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This report is a follow-up to the first African regional health report in 2006, in which we provided a comprehensive situational analysis of the health status of people living in the World Health Organization African Region. In this second report, we have taken that baseline and examined what has happened since, seeking to answer the question: what has worked and why? Now, more than ever, we need to know – and do – the things that work. Not what might work, not what could work in 10 years’ time, but what does work, and should be done here and now, to improve the health of the people of the Region.

In these pages you will find a rich discussion of strategies that work, including a chapter devoted to the elements needed for stronger health systems: good information and surveillance systems; well-trained and motivated health-care workers; well-equipped health facilities with good laboratory services; and well-managed services, trusted by, and functioning in partnership with community involvement. Sadly, these were the elements sorely lacking in the countries whose systems were rapidly overwhelmed by the Ebola virus outbreak. As I write this, the Ebola virus is raging through western Africa, causing the most severe, complex and devastating outbreak seen in the four decades since this virus emerged. The destruction it has wreaked can be measured not only in the mounting toll of human lives lost, but in economies stalled and communities paralysed by fear and panic. The real cost of this outbreak is something that we will be measuring for years to come.

In this report, we have done more than simply describe what works: we have distilled what we have learned from examining what has worked in Africa to 10 essential approaches. Our final chapter describes those approaches and explains why they are crucial. Many of these are things that, had they been applied before Ebola virus disease arrived in western Africa, would have provided early warning and inbuilt resilience to even such a powerful shock.

It is hoped that countries will take up the challenges of implementation or scale-up of proven effective interventions through strong health systems to move towards universal health coverage. We look forward to seeing what we have learned and described in these pages being applied towards reaching our ultimate goal: good health for all the people of the Region.

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