

Sustainable preparedness for health security and resilience:

Adopting a whole-of-society approach and breaking
the “panic-then-forget” cycle



MEETING REPORT

SIDE EVENT: 75TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Thursday, 1 October 2020

Co-hosted by France, Finland and Indonesia

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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of countries and communities to the risks and impacts of health emergencies and disasters, including disease outbreaks and epidemics. Such crises threaten lives, livelihoods, cause social disorder, disrupt economies and impede sustainable development. Furthermore, large-scale health emergencies transcend national boundaries, threatening international exchanges. Recent events have also been exacerbated by factors such as poverty and social inequalities, rapid population growth and displacement, increased movement of people, animals and goods, urbanization, climate change, and conflicts.

France, Finland, Indonesia and the World Health Organization (WHO) co-hosted a United Nations General Assembly Side Event on **1 October 2020 from 1300H to 1500H (CET)** over a virtual platform, which comprised 25 speakers and over 300 additional high-level attendees. It brought together ministers and leaders of Member States, regional and international organizations, funders and partners to highlight and advocate for long-term sustainable preparedness in the context of COVID-19.

Key objectives of the session were to:

- ▶ Highlight experiences and lessons learned by countries in emergency preparedness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- ▶ Advocate for long-term, sustainable emergency preparedness through diplomacy, investments, capacity-building and health system strengthening; and
- ▶ Advocate for applying a whole-of-society approach in countries for sustainable emergency preparedness through effective multisectoral collaboration and community engagement.

PROCEEDINGS

The two-hour event was opened by Director-General of WHO, **Dr Tedros Adhanom**; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Her Excellency **Minister Ms Retno Marsudi**; **Ambassador Ms Stéphanie Seydoux** of France, and **Ambassador Ms Päivi Sillanaukee** of Finland. This was followed by a presentation by Assistant Director-General for Emergency Preparedness of WHO, **Dr Jaouad Mahjour**. These were moderated by Director for Health Security Preparedness, **Dr Stella Chungong**. Two thematic sessions were opened by **Ambassador Mr Hasan Kleib** of Indonesia and **Ambassador Ms Sillanaukee** of Finland respectively and moderated by the chair of the Lancet infectious diseases commission on preparedness for emerging epidemic threats, **Associate Professor Vernon Lee**. Additional viewpoints were shared, before Executive Director for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, **Dr Mike Ryan**, and **Mr Bernard Derebergue** of France (on behalf of **Ambassador Ms Seydoux**) gave their closing comments. The full list of speakers can be found in the Annex.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

I. BREAKING THE PANIC-THEN-FORGET CYCLE

Dr Tedros noted that in the week leading up to the meeting, the world passed a “grim milestone” with more than 1 million lives lost to COVID-19, “livelihoods lost, economies and societies have been upended. The impacts go far beyond the disease itself, with disastrous consequences for health systems and services for immunization, nutrition, family planning and more. And yet none of this should come as a surprise. Over the years we have had many reports, reviews and recommendations all saying the same thing: the world is not prepared for a pandemic. COVID-19 has laid bare the truth. When the time came, the world was still not ready. Even some of the wealthiest and most powerful countries were caught off guard.”

Dr Chungong drew attention to how “the pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of countries and communities to the risks and impacts of health emergencies and showed that many health emergency threats require coordinated actions – a whole-of-society approach. This will not be the world’s last health emergency, and as the pandemic has demonstrated, countries and partners need to invest in building resilient health systems that can surge to meet the heightened demands during a crisis, reduce disruption to health services and engage all parts of society in all aspects of emergency preparedness. It is time to break the panic-then-forget cycle and this event seeks to foster that discussion.”

Like a wave drawing back and revealing what lays beneath, **Minister Ms Marsudi** stated, of the COVID-19 pandemic, that “it continues to expose how unprepared we are in dealing with emerging infectious diseases. For far too long we failed to make health a priority, nor invest enough in building resilient health infrastructure. As a result, we are now spending massive amounts of resources to combat the pandemic. This crisis is worsened by lack of coherence in policy and action at all levels. Countries are adopting widely different approaches against COVID-19. Many favour unilateralism and self-help over international cooperation and multilateral mechanism, placing countries at odds with one another.”

Minister Ms Tamara van Ark, Minister for Medical Care and Sport of Netherlands aptly added that “we all know that we have to repair a rooftop while the sun is shining, so it seems like our joint efforts to fight the Coronavirus pandemic are like repairing a rooftop in the pouring rain. So, let us use this as an important lesson for the future and let us make sure that we will be ready for whenever the next international health crisis strikes.” COVID-19 is indeed a clear call for urgent attention to emergency preparedness so as to prevent a repeat of such a crisis.



While the world was invested in preparing for terrorist attacks, relatively little is spent preparing against the attack of a virus which, as the pandemic has proven, can be far more deadly, disruptive and costly

– Dr Tedros Adhanom, Director-General, WHO

II. MULTISECTORAL PREPAREDNESS COORDINATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that health emergencies and measures taken to prevent their occurrence and mitigate their impact extend far beyond the health sector. An important part of adopting a whole-of-society approach is engaging all sectors and levels through multisectoral preparedness coordination. This was touched on by many speakers, including the need for strong leadership, coordination and a One Health approach. **Dr Tedros** highlighted three key points on what this meant: investing in preparedness capacities that protect every community; engagement across sectors beyond health, including foreign affairs, finance, parliaments, water, sanitation, labour, trade and other sectors; and stronger engagement of local government, the private sector, community leaders and the civil society, especially in urban settings and among the most vulnerable populations. **Ambassador Ms Sillanaukee** added that health security “builds on strong health systems, essential public health functions and multisectoral cooperation coupled with political leadership and commitment, legislative framework and effective structures for governance and cooperation.”

The Minister for Health of Singapore, **Minister Mr Gan Kim Yong**, shared recent experiences of the city state in establishing a multi-ministry taskforce to coordinate efforts, with minister-level representation from the various sectors, including social, health and finance. The

approach taken in the Netherlands “involves whole-of-society – private partners, non-government organizations (NGOs), the health sector, agriculture and the ministries of finance, foreign affairs and economic affairs,” **Minister Ms Tamara van Ark** highlighted. **Dr Susan Corning**, Senior Advisor of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) shared that “the COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that One Health is not just about multisectoral collaboration. It has now become even more essential to strategically integrate disciplinary skills and resources in order to create an efficient, cost-effective and sustainable strategy to minimize risk posed by future pandemics.”

Strong leadership and commitment are critical components of effective multisectoral preparedness coordination. **Ms Henriette Geiger** of the European Commission emphasized that for countries to advance the paramount importance of implementing national action plans for health security, their integration within national health sector plans to build responsive and resilient health systems is critical. Furthermore, it “requires strong political and financial support from us, the development partners, but first and foremost from governments. Ministries of health in all countries must be empowered and supported to exert leadership.” **Minister Mr Abdoulaye Diouf Sarr**, Minister of Health and Social Action of Senegal, when sharing on his country’s experience, likewise underlined this importance of leadership, coordination and transparency: “Winning the fight against COVID-19 requires strong leadership from the highest authorities, good preparation of the response, a deep commitment of communities by co-building with them, but also transparency in the management of the response.”

Parliaments also have an important role. **Secretary-General Mr Martin Chungong** of the Inter-Parliamentary Union offered that parliaments can elevate global health security to the top of the national agenda, give a framework for strengthening health systems and ensure that appropriate investments are made in the global health security sector. Furthermore, parliaments can use “legislative law-making powers to ensure that international commitments, such as the International Health Regulations (IHR), are integrated within the national legislative and policy framework in order to promote coherence, coordination across sectors and at the end of the day, promote what I call country ownership.” To do this, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has been working with WHO on a handbook that will serve as a strong resource for parliamentarians.

Only through a combination of good coordination of other sectors beyond health, strong leadership and commitment, and the support of parliaments will countries be better placed to deal with future health threats and emergencies.



COVID-19 has also reaffirmed the importance of good collaboration and coordination between national, subnational and local governments across sectors. It is crucial that we work together across sectors to enhance COVID-19 preparedness and response capacities towards long-term health security.

– Dr Jaoaud Mahjour, Assistant Director-General for Preparedness, WHO

III. LEARNING FROM PAST EXPERIENCES AND COLLABORATIONS THROUGH NETWORKS

To avoid returning to a state where the importance of preparedness is quickly forgotten, countries need to ensure that they take steps to learn from the current pandemic and past emergencies. Presenters shared how past experiences with disease outbreaks improved emergency preparedness for COVID-19. Minister for Health of Oman, **Minister Dr Ahmed Al-Saidi** shared the experience of Oman in benefiting from strong, well-organized leadership, drawing from lessons learned from past epidemics (influenza H1N1 and MERS) as well as other disasters, and how community resilience helped with early management of the pandemic. Singapore also drew from their experience during the SARS outbreak in 2003 which led to heavy investments to refine their approach and crisis management plans ahead of COVID-19. Africa is no stranger to health-related crises as **Ambassador Mr Solomon Eboah**

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