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STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF ECOSOC
H.E. AMBASSADOR SYLVIE LUCAS

ECOSOC ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW REGIONAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON PROMOTING HEALTH
LITERACY

29th - 30th April 2009, Beijing, China

Mr. Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to commend the Government of China for hosting this Regional Preparatory Meeting for ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) to examine in greater depth the promotion of health literacy. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Government and people of China for their warm and generous hospitality.

It is a privilege for me to take part in this important event in Beijing, as I believe this regional consultation will contribute significantly to the Annual Ministerial Review that will be held in Geneva in July. Understanding the impact of health literacy on the achievement of health goals, equity and development will help to advance the development agenda.

But before entering into the substance of our discussions, I would like to say a few words about the issue that currently captures everyone's attention. The swine flu outbreak is a reminder of our closely intertwined world and the fact that viruses do not respect borders. Though primarily a health issue, the impact of such crises is felt on diverse sectors. ECOSOC, charged with responsibilities in the economic, social and related fields, can bring together these multifaceted considerations of issues, and our AMR will be an opportunity to review the implications of this new crisis. Our meeting here in Beijing is in many ways an important and timely meeting related to this crisis.

Excellencies,

Allow me to take this opportunity to remind ourselves how the Annual Ministerial Review came about. The adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration at the 2000 Millennium Summit marked the commitment of world leaders to an ambitious but feasible development agenda. After a decade of important UN conferences and summits a set of time bound targets were put together. These targets have come to be known as the Millennium Development Goals.

When the Heads of State and Government reassembled at the 2005 World Summit it was clear that the world was off track in meeting the internationally agreed upon development goals. As a result, ECOSOC

was mandated the task of the Annual Ministerial Review, in which the specific purpose is to track progress, scale-up efforts and accelerate action towards the achievement of the goals by the 2015 target deadline.

A thematic discussion is a key aspect of the Review as it allows the Council to focus on the obstacles hindering the implementation of the UN development agenda, as well as exploring ways to overcome them. The theme of this year's Review is "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health". Another central element is national reviews of progress towards the development agenda. Together with six other countries, the Government of China has agreed to make such a voluntary presentation this year. I hope that in the coming years, many of you will make use of this opportunity to present national development strategies and policies to the international community and benefit from the experiences of others.

As you might know, this regional meeting is the second in a series of consultations organized for the 2009 Annual Ministerial Review. Last month, the first regional meeting for South Asian countries took place in Sri Lanka on the theme "Financing strategies for health care". In the wake of the global crisis, these discussions could not have been more relevant. The next meeting for Western Asia will discuss non-communicable diseases and will be hosted by the Government of Qatar in May. Meetings are also planned on HIV/AIDS in Jamaica and on e-health in Ghana.

The preparatory process for the High-level segment in July also includes a Global Preparatory Meeting held in New York at the end of March where an assessment was made on where we stand on achieving the goals on global public health, the impact of the world financial crisis and the health challenges in post-crisis situations.

In addition, we have discussed with more than 500 participants from the philanthropic and business community innovative ways to cooperate in improving global public health; and with over 5,000 participants, from diverse regions and stakeholder groups, in an e-forum, how to strengthen health systems and address emerging and future health challenges. We also had very productive discussions on the issue of traditional medicines. In this field, China has no doubt a lot to offer to the world.

The outcomes and recommendations that have emanated from these various discussions, including this meeting will be incorporated in the report of the Secretary-General and reflected in the Ministerial Declaration to be adopted by ECOSOC in July. This meeting therefore constitutes an important contribution to the debate that Ministers will have at the 2009 Review in Geneva.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This region has undoubtedly made gains in the area of health. But more needs to be done. We need to build the momentum for further progress. The task of meeting the development and health goals will become increasingly challenging in the context of the current crisis, unless accelerated actions are undertaken. Improving health literacy is essential to many of the health MDGs, such as combating HIV/AIDS and malaria, improving maternal health and reducing child mortality but also in addressing under-nutrition and non-communicable diseases. Tobacco use and obesity can equally be fought through improved health literacy.

To improve generally low levels of health literacy in this region and globally, we need to strengthen efforts in this area by all stakeholders and sectors. This ability will lead people to not only change personal health behaviors and lifestyle choices but also improve their living conditions.

The objective of this consultation over the coming two days is ultimately to accelerate action towards the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals and public health commitments,

by examining the challenges of increasing health literacy in the region and sharing experiences and knowledge.

It seems to me that an evidence-based approach would best be used: examples of success and lessons learned in the development and implementation of health literacy interventions, including the availability of indicators, baselines and benchmarks for measures of health literacy as well as reporting on progress, should lead the way to better results in this area.

Furthermore, information and communication technologies could be used more effectively as they have great potential to disseminate information and reach large population groups. While it is important to look at how information is used, it is equally important to empower people, particularly the disadvantaged and the new migrants and assure that they will benefit of this information.

Finally, the capacity to improve health literacy in the countries must be built.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to hear the recommendations and initiatives that will come out of our discussions in the next two days.