

## 10 years of Leadership on Global Health. Farewell to Margaret Chan

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### Remarks by Yvette Stevens – Permanent Representative and Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the UN and other international organizations in Geneva

First let me start by thanking the Global Health Centre and the Graduate Institute for allowing me to say a few words about my dear sister, Margaret Chan.

Let me thank you, Margaret, most sincerely as a woman, a gender champion. I will start with a quote: *“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say I do not have what it takes; they will say women do not have what it takes”*. I would like to thank you very much for actually bringing out the fact that a women can succeed in difficult tasks, and for doing it in such a fashion that we are all proud of you.

Since so much has been said, I will just go straight to highlight why and how you have been so successful. On January 2007, during your first interview as a new Director-General of WHO, you gave your 6 core areas for the organisation in the years ahead: development for health, health security, health systems capacity, information and knowledge, partnership and performance of the Organization as a whole. You have done just that, in spite of the many difficulties you faced in your ten years in office, and this is a major success. I would particularly highlight your focus on primary healthcare, universal health coverage, the social determinants of health, health systems strengthening, non-communicable diseases, neglected tropical diseases, and WHO’s role in emergencies.

I will concentrate on the last one. Having to deal with so many Member States is not an easy thing. One of the qualities which have helped Margaret is that she has tact; she showed the sincerity of purpose which makes her able to convince Member States on issues which she believed in. She was so passionate about her work; there is no doubt about this. But some of her other most admirable qualities are, as mentioned, her ability to convince and her careful tailored approach to WHO membership. She always had the right tact to deal with different groups, such as in her efforts to maintain dialogue with her “brothers and sisters” from Africa. You would often hear Margaret say “my brother”, using the terminology accepted amongst Africans. She always did it with such conviction that showed that she was with us even if she was from another part of the world. This is something we must remember.

This speech would not be complete if I did not mention the Ebola crisis. That was the moment when I had the opportunity of interacting directly with Dr. Chan and I got to appreciate her personal characteristics. While passionate about doing everything to address the crisis, which was spreading like wild fire, the administrative shortcomings became apparent. On more than one occasion, she was in tears over her failure to get WHO staff deployed and to convince reluctant airlines to transport supplies and personnel to the affected countries. She was in tears.

When there was a lot of criticism as to the WHO failure to handle the crisis in time, those who had observed it from closer realised that it could not be blamed on Margaret Chan or the Organization itself; it was some decisions taken by Member States which had made emergency response slow.

The Ebola crisis is something that I would personally never want any country to go through. When the special session on Ebola was held, a resolution had to be negotiated. *“After what I’ve witnessed on how this went, we have to make sure that this does not happen again”*, I said. We stayed all night until seven in the morning trying to get a resolution which would address the shortcomings revealed through the response to Ebola. One very striking fact was that even when you, as an affected country, felt that everything had to be addressed, there were some Member States that were still resistant, reluctant to set up the structures

that were needed to avoid such a situation in the future. At one point I came to tears to tell them: "*You have been insensitive*". But we managed and now we have an emergency system. I thank Margaret Chan for making it and for being very open about everything. I believe that when you admitted that WHO got it wrong you showed another quality we have to respect. In some places they would be defending themselves, but I think you were being very honest and sincere, and this is what helped us to address the emergency and to ensure that the system put in place will stand future emergencies.

I will just end with a quotation: "*A successful women is one who can bear a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at her*". Indeed, Margaret, you can be described as a successful woman. Not only as Director-General of WHO, but indeed for all what you have done for populations in general and for the world.

You ought to be proud and we, as women, are proud of you.

Thank you.