

Lining up for Assembly

Francis Omaswa is impressed at preparations in East, Central and Southern Africa for the upcoming World Health Assembly



This time last year we discussed African participation at the World Health Assembly (WHA) and how to improve the African contribution. It is pleasing to report that last week, I took part in a meeting where the East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC) Secretariat convened delegations from the governments in that region to a WHA preparatory meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe. This meeting was under the title 'Global Health Diplomacy', and the invited facilitators included Geneva-based health specialists from three countries who are Health Attaches to the permanent missions of their respective countries in Geneva. Other facilitators included the University of Nairobi who run a course in global health diplomacy, the African University in Mutare, Zimbabwe who run another course in intellectual property. There were other experts from Africa-Caribbean-Pacific office in Geneva and the World Health Organization (WHO) offices in Harare. I congratulate ECSA-HC for yet another uplifting initiative. What was uplifting about this experience?

The Geneva-based health experts and the WHO representatives presented excellent analysis of the WHA agenda and there were other presentations on 'Global Health Diplomacy', 'the Art of Negotiation', 'Intellectual Property and Health', and my own contribution was on 'Global efforts in addressing African health workforce challenges'. The quality of the discussions and the spirit of the meeting gave me much hope for the future.

One of the key messages conveyed was that a number of the WHA documents have been developed with inputs from member states and stakeholders using online e-platforms. However, a number of the participants from the countries had not been aware of this, and in any case, some of them confessed to having challenges with

access to fast internet connections and lacking the time to use this method of contributing to modern international discussions. The implications for African countries is that governments need to review the profiles of staff employed and ensure that there are sufficient numbers of sharp internet savvy cadres who can quickly access virtual material and avail the leadership with digested summaries, including facilitating responses in these e-platforms and keeping pace with all of relevant virtual e-platforms.

So, what is up at the next WHA, taking place 19-23 May 2014? The full WHA programme can be accessed at the WHO website. However, here are a few WHA agenda items that I would encourage the African delegations to study carefully before travelling to Geneva: Improved decision making by the governing bodies; which is important strategically for influencing future decisions; Draft global targets for tuberculosis after 2015; which contains some tricky language regarding classification of target communities; Prevention and control of Non-Communicable Diseases; which is Africa's emerging epidemic; Traditional medicine; which is a trusted first point of care for many African populations; Antimicrobial drug resistance; a major threat to future access to medicines; and a follow up to commitments on human resources for health made by countries during the third Global Forum on Human Resources for Health. These are only a few agenda items and as time remaining is short, I urge various academic and research institutions, and other centres of excellence and professional associations to take the time to look at the WHA agenda and advise the delegations to the WHA from their countries as they deem appropriate. Providing informed advice to government delegations should become a routine calendar item for these institutions in the future. I also want to once again congratulate ECSA-HC and to encourage other sister sub-regional organisations to emulate this excellent good practice.

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