

Fifth Seminar on Health Diplomacy

Cairo, Egypt 7-8 May 2016



Today, health is recognized as a leading contributor to development, peace, poverty reduction, social justice and human rights. Global health has gradually become a major topic on foreign policy agendas. The engagement of diplomats has led to a number of international negotiations that have resulted in key treaties and declarations such as the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (2003), the International Health Regulations (2005), the United Nations Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases (2011), the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, and, in 2016, the United Nations Security Council resolution on protecting health care in armed conflict.

It is becoming clear, in many areas, that issues which were once confined to national policy are now issues of global concern, with implications that extend beyond national boundaries. As countries become better informed on health diplomacy, they become better equipped to play a bigger role in influencing global health issues and decisions. The importance of health diplomacy is that it expands health issues to areas beyond the health sector, to address challenges from a political, economic and social perspective. So for health diplomacy to succeed, stakeholders from different disciplines – government, non-State actors and parliament – need to come together, mindful of different policies adopted by different government sectors and their impact on national health.

At the same time, health diplomacy is not just about international treaties but about solving problems on the ground. International cooperation to achieve national, regional and global security is higher now than it has ever been. The outbreaks of Ebola, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Zika virus, and the subsequent global response highlighted the fact that action from one country alone is not enough to halt the spread of epidemics. These are clear examples of the importance of health diplomacy to global health security.

It is also important in the context of sustainable development. In 2011, foreign policy and global health joined together in negotiating solutions to the epidemic of noncommunicable disease that threatens both public health and socioeconomic development in all countries worldwide, and especially in our region. Of equal importance in our region are the crises affecting the people of more than half the countries and that are devastating national health systems. Health diplomacy plays a major role in providing humanitarian relief to communities in urgent need, and more frequently it plays a role in cessation of hostilities to allow humanitarian assistance to take place, as well as contributing to creating a positive environment for political dialogue.

It is my belief that this area deserves our undivided attention in this rapidly changing world. There is a need for those of us in the health sector to have a better understanding of the links between health and policies in other sectors, including foreign policy. We see how important it is for this region to be more engaged with, and present in, negotiations that are critical for health, as well as in discussions in many different regional and global political venues.

The fifth seminar on health diplomacy, held in Cairo 7-8 May 2016, brought together senior officials from ministries of foreign affairs and health, ambassadors, representatives of permanent missions to the United Nations in Geneva, deans of diplomatic institutes, heads of parliamentary health committees, regional members of the WHO Executive Board and experts in health diplomacy.

We were privileged to have as keynote speaker Ambassador Amre Moussa, Former Secretary-General of the League of Arab States and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, who highlighted the fact that the Region continues to lack full awareness of the role of health diplomacy within the framework of global action in the development arena, and of its impact on everyday life. With the increasing and serious challenges to life and well-being of humanity, it was pertinent, he said, for diplomacy to intensify its role in health in addition to its traditional role in global peace and security. He noted that, as the wider issues of health are increasingly an issue of relevance to global security, WHO could legitimately engage with the United Nations to place health on the agenda of the Security Council, while it was also incumbent on developing countries to make better use of health diplomacy in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, nationally and internationally.

Dr Ali Saad Al-Obaidi, Minister of Health of Kuwait and Chair of the Sixty-second session of the WHO Regional Committee for the

Eastern Mediterranean also highlighted the role of the Regional Committee in health diplomacy and in supporting and promoting the global health agenda.

This series of seminars continues to spread the word that building capacity in health diplomacy is important for WHO's Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, and to contribute to that effort. We will continue to support the annual seminar

on health diplomacy so that we can help in raising awareness, enhancing coordination and building capacity at the national level and in order to ensure that our countries are actively and effectively engaged in global discussions on the challenges that face health and socioeconomic development in this region and worldwide.

Ala Alwan
WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean

Themes

The objectives of the fifth seminar were to: discuss recent global health issues that require full engagement of the whole of government, including foreign policy and legislature; strengthen capacity of participants to understand, act upon and positively influence diplomatic outreach for public health issues of highest priority and relevance to the Region; and integrate modern concepts and approaches of health diplomacy within foreign policy platforms to address critical health challenges that are global in nature. In addition to highlighting the interface between health and foreign policy, participants discussed a range of themes that highlighted important areas in which health diplomacy has helped to achieve positive outcomes for global health, as well as areas where it is needed.

The interface between health and foreign policy

Health diplomacy refers to the active engagement of governments and non-State actors in negotiations that are critical for health, and that shape the health environment. It brings together a wide range of actors in areas that affect public health. The main goals of health diplomacy are: better health security and population health; improved relations between states and commitment of a wide range of actors to work together to improve health; and achievement of outcomes that are deemed fair and support the goals of reducing poverty and increasing equity. Many examples show that health diplomacy works and that the alignment of health and foreign policy can generate significant benefits for health. There is also increasing recognition of health as a goal of foreign policy and as a key contributor to development, peace, poverty reduction, social justice and human rights.

Partnerships for health diplomacy

Health cannot be viewed or addressed in isolation from the broader socioeconomic context of national and international concerns. It has long been recognized that the key determinants of health lie outside the control of the health sector itself, but only in recent times has significant discussion taken place on the global stage of how best to address the multisectoral issues concerned. The health sector needs to engage and advocate with multiple stakeholders, governmental and nongovernmental. The role of civil society and of non-State actors in both the public and the private sector is crucial to sustainable development in health.

Implementing the political declaration of the United Nations General Assembly on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases

In 2011, WHO and its Member States achieved a substantial victory in raising the global epidemic of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) to the attention of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which recognized the existing socioeconomic impact of these conditions and the consequences of not taking action. The resultant political declaration established a clear roadmap with commitments and set time-bound targets for all countries to achieve. However, the follow-up meeting in 2014 concluded that progress was uneven and insufficient and there is therefore much work to be done to meet the targets on which Member States will report to the UNGA in 2018. The commitments of Member States have been translated into a clear regional framework of action covering the key measures that Member States have to implement in four areas: governance, prevention, health care, and monitoring and surveillance. It was agreed that for countries to achieve significant progress in implementing the framework, a much higher level of engagement of non-health sectors and a more robust involvement of the community and non-governmental partners will be needed. Health diplomacy has an important role to play in ensuring that this, and other, international agreements are implemented. As the rising trend of premature death from NCDs, globally and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, continues, active engagement and negotiation with almost all government sectors, in addition to civil society and industry, will be needed. Parliament can play an especially important role in enacting and monitoring the enforcement of crucial legislation.

Health security as an integral part of national and human security

Health security is an integral part of national and global security and the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) are a key component in maintaining that security for the world. Since the World Health Assembly endorsed the IHR in 2005, governments have worked hard to build up the core capacities required under the regulations, many of which are outside the health sector. Member States were required to report annually to WHO on their progress in implementing the core capacities, based on self-assessment. The Ebola outbreak of 2013-2014 highlighted the gaps in countries' core capacities and the challenges governments faced in meeting

their commitments, even when they had felt themselves to be in a relatively secure position. In 2015-2016 WHO and the Global Health Security Agenda came together to develop a harmonized framework for the monitoring and evaluation of IHR core capacities through a joint external evaluation (JEE) tool. The new approach facilitates engagement between countries, international organizations, donors and technical experts involved in the assessment processes. It also promotes transparency in exchanging information on the results of assessments, in particular to stakeholders supporting the development of national plans and strengthening of country capacities. The concept of the IHR is based on the notion of collective security and common responsibilities for all countries of the world. The regulations are the outcome of health diplomacy but continued health diplomacy is needed to ensure that they reach their full potential in protecting the world. All participants agreed on the urgent need for all countries to give a higher priority to health security as an integral part of national security and to build capacity in assessing IHR core capacities and in addressing the gaps. The health sector cannot meet this task without other sectors fully engaging and taking an active part in addressing the challenge.

Emergencies and humanitarian crises

The Region is witnessing unprecedented health crises, both in number and in magnitude and impact, overburdening already stretched health systems. Populations have been displaced across national and international borders, within and beyond the Region. The need for emergency response and relief is overwhelming in many countries and years of development and health gains have been lost. Health workers and facilities have been, and continue to

be, targeted despite repeated calls for their protection in accordance with international conventions. Communities have been isolated in areas that are under siege or otherwise hard to reach, resulting in deprivation, suffering and enormous loss of life. Health diplomacy is essential to ensure that health workers are protected and enabled to continue their work for the benefit of all lives concerned. Inter-regional coordination and collaboration are vital in ensuring that the needs of refugees and internally displaced populations are met.

Health as a component of the Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, heads of government endorsed at the United Nations General Assembly an agenda for sustainable development to 2030. The agenda set 17 goals (SDGs) and 169 targets cutting across the economic, environmental and social spheres to ensure that 'no one is left behind'. Health is central to development, being a precondition for and an indicator and outcome of progress in sustainable development. SDG 3, the health goal, captures the key aspects of achieving good health. Thirteen targets are included under SDG3, covering practically all key challenges to health development. Health is also closely linked to the other 16 goals. Global health is only as good as the health of the most fragile of states. Improving health is a prerequisite to sustainable development for the world as a whole and requires the commitment and action of all governments and sectors. The implementation of the SDGs and targets will require harmonization of existing national strategies and plans and their monitoring will need stronger health information systems than currently exist in most countries.



Participants in the Fifth Seminar on Health Diplomacy, Cairo, 7–8 May 2016

Conclusions

Health diplomacy contributes to both global health security and to the wider issue of security in general. Challenges to global health security, such as the outbreaks of Ebola virus disease and Zika virus, and the continuing conflicts in the Region which have led to mass movement of people to other countries in search of safe havens, are also challenges to global security. Better global health promotes stability, security and growth. Awareness needs to be raised at all levels of the value of health diplomacy in promoting both health and security.

Participants in the seminar concluded that the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region is gradually increasing its knowledge and capacity in health diplomacy. Governments are engaging more prominently in global negotiations on key issues of relevance to health, are improving linkages between ministries of health and foreign affairs, and between health and non-health sectors. Nevertheless, there remains much to be done to strengthen coordination between health and foreign policy and to engage non-health sectors in issues of relevance to global health security.

The following action points were raised by the participants. WHO and Member States should work together in promoting health diplomacy and addressing, whenever possible, these action points.

1. Continue to emphasize and promote health as a key pillar of foreign policy and a core responsibility of the whole of government. WHO should continue to hold national seminars to raise awareness and build capacity across all sectors.
2. Advocate for inclusion of global health issues and the urgent need to strengthen the capacity of countries, in a special session of the United Nations Security Council, as a key component of global peace and security in general.
3. Establish health diplomacy units within ministries of health, to coordinate common positions with ministries of foreign affairs, or strengthen existing international health departments.
4. Continue to recommend the establishment of a high-level focal point for health in ministries of foreign affairs of all countries.
5. Emphasize the importance of data and policy briefs to promote certain health-related positions within the country (internal health diplomacy).
6. Initiate preparations for the high-level meeting on prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases of the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, including analysis of why Member States are not achieving adequate progress in implementing the measures recommended by the United Nations Political Declaration and may not be able to deliver on some of the progress indicators which will be assessed by the General Assembly in 2018. The preparations should also focus on investment in generating baseline data for monitoring progress, and study of the influence of industry on prevention efforts and access to medicines.
7. Support implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005), including by identifying a sustainable financing mechanism for funding the national action plans developed after the external assessment missions, and reinforcing the role of WHO when Member States do not comply with the recommendations of the Director-General in the event of an outbreak.
8. Support efforts to strengthen global health security by investing in evidence-based advocacy (data) and working with other sectors, particularly the agriculture and animal sectors, on translating the global action plan on antimicrobial resistance into appropriate national plans.
9. Ensure representation of Member States at the forthcoming UN General Assembly session on antimicrobial resistance and promote dialogue at national level to raise awareness of the urgent need for action in the agricultural, animal and human health sectors.
10. Consider strengthening, and reinforcing the role of, country offices in managing emergency events with the support of other levels of WHO based on the principle of subsidiarity, and within the context of the WHO reform process.
11. Increase advocacy for protection of civilians and health workers and facilities during conflict and work with all partners in monitoring violations and raising awareness of the principles behind the international agreements in this regard.
12. Identify new mechanisms for a comprehensive solution for displaced populations, especially those living with host communities, and invest in strengthening national health information systems to support this.
13. Explore means of strengthening multisectoral collaboration and working across sectors to achieve the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals endorsed by the United Nations in September 2015.
14. Continue to hold the seminar on health diplomacy on an annual basis, and continue to support countries in hosting national seminars and capacity-building events.