

NEW LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA



For the first time in its 66-year history, WHO Africa Regional Office (AFRO) has a woman at its helm. Earlier this year, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti was appointed as the Regional Director for AFRO by the WHO's Executive Board in Geneva in January 2015.

Coming into this role, Dr. Moeti intends to build an effective, responsive, results-driven WHO in Africa. This is no small feat given Dr. Moeti began her five-year term in the midst of the most recent Ebola disaster.

Originally from South Africa, Dr. Moeti's inspiring career trajectory began with medical and public health degrees from University of London and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine respectively. From there she returned home and eventually led Botswana's Ministry of Health's epidemiology unit and its HIV/AIDS program. After that, she joined UNICEF in Zambia as a health and nutrition program officer and then went to UNAIDS as a regional team leader for Africa and the Middle East. It was after this that Dr. Moeti first joined the WHO's Africa Regional Office, where she held various roles such as Deputy Regional Director, Assistant Regional Director, Director of Non-communicable Diseases, WHO Representative for Malawi, and Coordinator of the Inter-Country Support Team for the South and East African countries.

Uniting to Combat NTDs caught up with Dr. Moeti during WHA68 in Geneva for an interview:

In what ways does being the first female AFRO RD matter to you? What does it mean to you – personally and professionally?

It's an honor bestowed on me to serve my continent and Member States as the first woman WHO Regional Director and more importantly to join my predecessors, the men and women in the Region and indeed around the world, to help reduce the burden of poor health on the people. The role of women is changing and with education and hard work, there is no limit to what any woman can achieve in her personal and professional life.

Your first meeting as Regional Director was on Neglected Tropical Diseases in Brazzaville, was this a happy coincidence for the NTDs community?

As a Regional Director of WHO in the African Region, a region that is currently experiencing the highest burden of NTDs, I made a commitment to the Ministers of Health that tackling NTDs will be one of my top priorities.

As you may be aware, these diseases anchor a large proportion of African people into poverty and must be controlled, eliminated and eradicated so as to contribute to the reduction of poverty and attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As an immediate follow-up to my commitment and determination to tackle NTDs, I convened a meeting of the Regional Program Review Group, a technical advisory group that reviews the status of NTD programs in the region and guides countries on critical interventions to be taken to achieve the NTD goals and targets.

What do you think is the single biggest issue that we need to tackle in NTDs?

Addressing the burden of NTDs in the region requires a multi-sectorial approach and combination of strategies that includes, among others, preventive chemotherapy, intensified case management, vector control and provision of safe water, sanitation and hygiene. One of our biggest challenges in the region is scaling up mass drug administration so as to reach the highest number of people and thus control, prevent, and hopefully eliminate these diseases with the support of our partners. We must take every advantage of the donations of medicines that pharmaceutical companies are providing and ensure that they get to all the people that need them until the diseases are eliminated or eradicated.

What gets you out of bed every morning?

The knowledge that every effort during the day contributes towards making someone in the Region healthy. To see that people have access to basic healthcare; to see the last Guinea worm patient and other successes in health is encouraging. I was thrilled to meet the last Guinea worm patient from Ghana and I want that experience about other endemic diseases.

What excites you most about your new role?

The fact that we've turned a new page and upped our game and are on course to tackle the health challenges facing the African region.

We know you are a lover of Jazz – which is your favorite?

It's impossible for me to name one; but listening to Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, John Coltrane, and Ella Fitzgerald have both inspired and soothed me since my teens.

Thank you Dr. Moeti, and all of us at Uniting to Combat NTDs wish you a very successful tenure in your role as Regional Director and very much look forward to working with you in ending these diseases of poverty in Africa.