

Speech for the World Health Assembly 2016

(General Theme – Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)

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Mr. President, Madame Director General, Distinguished Ministerial Colleagues from around the World, Excellencies, Ambassadors and Representatives, good morning.

This is my maiden address before the World Health Assembly since I assumed the Office of Minister of Health of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in December 2015. It is also the first time in a long time that my country is actually even present at these meetings. Here begins a new era of resurgent, renewed and relentless advocacy on matters to do with health and human welfare on behalf of the marginalized and subordinated peoples of this world. Too often in the high circles of power and dominion the interests of small countries like my own are relegated to the periphery of the international development agenda, if not completely ignored. This is unacceptable.

I may not be the newest Minister of Health (Taiwan's Health Minister for instance has only been in office for just 3 days so far), but at 30 years old I'm perhaps the youngest Minister of Health. This means that if all things are equal I am likely to spend most of my life in the future that we are creating today. I therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that this future is as healthy as possible. The fact of my relative youth also means that I am less wedded to the ideas of the past, and more amenable to new ways of doing things. I am no defender of the status quo, but I know that it would be foolhardy to abandon ideas that are tried, tested and true. Having said that, I embrace the thoughts which underpin the theme for this year's Assembly and the WHO mission – transforming our world, making progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals and providing universal access to *quality* healthcare.

Mr. President,

It is my honour to represent a lovely (but small) nation in the Caribbean Sea called St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We are not as big (in terms of either physical size or population) as many of our counterpart states. We cannot boast of material or mineral possessions like some other nations. We enter the fray as a country of limited political and economic "clout" in the conventional sense of the word, but what we have is a power which comes from the force of truth, and from a knowledge of what is fair, and right and just.

Mr. President,

We want sustainable development for all nations. The holy concept of sustainable development must not be denigrated by being interpreted in terms of the needs and desires of one set of nations (however defined) to the exclusion of all others. A striking irony of world affairs happens to be the fact that preferential treatment is often reserved for the loudest advocates against it.

I am happy to report that St. Vincent and the Grenadines has eliminated (subject to final validation) the mother-to-child transmission of HIV and congenital syphilis. This places us in the sacred company of the Republic of Cuba. In our country, there has also been a dramatic reduction in our child mortality rates because of strategic interventions, and the maternal mortality rate is currently zero. We have made reasonable progress in many areas, but we understand fully well that the work is far from done. Like so many other countries, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is fighting daily against communicable and non-communicable diseases, with good support from PAHO.

We hope to further improve our performance in the delivery of health and medical services through the modernisation of our health sector, a reorganization of our healthcare system (in part by a renewal of primary healthcare), the implementation of a comprehensive National Health Insurance programme and in a number of other ways. The intention is to strengthen our disease prevention capabilities and to improve the quality of our curative treatment.

There is plenty of scope within the context of our intentions for a redoubling of the technical support we receive from the World Health Organisation. We look forward to greater capacity building and training initiatives, and in general to WHO experience and expertise being brought to bear on our local and regional programme of change and transformation.

The Zika outbreak in the Americas is a recent reminder that diseases know no borders, and so too must our efforts to combat, contain, control and even eliminate them be based on transnational principles and international cooperation. We reach out to each and every nation present here to individually and collectively help us in our bid to better address the healthcare needs of our section of the world's population.

Mr. President,

I would like to conclude by sharing with this assembly a beautiful line from a song which we learnt back home as children growing up. "We are out to build a new St. Vincent (and the Grenadines)... the future is in our hands." At this assembly, we must commit ourselves to building a new world. The future in this respect is in our collective hands, and the health and welfare of nations for generations untold depend on what we do right now. God bless all our nations as we further forge a fruitful and peaceful partnership against all odds, and against the

thrust of a history dominated by world wars. We have the power to write a beautiful story about the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health.

Thank you.