

10 years of Leadership on Global Health. Farewell to Margaret Chan
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Remarks by Elhadj As Sy – Secretary General, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Colleagues and friends,

Many times when you [referring to Dr. Margaret Chan] made a speech, you looked at people around and said “ladies and gentlemen”. Then you looked into a certain direction and said “my dear brother”. People would look past me looking for someone else and I would giggle very proudly to say “that’s me”. Today I am saying “my dear sister”, and that is you, so do not look past her.

We use many words to qualify you and we heard some of those this morning: a devoted leader, a person with energy and passion, honest. But you do not use any of those words yourself. I have only heard you use one, humble yet so powerful: “servant”. “Servant” is a word that you often use in the best tradition of public duty, in which it is a privilege to better the lives of others; serving and being on the side of those in need to accompany them to respond to their needs.

On our work together during the Ebola crisis, you arrived in Guinea and Liberia at the time when there was nobody. The airports of Freetown, Conakry and Monrovia were full of people, but they were not coming: they were leaving because it was dangerous, out of fear of contamination, because borders were closed and flights were cancelled, and some were leaving simply because their families wanted them back home. You were there; and we could count with the fingers of one hand those who were there: friends from CDC, from UNICEF and, of course, Red Cross volunteers were there, because that is the where they belong to.

When the criticism about unpreparedness and lack of leadership of WHO was so severe you were not defensive. You stood honestly, open and asked “what can we do better?” And you led the response, opening the doors and widening the base to allow everybody to come in with ideas and contributions. You could have said that you were there talking to President Condé, that you stood at the African Union speaking truth to power. Yet you took responsibility beyond your own engagement of whatever needed to be an appropriate response; if there was something missing you took responsibilities on your own shoulders. We can define honest leadership and being a servant in many ways, but just facts and actions demonstrate it. For that, I would like to salute you; for everything you are and everything you do.

You are passionate and you know so much, yet you kept on questioning your own certainties about issues, which opened new ways of responding. You were there when discussing that a medical approach alone would not make it; you were one of the most articulate, powerful advocates to go beyond the biomedical response and to bring in social scientists and anthropologists.

You called on making small changes that had great impact. Do you remember? Changing the colour of a body bag from black to white, thereby changing the whole dynamics of acceptance in communities. Another small change in words: ‘body management’ it was called, at that time. You said “*no, we do not manage any dead bodies. We respectfully, safely, in a dignified manner, accompany these people to their last place of rest*”. And that was the origin of “safe and dignified burial”.

We were not trained to respond to health emergencies by organising burials; it is not what we are trained for. We are trained to ask people to do the right thing, which at that moment was to care, to support, to touch, to kiss, to wash, to bury. Then we realised that the right thing to do became a risky thing to do. We needed to change, and without the openness and the

questioning of our certainties it would not have been possible. You were there again, leading, bringing all of us to move into the same dynamic and to build the trust and the respect required within communities to do “the safe and dignified burial”. There is nothing more powerful in that response than convincing people to entrust you with the responsibility to care for their diseased people. They realised that they could no longer mourn the way they used to, but they had to entrust you with the responsibility to do it in respect of their cultures, traditions, and religion.

Public health is also much larger than what we defined it. But you were there too to redefine it. I salute you on your leadership on neglected tropical diseases. During your tenure you showed that having the patients in the South and the drugs in the North would not lead us to where we would like to be: universal health coverage. You were there also when that was being promoted, at times when everybody was sceptical about it. Afterwards, of course, we are all smarter and the right thing to do sounds so evident. At times when there were so many sceptics, reasons for inaction and people being defensive and pointing fingers to each other, leadership meant standing courageously and saying “*we take responsibility, we will do better, we want to do better*”. Because, at the end of the day, the only thing that counts is the difference that we will be making in the lives of people.

And we do that in the most difficult circumstances, which remind us only of one thing: it is exactly during this time that we are needed more than ever before. That is why we are not shying away because we are targeted or bombed, or because we are losing our friends and colleagues on the line of duty. Of course, there is nothing smart or proud to count the number of losses, but it is a reminder that it is exactly during these times that we are needed more than ever before. And your voice, your leadership and your presence in the field has always been extremely critical for that.

I know there will be a lot to be said about you; from the science of medicine to public health, from SARS to HIV/AIDS and Ebola. But here is a quote: “*Above all remember the people. Behind every number is a person who defines our common humanity and deserves our compassion*”. These were your words and in those words there is no “disease”, “bacteria” or “virus”. In those words there is what matters most: humans and the humanity we share. And that is where we meet, all of us, and we salute you for your leadership.

We knew you ten years ago as a colleague; you are leaving us ten years later as a friend, and a sister to me.

For that journey, thank you so much.