
ECOSOC High Level Segment opens with emphasis on Health

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ECOSOC Proceedings- 6th July 2009 By: Dinisha Fernando On the first day of the ECOSOC and more specifically, the High-level segment, opening and keynote addresses were made, followed by policy messages from the Annual Ministerial Review preparatory meetings which included the South Asia Regional Meeting hosted by the government of Sri Lanka. Mr. Sylvie Lucas, President of the Economic and Social Council; Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General to the United Nations; and Swiss President Hans-Rudolf Merz gave charismatic opening addresses, stressing the importance of striving to achieve health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These MDGs have undergone the least amount of progress out of the eight goals, and this year's Council is paying extra attention to maternal healthcare and non-communicable diseases, two factors that have not shown much improvement in a world undergoing climate change and unprecedented financial economic crisis.

The morning session hosted many keynote and guest addresses, which although enlightening, were somber and implored the involvement of all government sectors in improving healthcare systems. H.R.H. Princess Muna Al Hussein of Jordan discussed the increasing prevalence of fatalities due to non-communicable diseases in poor areas with limited access to healthcare, calling weak health programs "bottleneck" that slows international healthcare system progress. Ms. Cherie Blair of the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women cautioned that although "recognizing something as a fundamental right, is of course, a first step," simple recognition would not solve everything. "Health benefits from equality and suffers from discrimination." Sir Michael Marmot, Chair of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health discussed the dramatic inequities in life expectancies, pointing to data that revealed a direct relationship between socioeconomic status and average life expectancy, showing us that our concerns and aid should not exclusively focus on the poorest of the poor as life expectancy depends on the social gradient, affecting all of society. Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the WHO, discussed the many obstacles to achieving proper healthcare and asked a compelling and necessary question: "When will the world finally see what most of us in public health regard as self-evident? It is this. A focus on health as a worthy pursuit for its own sake is the surest route to that moral dimension that is so sadly lacking in international systems of governance. It is the surest route to a value system that puts the welfare of humanity at its heart."

Afterward, the floor was given to speakers presenting policy messages from representatives that hosted the ECOSOC regional meetings. As Sri Lanka hosted the South Asia Regional Meeting on Financing Strategies for Health Care, Dr. H.A.P. Kahandaliyanage, Secretary to the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition, addressed the Council. Dr. Kahandaliyanage informed the Council that "As a result of our commitment over several decades towards human development and social progress, and targeted policy interventions, we are satisfied that today we are well on track to achieve the health-related MDGs." Dr. Kahandaliyanage stressed that "while civil society and the private sector have important roles to play, the public sector has to take the lead role to deliver effective and equitable health services" and that "public-private partnerships are central for achieving the desired outcomes." The Secretary outlined three key messages that formed as a result of these discussions: (i) "With regard to domestic sources of healthcare financing, it was agreed that for universal coverage to be achieved, we need to find increased domestic funding and enhance efficiency in the use of resources. Equitable access to healthcare requires a move away from out-of-pocket payments to other options. Even though national growth rates were reducing against the current global background, rising incomes provide an opportunity in many Asian countries to expand domestic health funding." (ii) "With regard to external sources of funding, it was agreed that this needs to increase, and become more predictable and better aligned with national priorities. Innovative sources for health financing should be additional and not a substitute for external ODA funding. Donors tendency to focus on particular countries while neglecting others, is to be avoided." (iii) "With regard to health care in conflict situations, improving health care is possible even when countries are facing crises. Expenditure on health care should be on par with other areas in the recovery and rehabilitation phases."

The afternoon session hosted representatives from the WTO, UNCTAD, the IMF, the World Bank, and the ILO, who discussed the current financial economic crisis and the need for us to pay attention to developing countries, who plunge deeper into its negative effects and to emerge out of this catastrophe as a global society. The Global Jobs Pact, which emerged from the International Labour Conference 2009, was also introduced as a guide for countries to overcome the crisis. Presentations on partnerships in health geared towards fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, and other diseases were also conducted. Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations Geneva 07 July 2009