



OPENING STATEMENT
H. E. MR. HAMIDON ALI
ECOSOC ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW
REGIONAL MINISTERIAL MEETING
ON FINANCING STRATEGIES FOR HEALTH CARE

16 March 2009, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Honourable Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to congratulate the Government of Sri Lanka for hosting this Regional Preparatory Meeting for ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) to examine financing strategies for health care. I would also like to congratulate the Government for volunteering to make national presentation at the AMR. I understand Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to volunteer.

May I also take this opportunity to thank the Government and people of Sri Lanka for their warm and generous hospitality.

It is a privilege for me to participate in this important event in Colombo, particularly at a time of economic turmoil, when this theme could hardly be more topical.

Financing is the issue on everyone's mind and is therefore bound to figure prominently in the Council's deliberations in July. Therefore the contribution of this meeting is especially important. Before I share with you how I see this meeting enrich the 2009 Review, allow me to take this opportunity to remind ourselves how the Annual Ministerial Review came about.

The origins of the AMR go back to the 2000 Millennium Summit where world leaders committed to the Millennium Declaration - an ambitious but feasible development agenda. Building upon a decade of major UN conferences and summits, a series of time bound targets were adopted that have come to be known as the Millennium Development Goals. When Heads of State and Government reconvened at the 2005 World Summit, it became evident that the world was off track in meeting the agreed development goals by the 2015 target date. Consequently, the Annual Ministerial Review of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was established to track progress and scale-up efforts towards the goals' achievement by the deadline.

The Review consists of several elements. A key component of the Review is a discussion on a specific aspect of the United Nations development agenda: it allows the Council to focus on the obstacles, as well as on ways to overcome them. In 2009, the Review will focus on "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health".

While Sri Lanka has made significant strides in the area of health, many countries are not on track to achieve the health-related Millennium Development Goals. Right now, with shrinking health budgets, all countries are struggling to make ends meet. We are going to exchange experiences over the coming two days on health financing strategies. This will help us to better understand the specific challenges that Asian countries are facing and understand ways in which regional and global responses can be promoted in this difficult economic climate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many Asian countries have made considerable progress towards achieving the health-related MDGs since the signing of the Millennium Declaration. However, often, especially in the poorest countries in the region, only people who can afford to pay can use the available services. Promoting greater access and eventually universal coverage will require, among others, increasing the availability of funding for health, both domestic and external.

The economic consequences of the global financial crisis threaten to reverse recent accomplishments and can jeopardize progress on the many health challenges which still have to be tackled in order to achieve the goals by their target date. All components of a health system are likely to be affected during a crisis. While this is a major blow to the system, economic crisis also provides an opportunity to rethink the direction and nature of financing for healthcare.

The simplest solution is often to cut health budgets. Yet past experience has shown that when cuts are made in health spending, the poor populations in all countries are those who suffer the most. If the world is to have any chance of reaching the Millennium Development Goals, it is essential that support for health and the other social sectors which provide the safety nets for the poor do not decrease during the current crisis.

In your daily work, many of you are faced with hard choices and often forced to make tough decisions. Defending health budgets is even more difficult in economic bad times. That is why we are here today. During the next two days we will be able to explore lessons learned and actions that can help to overcome the negative impact of the present economic downturn.

I look forward to the recommendations and initiatives that will emerge from this meeting. They will not only make a significant contribution to the debate Ministers will have at the 2009 Review in July, but, more importantly, they can have an impact on the wellbeing of millions of people.

Thank you.
