to occur in the Region, as is currently the case in South Sudan and Central African Republic. This has resulted in population displacement turning many people into refugees, a significant number of victims of firearms, destruction of health infrastructure and disruption of health care delivery. These challenges underscore the need to undertake more in-depth reforms to strengthen the resilience of health systems and ensure universal health coverage.

It is now a decade since you elected me WHO Regional Director for Africa. I would like to express, here and now, my heart-felt thanks for the confidence you reposed in my country, Angola, and in my humble person. While acknowledging my limitations, I would like to assure you that I have done my best to meet the expectations of all our countries.

- Honourable Ministers of Health,

Thanks to your seamless support, your assistance and that of the international community, we have been addressing the health challenges in our Region since 2005. In order to render account of my stewardship over the past 10 years and for the sake of institutional memory, we have produced three reports presented to you today:

- (a) The first report, entitled “*The Work of WHO in the African Region 2012-2013: Biennial Report of the Regional Director*”, reflects the work of the Secretariat in the implementation of the Programme Budget 2012-2013.
- (b) The second report, entitled “*A decade of WHO action in the African Region: striving together to achieve health goals 2005-2015*”, deals with my contribution as the leader of the WHO team in the African Region during my two terms of office. It sets forth initiatives such as the establishment of Intercountry Support Teams in order to bring WHO technical support closer to countries; decentralization and delegation of authority to senior staff to facilitate decision-making; establishment of “the WHO regulations and procedures compliance monitoring unit” which has led to greater accountability and reduction of problems raised by external audits; the establishment of the African Public Health Emergency Fund; and establishment of the partners coordination mechanism for Harmonization for Health in Africa (HHA).
- (c) The third report, entitled “*The African Regional Health Report 2014: The Health of the People — What works,*” is a report of the WHO/AFRO management team, sharing successful experiences in public health best practices in many countries of the Region, which contributed to the progress made.

Allow me to thank the governments of countries of the Region and bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies that contributed to and participated in the achievements of the WHO Regional Office for Africa. I should also commend the health initiatives implemented by the African Union and the regional economic communities.

- Mr President of the Republic,
- Honourable Ministers,
- Distinguished guests,

I would like, after having spent nearly 25 years at the service of WHO, to remember my predecessors, notably the late Dr Alfred Quenum (from 1965 to 1984), Dr Gottlieb Lobe Monekosso (from 1984 to 1994) and Dr Ebrahim Malick Samba (from 1994 to 2004) with whom I was privileged to work and learn. I would like to acknowledge, at this gathering, their contributions to health development in Africa since the mid-1960s and the solid heritage on which we built our action over the past decade. The works of these illustrious public figures are on display in the exhibition hall.

I want to reiterate my gratitude to you for the privilege you gave me to serve WHO in the Region. The magnitude of the challenges was immense, but the opportunities to address them firmly were edifying. The results we achieved would not have been possible without the seamless support of the WHO Director-General, Dr Margaret CHAN. I would like, dear Margaret, to thank you for your unfailing support.

May I also express here my sincere gratitude to all Directors, WHO country representatives and the entire staff of the WHO African Region who showed proof of competence and devotion to work. You supported me in various often unforeseeable moments and I thank you for your support.

Our thanks go to the host country of the Regional Office, the Republic of Congo, particularly His Excellency the President, to the Government and the people of the Republic of Congo for their support and their care which enabled me to discharge my duties in serenity throughout my stay in Congo.

Last but not least, allow me to turn to my country, Angola, to express my profound gratitude to His Excellency Mr José Eduardo dos Santos, President of the Republic, and to the Government and people of Angola for their unfailing support which enabled me to face even the most difficult moments with calm.

This session of the Regional Committee will elect a new WHO Regional Director for Africa. Allow me to salute the distinguished candidates to my succession and to wish all of them the best of luck in this noble undertaking.

While I am about to depart from this prestigious organization, which I had the privilege to serve, I am even more convinced of its relevance and *raison d'être*. Its core functions are of special importance to African countries, in view of the health challenges facing them. To enable WHO to fully play its role, it is necessary, now more than ever, for it to obtain financing commensurate with the challenges and with the expectations of the people and governments. It is important for our Organization which is undergoing reform to be able to achieve its institutional objectives without being destabilized by worries about financing. My wish is that the world would do more to finance WHO more adequately.

I wish the Sixty-fourth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa every success in its deliberations.

I thank you for your kind attention.