Good morning and very warm welcome to all the esteemed participants of the International Conference on Infectious Diseases jointly organized by WHO and Mongolia’s Ministry of Health and its agencies.

As you may have noticed the title of our Conference is self-explanatory: the Conference aims at providing an up-to-date evidence to policy and decision makers, informing relevant national programmes, civil society and other stakeholders about burden of infectious diseases in Mongolia, sharing results and best practices on prevention and control of infectious diseases, and discussing the potential policy change and future research collaboration in the areas of infectious diseases. The Conference agenda is quite wide: we’ll present new data on tuberculosis prevalence in Mongolia, we’ll talk about the burden of HIV and viral hepatitis, the epidemic of sexually transmitted infections, we’ll also have presentations and deliberations on vaccine-preventable, emerging and re-emerging diseases, zoonotic diseases, WASH, and water safety and quality.

You may still wonder why have we gathered to discuss the topic of infectious diseases particularly at this time in Mongolia?

As we all know much has been achieved in the world, in the Western Pacific Region and in Mongolia in particular in controlling the burden and spread of communicable diseases through immunizations, infectious disease control programmes and fostering international cooperation in the field of prevention and control of communicable diseases. Significant progress had been made in improving surveillance, human resource development through Field Epidemiology Training Programme, and in upgrading laboratory capacities for diagnosis of priority and unknown diseases. It’s also important to acknowledge the efforts made in ensuring multi-sectoral coordination in emergency response.

However, unfortunately, at the same time Mongolia today has been undergoing a notable rise in infectious diseases: the new evidence released by the first ever TB prevalence survey shows that the TB prevalence in Mongolia is much higher than estimated previously by the National TB Programme
and WHO; the data on spread of STIs repetitiously suggests that Mongolia is facing a silent epidemic of STIs with increasing number of congenital syphilis cases: 52 cases in 2015 alone, which demonstrates serious problems in the country’s health system. The sad fact is that women who have syphilis, gonorrhoea and HPV today have a high chance of ending up with cervical cancer, infertility and pelvic inflammatory diseases in 10-15 years from now. Since March 2015 Mongolia has been struggling with the measles outbreak that took away over 100 babies’ lives in 2016. Nationwide measles outbreak tested our preparedness and response capacity. It revealed major issues and inefficiencies with surveillance, risk assessment and risk communication. Should the health system response have been adequate and should the health sector haven’t fallen prey to political instability, systemic lack of multi-sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration and plain managerial irresponsibility these innocent babies would not have died from a vaccine-preventable disease causing deepest pain to their parents and families. The number of food-poisonings with bacteria and chemicals especially in school and kindergartens long become a regular occurrence. Food and water safety remains being an issue in the country despite of notable efforts made especially in terms of ensuring water safety. Infectious diseases still account for a high proportion of disability-adjusted life years and are of significant socioeconomic importance due to their potential for causing outbreaks and health emergencies. Poor response to emergencies results in loss of lives and brings economic challenges and political instability. Expenses may rise into several-fold liabilities and cause a major international emergency situation.

We live in a highly interconnected world. The only certainty is uncertainty. In the recent past, we were faced with public health events at global and regional levels. Challenges continue to exist in national readiness to respond to large-scale and complex events in an effective and coordinated way. Endemic, well-known diseases that can be prevented by vaccines can become national and international public health events. Let’s recall the recent measles outbreak in Mongolia. In the midst of the outbreak many health professionals were asking themselves what happens in the face of unknown, new diseases if we are not able to effectively manage known, vaccine-preventable diseases? The threat from emerging diseases and other public health events is ever-present and vulnerability is universal. The risks are continued, the job is never finished. Health security work is never complete. Certain risks have the potential to increase in the future posing significant threat to the national health security. As evidenced by recent public health events that caused international concerns, namely the Ebola virus disease, MERS, Zika virus and yellow fever outbreaks, public health events can impact the overall social and economic well-being of a country. Strengthening public health emergency preparedness and response capacities, which include surveillance, risk assessment, laboratory capacity, risk communication and emergency operations is an effective approach that will result in a more efficient use of resources, the avoidance of unnecessary vertical programmes and more sustainable health systems. That is why we welcome MoH taking pro-active approach to preparedness through functional Emergency Operations Centre.

WHO views this Conference as a platform for a frank and open conversation, exchange of information and ideas and most importantly, recommendations and suggestions to guide our way forward in making the much needed rapid progress in this area. We cannot afford losing more babies to vaccine –preventable diseases, we must not have any more cases of a congenital syphilis in the lower-middle income country of XXI century, we cannot continue losing productive age people to hepatitis B and C viruses, we cannot continue allowing non-safe foods and water to be consumed by our children.

All of the issues to be highlighted at the Conference are not the responsibility and the “headache” of the health sector alone. Human health is a crosscutting area requiring a dedicated and evidence-based multi-sectoral cooperation. I’d like to repeat again and again: health issues are the responsibility of the whole of government and the whole of society. Hence we have invited representatives of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sciences and Sports, Ministry of Labour and
Social Protection, Ministry of Environment and Tourism and civil society representatives including the national media.

WHO calls this approach, the way of doing, and the outcome we strive for, “Health in All”.

It indeed is the time when we, as a society, accept the simple truth that to reach “Health in All” we need to work together.

We are proud to organize this Conference particularly at a time when the new Government has just assumed its responsibilities and approved its Programme of Action for the next four years. Expectations of the Mongolians from this Government are high and as always WHO will stand next to the Government of Mongolia and its Ministry of Health as well as Mongolia’s civil society to achieve the “Health in All” objective, to make sure that no one is left behind in accessing quality and acceptable health services when needed, regardless of financial abilities, putting the Universal Health Coverage at work.

I’d like to highly acknowledge the Government leadership and commitment in improving the country’s health sector and thank all public health professionals for their dedicated work. I hope that this Conference will lead to some decisive multi-sectoral steps in tackling the epidemic of infectious diseases in Mongolia based on new evidence presented and tapping into the rich pool of knowledge, ideas and practices shared by our esteemed participants.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and innovative solutions so the evidence presented at this Conference may inform necessary actions to be taken by the Government as a whole, by the Ministry of Health, by its agencies, by professional organizations, by civil society actors, by the media and by the international community including the UN agencies and bilateral partners, to make sure that every Mongolian is healthy and that Mongolia is well on its way to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.