

The role of diplomacy in health is vital. As health becomes an ever more critical element in foreign policy, security policy, development strategies and trade agreements, new skills are needed to negotiate for health in the face of other interests. An increasing number of health challenges can no longer be resolved at the technical level only – they require political negotiations and solutions, and often need to involve a wide range of actors. Health diplomacy takes place at many levels. Global health diplomacy focuses on those health issues that need the cooperation of many countries to address issues of common concern, but health diplomacy can also play a central role at the regional, bilateral and national level.

Health diplomacy is conducted in many venues, some of which are focused on health negotiations, such as the World Health Assembly, and some of which have a broader agenda, such as the United Nations General Assembly or the Human Rights Council. This can lead to international agreements, treaties and conventions. In some cases Member States are represented by high-level health officials, such as ministers of health; in other arenas, or major international conferences, negotiations are usually conducted by diplomats, but may also include other major players, such as international nongovernmental organizations.

Many examples show that health diplomacy works and that the alignment of health and foreign policy can generate significant benefits for health. There is an 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. Health diplomacy can have an important role in supporting sustainable development by addressing health as a social and economic issue of high relevance and in dealing both individually and collectively with health challenges. It can support countries in protecting joint interests and in taking positions on matters of common concern, such as access to health security, health promotion, disease control, access to medicines and technologies, food security, water and the post-2015 agenda.

Health diplomacy is important for the countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region because many of the development issues they face relate directly to health and because it is disproportionately affected by manmade and humanitarian crises. It is gaining in relevance as the Region has to find solutions to issues that require global action and collaboration across borders, such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), humanitarian health relief, noncommunicable diseases and antimicrobial resistance. But experience also shows that health diplomacy at the national and regional level is critical for the implementation of health programmes through complex partnerships. For example polio eradication in the Region is dependent on successful negotiations with many players, whose trust has to be gained, and creation of a safe and secure environment for vaccination campaigns.

With these issues in mind the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean hosted the Third Seminar on Health Diplomacy from 3 to 5 May 2014 in Cairo, Egypt. The objectives of the seminar were to build capacity among Member States, with a focus on issues of highest priority and relevance to the Region, and to raise awareness of the value of integrating concepts of health diplomacy into foreign policy. Participants included senior officials from ministries of foreign affairs and health, ambassadors, deans of diplomatic academies, regional public health institutes and heads of parliamentary committees.

Presiding over the meeting, Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, underlined that building capacity in health diplomacy is essential. The Region is facing major health challenges that have critical political and socioeconomic dimensions and require political solutions at the domestic and international levels. The engagement of representatives of Member States in decision-making processes on global health issues is important in protecting their interests. There is a pressing need for stronger regional presence in global discussions on health or on other issues that have potential impact on health. Both health and foreign policy officials should be aware of the importance of reinforcing their engagement in such discussions. Equally important is to strengthen the interaction and coordination between health, foreign policy and other sectors at the domestic level. Improving health, like education, is a prerequisite to national security and socioeconomic development.

[Global health security is integral to foreign policy](#)

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