

**Speech by Prof. Recep AKDAG, Minister of Health, Turkey at the Opening
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Global Economic Crisis

In 2008, we witnessed possibly the most important economic downturn after the 1930 depression; we started to talk about a global economic crisis as well as a number of adverse consequences of the crisis. Nevertheless, in 2009, we are more intensively dealing with this global crisis, and trying to prevent its damages by implementing stimulus packages and other measures.

No country is immune from the crisis. It affects and will affect all countries but the magnitude of the impact will vary from one country to the other.

Of course, health sector will have its share from this recent economical distress. We all know that the economists do tend to cut down government expenditures at challenging times like this one. In this sense, health expenditures, unfortunately, are among the first items to be considered for cut down.

However, at this point, we have a crucial responsibility that is to prevent the economic crisis from turning into a social and welfare crisis. Therefore, health, not only a fundamental right of individuals but also the assurance of the well-being of our future, should not suffer from the crisis. Today, we have achieved a certain success, and the progress in many areas of health is very promising. Accordingly, we should display our utmost efforts to avoid any cutbacks in this progress because we cannot compromise or endanger our future.

Health Situation in Gaza

Violence is a threat to spread health for all persons. Wars and conflicts have always had devastating consequences during the history of the world and mankind. They have resulted in widespread pain, suffering, traumas and most importantly lives have been lost, lonely orphans and many other tragedies have been left.

The recent tragedy in the Gaza Strip has led all of us into deep distressful concerns. We are still concerned about the grave humanitarian situation. The hospitals, primary healthcare centers and the health personnel are under a serious pressure to cope with the consequences of the heavy fighting. In fact, unfortunately some health personnel were either killed or injured while they were on duty during the fighting. Furthermore, the severe shortage of power and medical supplies has stretched the already weak health infrastructure. The vaccination program should immediately be strengthened in health centres to prevent the risk of pandemic outbreaks given the Gaza's high population density and dire living conditions. We believe that we should put more emphasis on the reconstruction of the destroyed health infrastructure, and availability and accessibility of humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The World Health Organization should take further initiatives in cases of violence like the one in Gaza.

Health Policy Cycle

While developing health policies, it should be kept in mind that ethical norms and health are the most fundamental human rights, and health policies should be developed and maintained with strong commitment to the principle of "health for all". In developing health policies, fundamental structural changes might be required for some countries while just improving processes and procedures might be enough for some others. Therefore, the continuity of change – though every country's need for change might be somehow different- is an inevitable reality.

Millennium Development Goals

We have come a long way in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. But, we still have a long way to go ahead, and some countries should put more efforts than the others since they have not been able to achieve desired success, yet. We have reached the second phase in the global drive to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The Goals address a central challenge: to ensure that the benefits of globalization are evenly and fairly distributed. As stated in the Millennium Declaration, this is a call for global solidarity based on the principles of equity and social justice.

Even though several successful steps have been taken as we have reached half way of the target date, discussions suggesting that some low-income countries would not achieve the goals are of priority in the agenda. In this regard, I should underline that donor countries should definitely continue to support less developed countries. They should not weaken or put an end to their supports, especially at this vulnerable time. Otherwise, we will come to a point, which -in fact- we would hope for the otherwise, that is impoverishing the already poor.

Strengthening Health Systems

For achieving health-specific goals of the Millennium Development Goals and for overcoming global health challenges, we need to strengthen health care systems. Promoting health through efficient policies and effective actions is the main objective of health care systems, which include all organizations, agencies and resources of a country. In this respect, we will be able to accomplish this by means of main functions of the health care systems such as delivery of services, generation of resources, effective financing and stewardship.

Primary Health Care

Considering primary healthcare activities, meeting health needs of societies and determining rational actions - instead of adhering to the policy-based definitions- are vital for the future. In the 30th anniversary of the Alma-Ata Declaration, we are in urgent need of addressing Primary Health Care. We have to be careful in reorganizing PHC in order to meet contemporary demands of citizens and to respond to the recently emerging needs of the aging populations.

Turkey's health reform and its outcomes

In Turkey, we have been going through a significant transition period for the last six years under a very comprehensive reform program. So far, many of the goals have been achieved as a result of the actions that we have taken under this Program.

In order to reach targets, definitely, it is required that certain policies are implemented with strong commitment. One of the most important pillars of such commitment is allocating higher amount of financing for health (and especially for preventive health care services) and using the financial resources more effectively.

Undoubtedly, a series of policies need to be implemented in order to achieve these targets. Allocating higher amounts of money for health and especially for preventive health care services, and effective use of financing are essential at this point.

It is essential that citizens have access to primary health care services without any charges indeed. In the recent period of transformation, Turkish citizens have been taken under the coverage of health insurance under a single umbrella that is the Universal Health Insurance. And because Primary Care Services are essential for health, all citizens across the country can receive preventive and primary health care services in primary

health care facilities with no need for a social security paper within the scope of the Health Transformation Program.

Vaccination is of still utmost importance, especially for children. Not only is the availability of vaccines but also providing children with access to vaccines important. Health Transformation Program has brought both the level of vaccination and the range of vaccine types up to a satisfactory level, which has – certainly- had some cost for the budget. The World Health Organization should guide countries for developing new approaches, which would facilitate the access to some vaccines that are not easily affordable.

Proper nutrition of children is vital for growing healthy generations. Providing all infants in Turkey with free-of-charge iron and Vitamin D support, we have taken a major step in this regard.

Disaster management is a very important topic. Countries should make arrangements for disaster management according to their own needs and features, and the World Health Organization should facilitate for regional planning and solidarity systems. As known, Turkey is located on the seismic belt and therefore, we have taken some major steps in this subject under the Health Transformation Program. Considering the regional plans across the country, we have set up the National Medical Rescue Teams with two thousand five hundred and twenty-six (2.526) well-trained and volunteer personnel.

Together with the changing burden of diseases, health promotion should be developed and its communicative power with regards to public health should be definitely used well. Countries should tailor and implement health promotion activities in mother and child health care, communicable diseases and non-communicable diseases. Given the changing burden of disease in Turkey; the Health Transformation Program has identified two basic activities for health promotion that are “smoking” and “obesity”.

The role of hand-washing in public health protection should be prioritized by all countries and should be put at the top of health promotion agenda. To give example, hand-washing plays an important role even in cases of swine flu that is transmitted by respiration. Turkey regards “hand-washing” practices as the third pillar of health promotion activities.

It is important to follow-up the outcomes of the health programs implemented. Health indicators, protection from financial risk and citizen's satisfaction with health care services are three important fields of follow-up. To give an example, I would like to brief the results that we have obtained from the Health Transformation Program in the last six years.

Only the health care systems and transformation programs, which are managed by the resolution and commitment of political decision-makers, are capable to have success. Sustainability of the programs is essential and I am very proud to acknowledge that we have achieved such sustainability in Turkey within the last six years.

That's why we have made major progress in terms of cases such as maternal and infant mortality, maternal and neonatal tetanus, iron deficiency, the Rickets, measles, malaria and typhoid fever.

Major decrease has been noted in maternal and infant mortality.

A range of activities have been implemented and as a result of this neonatal tetanus is eliminated. It is considered to be a public health success by WHO.

The proportion of iron deficiency, which was approximately 30 % before the “Iron-Like Turkey Program” was reduced to 7.8 %.

The rickets - an D vit deficiency-affiliated disease- was 61 per 1000 before but was decreased to 1 per 1000.

We are close to the elimination of measles.

We are close to the elimination of malaria.

As a result of the serious activities we have conducted, the number of tyhoid cases has decreased by 1/100 when compared to the figures in the year 2002.

It is important that all individual within a society – even if they are poor- have access to health care services. No one should be impoverished because he makes spending on health. The fact that ratio of the impoverishing effect of catastrophic health expenditures in Turkey is decelerating is a result of the Health Transformation Program. Besides, the ratio is quite lower than that of the comparable countries, on which data are available. In 2006, only 7 per 1000 households were impoverished due to health expenditures and we believe that the ratio has been decreased in 2007 and 2008.

People’s satisfaction with health care services is a significant indicator of the extent, to which we have achieved our objectives. Health reform in Turkey is a good example, which proves that significant improvements could rapidly increase people’s satisfaction with health care services in a short time.

In the presence of these respected public health professionals, I would like to add a few things about the future.

In this respect, the last six years in Turkey prove to be a good example. And it is very important to evaluate the OECD report, which is based on the OECD’s review of Turkish heath care system.

OECD Report has the following expressions regarding the progress, which Turkey has made so far:

“The Health Transformation Program in many ways reflects “good practice” in the development and implementation of a major health sector reform including UHI coverage. Strong government commitment and leadership along with major financing reforms aided by strong economic growth have been complemented by sequential delivery system reforms.”

“Indeed, there may be much that other countries can earn from the recent health reforms in Turkey, especially in the use of performance-related pay to rise staff productivity.”

“Health system reform is a perpetual process. At this early stage in its implementation, Turkey appears to be one of the few middle-income countries to be implementing a “bing-bang” reform effectively.

The HTTP represents both an important improvement in Turkey’s social welfare system and a “good practice” example for other countries struggling with the same issues.”

We should set our future goals properly and should assist each other. Our primary goals for the future in Turkey are;

- Alleviating risks for population health
- Health protection, and
- Health promotion.