

# What is Health Diplomacy and Why is it so Important and Relevant at this Time?

## Global Health Diplomacy

- ❖ Global Health Diplomacy (GHD) is the practice by which governments and non-state actors attempt to coordinate global policy solutions to improve global health.
  
- ❖ It brings together several disciplines including:
  - public health
  - international affairs
  - management
  - law
  - economics
  - trade policy
  
- ❖ I have read a definition of GHD that describes it as embodying “intergovernmental negotiations that shape and manage the global policy environment for health”.
  
- ❖ I do not believe, however, that GHD should be confined within this relatively narrow, traditional construct, in which diplomacy is conducted solely by government diplomats hammering out agreements around the classic negotiating table.
  
- ❖ Today’s health diplomacy more than ever before involves a multiplicity of actors, not all of which are representatives of the state, and occur at various venues, formal and informal, at diverse levels of authority.

## Diplomacy (Definition)

- ❖ Allow me to take a step back by defining diplomacy generally.
  
- ❖ There are various definitions of diplomacy, several of which no longer reflect the evolution that has taken place in the field. For example, it has

been defined as “a tool or instrument by which states implement their foreign policy and articulate and defend their national interests”.

- ❖ Whereas this is indeed the case, this does not capture the role played by non-governmental organisations and other non-state actors that fall under the broad umbrella of civil society.
- ❖ A more accurate and contemporary definition is that “*Diplomacy refers to both specific methods for reaching compromise and consensus, as well as a system of organization for representation, communication, and the negotiating process. It entails relationship building at different levels and with different actors.*”
- ❖ I cannot underscore how important this last sentence about the value of relationship building is. In my estimation, the ability to make friends and win allies to your position and interests is the single most important instrument in a diplomat’s toolkit.

## **Non-state Actors**

- ❖ Non-state actors not only help to shape the policy responses taken by governments to today’s global challenges, but can also play an active role in negotiations undertaken to respond to these challenges.
- ❖ The influence of non-state actors who command large amounts of resources, particularly financial, is growing. They can exert political pressure on governments that is difficult to ignore and which may run counter to the overall public good.
- ❖ A prime example of this is seen in NCDs, where the commercial market power of big business can create tension with the public health policy objectives of governments.
- ❖ The WHO Director General Margaret Chan hit the nail on the head when she noted that “market power readily translates into political power, and few governments prioritize health over big business”. She elaborated on this in 2013 at the 66<sup>th</sup> WHA when she stated that the pressure from

trans-national private companies on Member States was never stronger, particularly in relation to the NCD agenda.

- ❖ This is not to suggest that commercial non-state actors do not have a legitimate role to play in the practice of global health diplomacy, for they do. However, I think we are all aware of the pressure that can be exerted by the private sector when attempts are made by governments to levy so-called sin taxes on tobacco products and alcoholic drinks, limit the size of sugary drinks, or even make slight changes to official dietary guidelines.
- ❖ Indeed, the new US Administration may be less strident in their efforts to regulate big business (pharmaceuticals, food and drink, tobacco and alcohol etc.) than was the Obama administration. This could have a significant impact on the overall global response to finding policy solutions to improve global health.
- ❖ It is through the rules-based, multilateral system that controversial non-actors that engage in harmful marketing and production practices are brought into the process of global health diplomacy, via global governance institutions, such as the UN and the World Health Assembly.
- ❖ This is not only the case in relation to trans-national corporations such as Big Pharma, Big Food, Big Tobacco, Big Alcohol and Big Soda. The rules-based multilateral system also provides a space for the views and positions of international NGOs, philanthropic organisations, academic institutions, advocacy groups and well-endowed foundations, religious groups and humanitarian organisations.
- ❖ **[NY State tried unsuccessfully in 2009 to introduce an 18% tax on sugary beverages, which failed in the face of a \$9.4 million lobbying campaign mounted by the American Beverage Association].**

## **Why GHD is Important at this Time**

- ❖ A growing number of health challenges now transcend national borders.
- ❖ This generates demands for more concerted policy responses, as well as diplomatic coordination at the global level.
- ❖ Unlike at the domestic level, where a country responds to a set of health conditions via its national health system, at the global level what is required is an understanding of these health conditions in the context of the transnational/cross-border transfer of health risks.
- ❖ You don't need me to tell you that in today's globalized world, characterized by ever increasing trans-boundary flows of people, products, services and capital, the risk of the spread of disease and pandemic outbreak is greater than ever before.

#### Recent Examples

- ❖ SARS outbreak in 2003
- ❖ Growing threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR)
- ❖ Zika
- ❖ Ebola
- ❖ Chikungunya Virus
- ❖ HIV/AIDS
  
- ❖ The relevance and heightened importance that is accorded by the international community towards GHD results from the impact it has on three major aspects of the global agenda: the world economy; the security environment; and the humanitarian, human rights and social justice arenas.
  
- ❖ As far as security is concerned, we have all seen the fear that spread and the attendant security measures that were put in place during the Ebola outbreak. There have also been extensive security screening measures put in place to control health risks occasioned by internal and external mass migration.

- ❖ The socio-economic interlinkages between health, poverty alleviation and development are well recognized, as is the effect that rising public health care costs have on fiscal policies and national budgets.
- ❖ Universal access to primary health care is a fundamental aspect of our core social values and humanitarian and human rights principles and is in line with the expectations of all our citizens.

### **What is the Required Diplomatic Response?**

- ❖ There is widespread recognition that the required response to the growing frequency of global health threats, both at the national and international levels, involves improved governance of health systems.
- ❖ The intensification of cross-border health threats that results from the increased spread of globalization is such that it is beyond the ability of any single country or organization to address, by themselves, the health threats that they face.
- ❖ An effective response is dependent, therefore, on the ability of the international community to mount a coordinated response.
- ❖ This is where diplomacy is critical, but are we equipped to effectively address the problem?
- ❖ In my view, whereas some countries are well equipped to meet the challenges posed by contemporary global health threats many other countries, mostly in the Global South, are not.
- ❖ The fact that some of us are not yet able to effectively meet this challenge presents a problem for the efficacy of the global response, which is based on our ability to take international collective action.
- ❖ However, in the absence of a world government international collective action is difficult to achieve. Its success relies on the decisions of the world's sovereign nations to act in concert with each other towards the realization of a universal objective.

- ❖ A prime example of this new emphasis on a universal agenda can be found in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The fundamental role of health in development is outlined not only in SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) but is also a cross-cutting theme linked to the entirety of the SDG Agenda, as health is a prerequisite for, and indicator and outcome of, sustainable development.
- ❖ However, as important as the individual Goals is the new approach to the promotion of a universal agenda for inclusive, sustainable development that applies equally to all countries. In this sense, the new Goals are unique in that they call for action by all countries, poor, rich and middle-income to promote prosperity while protecting the planet, which was not the case with the MDGs.
- ❖ Universality however, is difficult to achieve in an organization, the UN, with 193 sovereign members. In fact, we are also witnessing just how difficult this can be to sustain in relation to the Trump administration's disposition to the Paris Climate Agreement.
- ❖ Dr. Julio Frenk addressed this issue in a paper entitled *Governance Challenges in Global Health* in which he stated "*Sovereignty can confound attempts at transnational coordination, rulemaking, and adjudication. These tasks become even more difficult given the highly unequal distribution of health risks and resources, the opposing interests of various actors, the diversity of cultures and histories, and the rapidly changing distribution of power among countries in the global system*".
- ❖ On the diplomatic front, efforts towards coordinated action on global health will require that our traditionally trained cadre of diplomats, who operate within the confines of our ministries of foreign affairs and who have been accustomed to negotiating solely with other diplomats, become a part of the transformation that is currently underway.
- ❖ This transformation is ongoing in both health and diplomacy. It is manifested in a new focus being placed on the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement, which I saw firsthand during my work in organizing the UN High Level Meeting on NCDs.

## **Shifting Geopolitical Power Dynamics**

- ❖ The relationship between health, foreign policy and international trade is currently at the cutting edge of multilateral diplomacy and health experts have a critical role to play in this new paradigm.
- ❖ There is a growing realization that the global health arena has become more complex as the number of non-state actors has grown. Added to this is the changing geopolitical power dynamics underway, which have seen the emergence of new economic poles of influence such as the BRICS countries.
- ❖ These shifts in the global power structure reflect the transition from two super powers during the Cold War, to a brief unipolar world post the Cold War, to the rise of regional trading blocs such as the EU, and the current situation of emerging economies.
- ❖ Shifts in power dynamics have been accompanied by shifts in thinking about health and what it means given the growing interconnectedness among populations.
- ❖ There is a risk that the rules based multilateral system that governs global political and trade relations could be subjected to increasing fragmentation as more self-assured emerging nations assert their own values and rules.
- ❖ A question arises as to whether and to what extent emerging economies will maintain their support for international bodies such as the WHO, GAVI and UNAIDS, as well as global initiatives that were taken without the support of developing countries.
- ❖ The growth of populist sentiment throughout the world poses yet another risk to the multilateral system, as it reflects a nationalist agenda that views multilateral institutions and the very notion of global governance with anathema.

- ❖ Despite these risks, I believe that states remain important actors in international affairs.
- ❖ The important shift that I see happening is that the role of diplomats will cease to be the guardians of the frontiers of the nation state and instead adapt to become the bridge that integrates the various actors that today share the global diplomatic space.

### **Role of Health Experts**

- ❖ Traditional diplomats require the help and active engagement of health experts such as yourselves to design and negotiate frameworks and agreements that can address global health challenges in a collective manner.
- ❖ There are a growing number of countries that have become increasingly more engaged in health policy and which recognize the value of integrating health into all government policies.
- ❖ These countries have responded to the growing challenge posed by increased global health risks not only by strengthening the international health departments within their health ministries, but by assigning health attaches to provide public health expertise to their diplomatic missions in Geneva and New York.
- ❖ Government and non-Government stakeholders have started to recognize the strategic value of how and why the foreign policy community's support for the health sector is vital for advancing both.
- ❖ The need for increased foreign policy and diplomatic activities on global health problems has created opportunities and challenges for those who shape the foreign and health policies of Member States.
- ❖ We must heighten the involvement of, and policy coherence among, diplomatic and public health forums to improve our understanding of the interlinkages between foreign policy and global health.



- ❖ In fact, this workshop is an example of just that, as it is designed to highlight the need for a more thorough understanding of the relationship between the two arenas.
- ❖ Common frameworks and recognition of the comparative advantages of both sectors to pursue better health outcomes will increase chances of success in achievement of results.
- ❖ I also see the need for formal, whole-of-government strategies and coordination processes, which offer a promising way to improve foreign policy acumen, capabilities, and performance on global health challenges.
- ❖ This will require intersectoral collaboration between several ministries, including health, education, transport, tourism, trade, commerce, planning and development.
- ❖ Within this coordinated diplomatic construct, ministries of foreign affairs should see themselves not as the sole practitioners of diplomacy, but rather as a part of a new national diplomatic system.
- ❖ This final point I would make is to emphasise is the link between domestic populations and global public health. There is a symbiotic link between global health issues and those at the domestic level.
- ❖ Therefore, you will find that the credibility of your advocacy on the international stage will be impacted by the policies you develop and implement at home.