

**Speech delivered by the WHO Regional Director of Africa,
Dr. Luis G Sambo, to the High Level Ministerial Meeting on
Health Research, Accra, Ghana, 17th June 2006**

The guest of honour,
Honourable ministers,
Distinguished experts and guests,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen

I would first like to thank the honourable minister of health of Ghana for inviting me to this meeting and for the kind hospitality accorded to me. Indeed, it is a pleasure to be back in Ghana, to its beautiful city Accra, and its kind and hospitable people. All of us recall the crucial contributions Ghana has made to the translation of health research into policy and action. The use of insecticide-treated bednets in the control of malaria was shown by studies conducted in Ghana and other African countries. It was operational studies from Ghana that showed that community health officers equipped with basic transport facilities and relocated to village health centres could improve provision of health services, including immunization and family planning coverage. These studies have not only led to policy and decision frameworks in Ghana, but have also influenced other countries of the Region to strengthen community-based health services to improve health outcomes.

I am pleased to attend this important high-level ministerial meeting on health research, which comes as the African Region is preparing to host the 2008 Global Conference on Research for Health. The initiative taken by the honourable ministers of health of Ghana and Nigeria is very significant. Although the 2008 Conference will focus on global issues related to research for health, it is also expected that strengthening national research systems in the African Region will be high on its agenda. It is thus important that the African Region be well prepared of this event.

During the 55th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa held in Maputo, Mozambique in August 2005, a series of activities were planned as part of the preparation for the 2008 Meeting. These included a preparation of a document on 'Health Research: Agenda for the African Region'. I am pleased to inform the honourable ministers and distinguished guests that results of the deliberations of this Accra meeting and that of the Abuja meeting will be used to develop the Regional health research Agenda, the Regional Committee document, and thus will be the basis for discussion at the 56th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa to be held in Addis Ababa in August 2006.

Beyond the Abuja and Accra meetings, we will also take into consideration the outcomes the deliberations of the Joint Coordinating Board (JCB) meeting of the TDR to be held here in Accra next week, the Human Resources for Health Research (HR – HR) meeting to be held in Nairobi in early July, and other significant gathering of health researchers in the African Region.

We in the WHO African Region are proud to be part of and to support processes aimed at increasing developing countries engagement and investment in innovation and appropriately directed research for disease control and development.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The translation of research results into policy and action has been an important area of concern for WHO and Member States for a long time. WHO has devoted a lot of effort and resources on supporting countries to strengthen their health information and health research systems to generate evidence for supporting policy and decision making. The importance of strengthening the link between evidence and policy and decision making has also been reiterated in the resolutions of the 2004 Ministerial Summit in Mexico and the World Health Assembly in 2005.

A mechanism for translation of research into policy and action (Evidence Informed Policy Network, EVIPNet-Africa) was launched on March 27-29, 2006 at a workshop in Brazzaville, Congo. EVIPNet is an innovative program to decrease the gap between health research and policy and practice. The EVIPNet – Africa initiative has brought together senior health policy makers, programme managers and researchers from 8 countries, specifically, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central Africa, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Niger, and Zambia. These countries are now in the initial planning phase and are working on their concepts for partnerships between researchers and policy makers, develop their teams, and host national workshops to identify priority topics for their work. It is our wish that the EVIPNet process will be scaled up to include more countries of the Region.

As it is important to create mechanisms to apply the knowledge created by research, it is also important to address the related issues of application of knowledge created by health information, as well as the issue of capturing the knowledge already available, its dissemination and sharing, its application and use, to improve, protect and restore health in the African Region. WHO-AFRO will submit a document to the Regional Committee that deals with the strategic directions of knowledge management in the African Region. The Regional agenda indicates that countries would benefit from considering knowledge management as a priority component of their national health development policies and plans and to that end, to allocate adequate resources with the support of relevant partners.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am aware that the Abuja meeting came up with priority agenda for strengthening national health research systems. This is important, but in addition assessment of health research, information and knowledge systems is an important first step in strengthening national systems. Such mapping will provide information on what countries have already done and what they are doing in strengthening their systems; and, the financial, human, organizational and infrastructural resources they have and what resources they need. It can also characterize how

the knowledge from research, health information and other sources are captured, created, disseminated, applied and used for improving, protecting, or restoring health.

The assessment is also important to ensure that discussions and decisions during the 2008 global conference are informed by the best evidence available in the Region.

WHO has plans to undertake such mapping in collaboration with Member States and other partners. The outcome of such mapping would be used to prepare national and regional strategic plans in consultation with all national, sub-regional and regional stakeholders. It will also be used to prepare the next issue of the Regional Health Report that will be presented to the preparatory Regional conference to be held before the 2008 global conference. The Report and the preparatory conference will build upon the outcomes of both the Abuja and Accra meetings, as well as the other regional and sub-regional consultations that will be conducted before the preparatory meeting.

As you all know, the 2008 global conference is Research on Health as distinct from 'Health Research' recognizing the important role played by the non-health sector. We appreciate the importance of this distinction because we also feel that the health research agenda needs to be expanded to encompass the broad and multidimensional determinants of health and ensure cross-linkages with other sectors. Thus, ministries of education, science and technology and other ministries supporting research with potential or actual implication on public health will be invited to participate in the preparatory Regional Conference to be held in Algeria in late 2007 or early 2008.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

WHO will continue to promote the message that research is fundamental to generating knowledge to improve health outcomes and achieve the MDGs. It will continue to promote the message that evidence must inform the design and implementation of health

programmes as well as all attempts to reform and strengthen health systems. It will also advocate for increased funding from governments, donors and lenders for health research.

WHO will also continue to support Member States strengthen their national health research systems; develop capacity to conduct health research; identify health research priorities; evaluate research results; and, translate knowledge to solve health-related problems.

However, in order to contribute to health development and achieve the internationally agreed health-related development goals, including those contained in the MDGs, Member States should consider devoting more resources and efforts to strengthen their national health research systems and also create mechanisms to translate the outcomes of research into actions.

In conclusion, I would once again like to acknowledge the important contributions of the honourable ministers of health of Ghana and Nigeria, the various experts who took part in the technical deliberations and consultations in both Abuja and Accra, and the support of TDR, in moving forward the health research agenda of the African Region. I would also like to reaffirm that WHO will use the outcomes of these meetings to inform the Regional Committee deliberations as well as other Regional preparatory meetings as we move towards the 2008 Global Conference on Research for Health.

Thank you for your attention.