

# The Middle East and North Africa Diabetes Leadership Forum

Ann Keeling

**In December 2010, key stakeholders, leaders and high-profile speakers gathered in Dubai to discuss the overwhelming human and financial burden imposed on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region by diabetes. The MENA Diabetes Leadership Forum, sponsored by Novo Nordisk and supported by IDF, was a high-level advocacy meeting aimed at confronting the diabetes epidemic in the region and exploring and sharing ways to tackle the issue at the highest level. The Forum was the fifth in a series of such meetings, with previous events in the USA, Russia, China and South Africa.**

The MENA region is one of the hotspots of the global diabetes epidemic. Progressive urbanization, increased life expectancy and economic development associated with a shift in lifestyles have contributed to an explosion in the number of people with type 2 diabetes in the region over the last 30 years. IDF estimates that there are currently 26.6 million people living with diabetes in the MENA region and the number is set to almost double to 51.7 million people by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The United Arab Emirates has the second highest prevalence of diabetes globally, and five out of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence rates are in this part of the world (Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE). Co-hosted by the UAE Ministry of Health, the Executive Board of the Health Ministers Council for the Gulf Cooperation Council States, the World Bank Group (MENA region) and the World Diabetes Foundation, the Diabetes Leadership Forum provided a timely platform to discuss the unique challenges faced by the MENA region and reinforce commitments for the way forward.

With just months to go until the UN Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), the Leadership Forum catalysed dialogue about the forthcoming political opportunity and the preparations required to translate this unprecedented high-level meeting into tangible commitments and resources. From start to finish, the UN Summit remained central in discussions.

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The Forum opened with an IDF Special Session, 'Looking towards the UN Heads of State Summit on NCDs', during which IDF President Professor Jean Claude Mbanya gave a stirring keynote speech on IDF's hopes for the UN Summit. Drawing on the framework for action laid out in IDF's recently launched Call to Action on Diabetes<sup>2</sup> (see page 15 for more on the Call to Action), Professor Mbanya rallied for renewed commitment and energy to improve health outcomes for people with diabetes, preventing the development of type 2 diabetes wherever possible and ending

discrimination against people with diabetes. Speaking in front of regional experts and leaders, the President invited participants to join IDF in our year-long process of awareness, engagement and mobilization for diabetes in the lead up to the UN Summit.

In his opening speech, IDF's President highlighted the importance of MENA in global as well as regional advocacy: "for a successful UN Summit, it is of utmost importance we galvanise a ground attack, particularly in regions such as MENA where the epidemic is raging. We need the MENA States to be leading this movement at the political level, as well as at the policy and programmatic levels". The MENA Diabetes Leadership Forum provided the opportunity for experts, leaders and officials from the region to discuss regional diabetes priorities and needs for the UN Summit. Much discussion centred on existing regional action plans and declarations, such as the 2009 IDF MENA Regional Diabetes Action Plan<sup>3</sup> and the Integrated Gulf Executive Plan for Diabetes Control 2008-2018, the Riyadh Declaration, the Jeddah Declaration and the Doha Declaration. Building on these, the Leadership Forum adopted a Dubai Declaration and national delegations formed breakout sessions at the end to discuss follow-up activities at the national level.

Sharing good practice will be key component in driving change in the MENA region during the approach and immediate aftermath to the UN Summit. Sessions during the Forum dedicated to good practice in awareness, early detection and improving quality of care demonstrated the breadth and quality of the cutting-edge work being done in the MENA region. The discussions in these sessions reflected the great diversity in the region, in terms of diabetes

prevalence and the challenges faced by some countries in coping with the human and financial strain of the diabetes epidemic. Innovative partnerships and practices, such as Member Association twinning, will be required to support the poorer countries in the region, and by doing so, achieve equitable and sustainable diabetes care and prevention.

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Indeed, the recurring theme of the UN Summit was punctuated by frequent assertions of the importance of partnerships and the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to fight the global diabetes epidemic. Representatives from the UN and international organizations, governments, businesses, healthcare professionals and civil society were in agreement: only with a unified approach through robust partnerships and strong leadership will we be able to make a real difference for the 300 million people living with diabetes today. During the official opening, former US President Bill Clinton led this call when he stated, "there is a clear way forward: conscious, organized, deliberate and sustained action. No one can do this alone; we need every level of society".

In his keynote speech, Clinton reaffirmed his commitment to fighting diabetes and related NCDs, and cited the Annual Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) meeting as an opportunity to launch innovative public-private partnerships for diabetes. The Medtronic Foundation committed USD 1,000,000 to the NCD Alliance at the CGI last September, part of which is specifically for IDF's Diabetes Roadmap Programme for the UN Summit. We can expect to see

further pledges to NCDs at the September 2011 CGI, which will coincide with the UN Summit. Undoubtedly Clinton's presence at the Forum is testament to the growing international recognition of diabetes as a major global health and development issue.

Not only was this a unique opportunity for the MENA region to prepare the groundwork for the 2011 UN Summit on NCDs, it was also a key meeting in the run up to IDF's World Diabetes Congress in Dubai on 4-8 December 2011. The MENA region will be host to the global diabetes community just a few weeks after the UN Summit, and IDF intends for this sequence of events to build momentum and facilitate the implementation of commitments made at the UN Summit in the MENA region and at the global level. A new element of the World Diabetes Congress, a Global Diabetes Forum, will be introduced in Dubai to facilitate this process. The Global Diabetes Forum will provide the opportunity for key decision makers to reflect on the Summit and carve out the next steps. For a region that is buckling under this health tsunami, high-profile events, such as the MENA Diabetes Leadership Forum and IDF's World Diabetes Congress, will bring much-needed attention to diabetes.

**Ann Keeling**

Ann Keeling is IDF Chief Executive Officer.

## References

- 1 International Diabetes Federation. *Diabetes Atlas 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* IDF. Brussels, 2009.
- 2 International Diabetes Federation, A Call to Action on Diabetes. IDF. Brussels, 2010. [www.idf.org/webdata/Call-to-Action-on-Diabetes.pdf](http://www.idf.org/webdata/Call-to-Action-on-Diabetes.pdf)
- 3 International Diabetes Federation. IDF MENA Regional Diabetes Action Plan. IDF-MENA. Cairo, 2009. [www.idf.org/webdata/docs/IDF-Action%20Plan-EN.pdf](http://www.idf.org/webdata/docs/IDF-Action%20Plan-EN.pdf)