



2020 WAHO Day Message

The West Africa Health Organization (WAHO), the Health Institution of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is 33 years old today, 9 July 2020.

Since the creation of WAHO in 1987 and the appointment of the first Director General in 2000, the organization has worked closely with the Ministries of Health of the 15 Member States of ECOWAS, and with all stakeholders - partners, the private sector, civil society organizations and our communities to advance the health agenda in the region. From the improvements in national immunization programs and investments in malaria prevention strategies, through the excellent initiatives in sexual and reproductive health and rights aimed at improving demographic transition in our region, to the herculean efforts that defeated Ebola in our region, these collaborations have been the foundation of all that has gone well over the years despite the recurrent health challenges in the region.

As we mark WAHO Day this year, our region has not been spared from the COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the world today. The lessons of the Ebola epidemic and the support of our partners through various health security strengthening programs meant that the disease surveillance and preparedness architecture in the ECOWAS region was in a

much better shape going into the Covid-19 pandemic than was the case before. All countries had set up National Public Health Institutions for coordinating public health preparedness and response to epidemics, networked regionally through WAHO and its Agency, the ECOWAS Regional Centre for Surveillance and Disease Control (RCSDC). A regional reference laboratory network had been set up with WAHO support and formalised regular Communication policies and platforms ensured there was transparency, early warnings, peer support and mutual respect and trust among Member States.

Since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Covid-19 infection a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, WAHO has worked tirelessly to support the region and protect our populations, coordinating communication and collaboration between Member States, and between the region and partners, whilst supporting individual Member States with critical medical supplies, diagnostic test kits, online training to build capacity, public health advisory, and targeted funding for specific activities to help flatten the curve of this pandemic. However, the scale and nature of the pandemic has exposed weaknesses in our health systems that have undermined response efforts, including weaknesses in infrastructure, human resources, diagnostic and therapeutic facilities, manufacturing capacity particularly of medicines and vaccines, and deficits in the level of community engagement required to effectively tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic therefore offers us both an insight into our shortcomings, but also an opportunity to resolve to do better. Both the leaders and the led have had to endure the same facilities and utilise the same health resources with the obvious challenges. We can therefore commit ourselves to break the stranglehold of poor health funding, neglect of human resources for health, and weak health systems through innovative involvement of the private sector, civil society organisations and universal community health insurance schemes. We must rebuild trust with our populations and engage community and religious leaders in strengthening public adherence to the social distancing and personal hygiene measures critical to defeating the current pandemic. It is within our power as individuals to protect ourselves and our loved ones and rapidly contain community transmission of

the virus. Today, on WAHO Day, I am challenging every citizen of West Africa to make a pact with 10 of your friends or family to practise scrupulous personal hygiene and responsible social distancing, to never be out in public without a face mask, and to encourage each other to keep the pact during this pandemic. You will be amazed at how quickly this pandemic will go down in your community.

WAHO encourages governments to continue to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations, to safeguard the delivery of essential health services particularly to women, children, the elderly and marginalised populations, and to reward the selfless services of all those in the frontline of fighting this pandemic – the doctors, nurses, contact tracers, laboratory, volunteers, and their families. WAHO will continue to work with the Ministers and national experts of all ECOWAS Member States, Africa Centre for Disease Control, the WHO Afro Regional Office, and with all our partners to sustain the strong collaborative efforts within the region, to all of who we are grateful for their leadership.

Finally, I would like to thank the Authorities of all ECOWAS Member States for their total and continuous support to WAHO in the discharge of its mandate of regional integration through health, and the President and Government of Burkina Faso for the cordial present and future hospitality as the Host Government of WAHO Headquarters. We have a lot of work to do, but I believe that this special Institution of ECOWAS will continue to serve the region creditably as we march from a Community of States to a Community of Peoples.

Long live ECOWAS. Long live WAHO. Long live Regional Integration.

Prof Stanley OKOLO
Director General, WAHO