Joint Inter-Ministerial Policy Dialogue on Standardization and Second WHO Forum on eHealth Standardization and Interoperability

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Opening Remarks
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Your excellences, distinguished members of the public health community, colleagues in the UN system and sister agencies, representatives of civil society organizations, International Standards Development and Maintenance Organizations, development partners, colleagues from WHO, ladies and gentlemen,

First, let me take this opportunity to convey to you the warm regards and welcome from Dr Margaret Chan, the Director-General. Due to travel obligations, she is not able to be with us in-person this morning.

Let me also say that it is a great pleasure to welcome each one of you to WHO and to this beautiful city of Geneva.

I will be brief.

I am very pleased to note that this second Forum has brought together key representatives from many Member States, Standards Development Organizations, academic and research institutions, implementing partners, donors, and subject matter experts in addition to WHO staff and experts concerned with development, adoption, and implementation of health data standards. This is a true multi-stakeholder event where a common objective is being pursued. Organizing this global multi-stakeholder Forum to address standardization and interoperability issues is a clear commitment by WHO and its Member States to standardization of health data and systems. In the age of data revolution and where investment in health becomes more data driven, standardization becomes a strategic objective.
Your excellences, ladies and gentleman

Setting norms and standards, and promoting and monitoring their implementation is one of the WHO six core functions. WHO recognizes that it is not on its own in this field, as there is a multiplicity of partners in the public and private sector. WHO has been leading standard development in some areas, working with others in certain areas and leaving it for others to lead standards development in many cases. Collaboration and coordination is a key value that WHO maintains as the UN agency for health. I am not going to give many examples to this particular audience of the standards that WHO has developed and of our many partner organizations. I would only like to highlight some of the work of the Organization in the area of standardization of terminology, medicines and human resources. Examples of such collaborations include our very active collaboration with IHTSDO on SNOMED-CT and ICD-11, our long-term cooperation with our sister agency the ITU and the work being developed with HL7 to make their standards available free of charge to low and middle income countries through WHO portal.

Here, I want to draw your attention to the fact that technical work on standardization is not sufficient. Indeed, national policies are essential for the adoption of standards at country levels. Policies are needed for implementation of standardization and interoperability of medical devices, diagnostics devices and other laboratory instrumentation, electronic health records, medical commodities and supply-chain management systems, and the like where health data is exchanged.

To assist our Member States, WHO collaborates actively with several networks of WHO Collaborating Centers and International SDO’s such as ISO, ITU, CEN, IHTSDO, PHDSC, IEEE, HL7, GS1 and many others including national standardization bodies. Every one of you holds an important piece of this common knowledge. Now, one of the challenges is to join these pieces together, and to begin drafting a policy and governance framework which will be useful to Member States for standards adoption at national level.

Your excellences, ladies and gentleman, we all recognize the importance of health data standards and health Information Technology standards for timely and accurate data for decision making at all-levels of health care delivery. So, I will not expand on this point. I would just like to remind you that between December 2012 and February 2014 a milestone was achieved, thanks to your collective efforts as WHO Member States and other partners. This milestone was the adoption of the World Health Assembly Resolution on standardization and interoperability in May 2013. The resolution reinforced the mandate of WHO and asked the Director General to intensify effort to support this area of work. It also requested member states to pursue efforts in this direction.

However, I want also to bring to your attention that gaps in policies, and lack of adequate governance mechanisms can make the implementation of standards a hard task for some Member States. As you recognize, lack of clear national-level mandates, policies, and
governance mechanisms, would hinder the full adoption of standards and thereby hinder interoperability of health data systems. The issue was recognized in the World Health Resolution mentioned above which placed importance on the need for policy and governance mechanisms for standards’ adoption.

I hope that in the near future a more robust policy-enabled environment will facilitate the full adoption of health data and related information technology standards at national-and sub-national levels. Without which, it would be hard to put in place functional eHealth systems.

Your excellences, ladies and gentleman,

Many of you who were present in the first Forum in 2012 had clearly identified a need for engaging member states to conduct a high-level policy dialogue and to develop policy guidance for full implementation of standards-compliant eHealth systems and services.

So, this second Forum is particularly designed for such a dialogue over the next two days.

Moreover, since many of our Member States have already made significant progress in this area, we will have a chance to learn from their experience, which undoubtedly will contextualize the issues and contribute to the richness of the dialogue over the coming 2 days.

Your excellences and colleagues, we have an important agenda in front of us and we have much work to do. The success of this Forum and our future work will depend on your collaboration and cooperation.

I wish you a very successful Forum and look forward to a productive outcome.

Thank you.