



Taiwan's indispensability in preparing for future pandemics

May 6, 2024 in **Tribune**

 0

0
SHARES

0
VIEWS

 Share on Facebook

 Share on Twitter

 Share on Whatsapp



Dr. Hsueh Jui-yuan

Minister of Health and Welfare / Republic of China (Taiwan)

The three years of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a terrible loss of life and exacerbated health inequalities. The global economy slumped and, worldwide, people's lives were affected. This experience demonstrated that the present global health governance framework is not effective in responding to threats to global health. Although COVID-19 is no longer labeled a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) and trade and economic activity globally have returned to normal, the World Health Organization (WHO) cautions against the threat of a Disease X pandemic. Therefore, it is critical that countries across the globe unite to bolster health governance.

WHO and many countries began reviewing response strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Weaknesses in the International Health Regulations (2005) as concerns managing this crisis were revealed. As a result, changes are afoot. Proposed revisions include enhanced

surveillance, reporting, and information sharing; improved response readiness; and revised criteria for declaring PHEICs. At the same time, there is vigorous debate around a new pandemic agreement, which aims to craft a robust global pandemic governance framework grounded in accountability, transparency, and equity. It may be approved at the 77th World Health Assembly.

As Taiwan is not a WHO member state, we cannot directly influence revisions to the International Health Regulations (2005) or the drafting of the pandemic agreement. Nevertheless, we remain greatly concerned about the content of and developments regarding these central documents. We are eager to contribute our insights into pandemic management and learn from international best practices. Taiwan was the nation that initially identified the epidemic risk and promptly executed adaptive measures. Taiwan also proactively shared vital information with global partners and garnered public trust through a commitment to openness. This was crucial to effectively implementing pandemic policies. To address future pandemics, we will strive to refine approaches to obtaining vaccines, managing medical resources, utilizing technology, safeguarding human rights, and addressing misinformation.

We strongly endorse the passage and implementation of amendments to the International Health Regulations (2005) and the pandemic agreement. We call on WHO to include Taiwan as a signatory to these documents. This would enable us to collaborate on monitoring new virus strains, reporting and exchanging pathogen diagnosis data, and sharing novel vaccine and antiviral research or clinical trial results. This would further collective global action against future pandemics and more resilient antipandemic efforts by the international community.

We urge WHO to support Taiwan's inclusion in overseeing global health. Taiwan remains committed to participating based on the principles of professionalism, pragmatism, and making contributions. Taiwan seeks to cooperate with WHO to remedy geographic gaps in global health security and to construct a comprehensive global health framework.

The WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All has found that at least 140 countries recognize health as a fundamental human right in their constitutions. Despite this, many nations have not passed and implemented laws to ensure that their citizens have access to healthcare services. Taiwan has worked hard to reach universal health coverage and has consistently improved the quality of health care over the past few decades in line with WHO

recommendations. Taiwan has effectively integrated and allocated social welfare resources to enhance primary and oral health care for all, implement mental health programs, and strengthen the social safety net. Taiwan has put in place an agile and resilient healthcare system able to combat both communicable and noncommunicable diseases. We are improving health for all individuals over the course of their entire lives. Moreover, Taiwan is working to share its experience and expertise in achieving universal health coverage to help the international community realize health for all.

The theme for World Health Day 2024 is “My health, my right.” This is a way to advocate for every individual, everywhere, to have access to quality health services, education, and information, as well as enjoy safe drinking water, clean air, good nutrition, quality housing, decent working and environmental conditions, and freedom from discrimination.

Through a public-private partnership, Taiwan has been contributing to global efforts to realize the right to health in collaboration with partner countries and international organizations. We have improved medical care in small South Pacific island nations, enhanced nutrition for women and children affected by an earthquake in Haiti, provided psychological support to Ukrainian refugee women and children in Romania as well as aid workers; bolstered climate change adaptability in the Caribbean; and improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene at healthcare facilities in Kenya. Furthermore, Taiwan has provided humanitarian assistance through postdisaster recovery and reconstruction efforts that have helped people get through disasters in the Philippines, Japan, Hawaii, Türkiye, and Indonesia.

Taiwan believes that health is a human right. Yet the rights of Taiwan’s 23 million people are disregarded by WHO for political reasons. Taiwan remains a steadfast partner in defending the right to health of all people everywhere. We urge WHO and all relevant parties to recognize Taiwan’s considerable contributions to global public health and the human right to health. It is imperative that WHO adopt a more open-minded approach and demonstrate flexibility, adhering to the principles of professionalism and inclusivity. Taiwan should be included, as a matter of pragmatism, in the World Health Assembly and all WHO meetings, activities, and mechanisms, particularly those concerned with the WHO pandemic agreement. This would better empower Taiwan to collaborate with global partners to uphold the fundamental human right to health stipulated in the WHO Constitution and the vision of leaving no one behind espoused in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.