

Daily Report for WHA70

Day 1, 22 May 2017

The WHA70 has begun! This year, as in previous years, the People's Health Movement's 'WHO watch' activity will track the discussions at the Assembly and also provide comments and analysis on different agenda items. After a full week of discussing each agenda item separately and thoroughly, the Watch team developed a policy brief for delegates on human resources for health, FENSA, NCDs and access to medicines, available [here](#). PHM Commentaries on other items can be found [here](#).

Starting from today, we will be following every session live and reporting on it in our Skype channel. We will also create these daily reports to provide a brief overview on the entire day's proceedings.

Opening of the World Health Assembly 70

Today was the first day of the World Health Assembly (WHA). The Minister of Health Care of the Russian Federation, Dr Veronika Skvortsova, was elected as the President of the Health Assembly. This did not happen without dispute. In a strongly worded statement, Ukraine objected to her appointment on the grounds that Russia's military actions in the Crimea, and its hazardous impact on the health and health systems of the region, did not give Dr Skvortsova the moral authority required to preside over the meeting. China, speaking on behalf of itself and the BRICS countries, supported her appointment. No other countries objected to her nomination and Dr Skvortsova was thus appointed as President. The assembly also elected five Vice-Presidents from Cabo Verde, the Cook Islands, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Somalia and Suriname.

The Director General's Speech

Before the start of Dr Margaret Chan's last address as Director-General there was a little excitement related to the elections for the next Director-General. Someone started shouting from the floor in opposition to the candidature of Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus from Ethiopia for the next Director-General. This shows the heated debate around the first secret ballot vote for the next Director-General. The other candidates for this position are Dr David Nabarro of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Dr Sania Nishtar of Pakistan. PHM does not support any particular candidate. However, please refer to the civil society statement on '[The WHO we want and the leadership the WHO needs](#)' to see what issues we think the next Director-General should be addressing.

Dr Chan gave a short speech in which she addressed the high and lows of her tenure. She noted that she started during a time of prosperity, but that the economic crisis introduced a period defined by austerity measures. Other difficulties during her tenure included international terrorism, huge flows of migrants and refugees, attacks on health facilities and health workers during conflicts, and new pandemic outbreaks such as Zika and Ebola.

Dr Chan warned that it is time to set priorities as the world is not adequately prepared for new epidemic outbreaks. We live in a time, she argued, where partnerships are necessary to overcome these challenges.

Dr Chan argued that the Universal Health Coverage policy was one of the most important policies she released during her administration. This connects many parts of the health system, such as access to medicine and tackling infectious diseases.

Lastly, she reminded the delegates to “Listen to Civil Society”. She argued that civil society is best placed to hold governments and business accountable, and give those who suffer a voice.

2. Start of Committee A: Health Emergencies and the International Health Regulations

The committee started with the WHO regional director of Africa giving a brief summary of the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The outbreak in the northern parts of the country has drawn global attention thanks to a rapid response by WHO and other partners. WHO has conducted a risk assessment, concluding that risk was high at national level but low at the global level. The Ministry of Health of the Democratic Republic of Congo expressed appreciation for WHO’s assistance in addressing the outbreak, which is located in a remote part of the country, in conjunction with the Ministry and civil society organisations on the ground, in an effective manner.

The implementation of the international health regulations (IHRs) was discussed. The need for long-term sustainable financing for IHR was emphasised by several countries. Many countries raised concerns about the lack of funding at the WHO to address health emergencies and to implement the IHRs. We are glad that the EU suggested that the WHO should take a human rights approach based on sustainable financing. We hope that countries will do this by increasing first of all the assessed contributions but also the funding to address the IHRs.

The matter of health system strengthening was also raised. Many countries mentioned the need for stronger health systems, particularly in relation to expanding the health workforce. Cameroon expressed this concern in particular on behalf of 47 member states. We would like to stress the importance of strengthening the health systems in low and middle income countries (LMICs). It is necessary to ensure that health systems of LMICs are not undermined by a protectionist approach by high income countries (HICs) to prevent infectious diseases spreading towards them. We would like to remind the international community that the implementation of the IHR will result in global public goods of which the benefits will be shared worldwide. Additional financial contributions from HICs can therefore be justified. Tomorrow or later this week, MMI in collaboration with PHM, will provide a statement on this agenda item.

3. What is coming up tomorrow

The big event tomorrow, Tuesday 23 May, is the election of a new Director General. This will take place in plenary with start at 14:00. Exciting, because it will be the first elections done by a secret voting!

In Committee A the discussions on Item 12 will continue. Sub-items 12.1 on Health emergencies and 12.4 on Implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005) are being discussed together. The WHA Watch group has a statement on these items.

We will continue with live updates from the Assembly on our Skype channel WHA70.