

EU-Level Consultation on Migration Health – "Better Health for All"

Lisbon, Portugal

Ms. Laura Thompson, Deputy Director General, International Organization for Migration (IOM)

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Your Excellency, Francisco Ramos, Secretary of State, Assistant to the Minister of Health;

Prof. Maria do Céu Machado, High Commissioner for Health;

Dr. Marit Koki, European Centre for Disease Control;

Distinguished Officials, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

Colleagues and Friends;

It is a privilege to be in Lisbon and an honour to address this distinguished gathering on the important question of Migration Health. Considering Portugal's historical role in the age of discovery, and being the melting pot for different cultures that it has today become, I can think of no better venue for an event such as this one.

The theme of this Consultation is compelling: inclusive and equitable access to health and social services for migrants remains vital for the pursuit of sustainable, humane and beneficial migration in the 21st century.

Let me therefore start by thanking the Portuguese Minister of Health represented today by State Secretary Francisco Ramos, the High Commissioner for Health Prof. Machado and, through you, the Portuguese Government, for the leadership you have taken to promote the migration health agenda. Your continuous leadership and advocacy has contributed enormously to some of the policy reflection taking place and to concrete results in this domain. We continue to work with the current and forthcoming EU Presidencies on these issues so as to ensure that the migration health agenda moves forward.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all those who have partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the preparation of this important conference and in pioneering new migration health initiatives in Europe. I must pay particular tribute to those Member States who, with the leadership of Portugal, facilitated the process that led to the adoption of Resolution 61.17 Health of Migrants at the 61st World Health Assembly in 2008. IOM looks forward to continued fruitful cooperation with the WHO, the various other partner agencies and Governments in the implementation of this Resolution.

Needless to say, this event would not have been possible without the generous financial contribution of the European Commission Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) and the Government of Portugal in funding the "Assisting Migrants and

Communities" (AMAC) project, under whose auspices this conference is taking place.

As you well know, this key resolution calls upon Member States to promote migrant-sensitive health policies and programs. It further recognizes the health of migrants as being a human right. The right of every human being to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is recognized by major human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, among others. Unfortunately, as you know, several European countries are yet to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants Workers and Members of Their Families, an essential step, we believe, towards implementing the Health of Migrants WHA Resolution.

It bears emphasizing that well-managed migration health regimes promote the well-being of all, protect global public health, thereby facilitating migrants' integration and contribution to social and economic development in sending and receiving countries.

It is therefore regrettable that migrants often suffer low social status that negatively affects their health. Stigma, discrimination, poor living and working conditions, high stress levels, and unhealthy lifestyles are all factors that contribute to lower health outcomes of migrants.

Further exacerbating the situation is the fact that many groups of migrants face obstacles to accessing health and social services due to their irregular legal status, language barriers, socio-cultural factors, among other factors.

And yet, migrants are not equally vulnerable. Groups such as women, children, the elderly and undocumented migrants, are, for various reasons, more prone to abuse and exploitation. It is often the case that the most disadvantaged are the least visible and have no voice. These migrants may well be those persons who pick the vegetables we buy in the supermarket or those who clean our offices at night.

During the next two days of this Consultation, we will learn about the achievements and challenges faced in promoting migration health and better health for all, with a particular focus on the complex issues relating to social determinants of the health of migrants.

I will therefore only touch briefly on three aspects that are critical to any discourse on social determinants of health as concerns migrants. First, and possibly most importantly, research and data collection is essential to expanding the knowledge base on migration health. Accurate information is needed to enable policy makers to develop evidence-based migrant health policies and strategies. Secondly, data is needed if there is to be effective advocacy for migrants' right to health. Last, and certainly not least, it is critical that the capacity of health and social care professionals is strengthened so as to make

services more "migrant friendly".

As we develop Pandemic Influenza (H1N1) preparedness, mitigation and response plans, we must not forget to include the needs of migrants. Indeed, failure to factor in the health needs of migrants, whatever their status, poses a public health risk. Hence the need to provide ACCESSIBLE, ACCEPTABLE, and AFFORDABLE, health and social services to all, migrants included. To this end, a multi-sectoral approach that incorporates migrant health issues in all aspects of our various areas of work will be required.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize certain actions that could help to promote migrants' health issues.

- 1) We -- which is to say, Governments, Agencies, Academic Institutions and other Stakeholders -- need to commit to including health in all discussions, policies, strategies, and impact assessments that touch on migration. The upcoming Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) is on such opportunity. Further, and more importantly, migration needs to be specifically integrated into national strategic health plans. This will be critical to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.
- 2) When we address the social determinants of health and equity, there is need to specifically focus on the health needs of migrants as a distinct group because migrants have health vulnerabilities that are inherent to the migration process.
- 3) Finally, we may need to do more to ensure that migration health stays on governments' agenda despite the current climate resulting from the economic crisis which, understandably, presents new challenges towards which attention and resources need to be directed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again, thank you very much for honouring us with your presence here today. I wish you successful deliberations and very much look forward to the guidance we will receive from you over the course of the next two days.