

IFRC Speech at the Plenary session on: Humanitarian Diplomacy and Global Health Challenges

DIHAD 2024

Wednesday, 24-04-2024

Panelist: Dr. Nehal Hefny – Deputy Regional Director - MENA

Thank you for having me here,

Let me start with some facts and figures:

- More than **125 million** people around the world have had their lives devastated by conflicts or disasters.
- It is estimated that by 2030, **46% of the world's poor** will live in areas characterized as fragile or conflict affected. (World Bank)

We can imagine how worrying are the subsequent direct and indirect effects of disasters, crises, and conflicts on the health of individuals, as well as on health systems that are usually already overwhelmed in vulnerable countries and communities. Knowing that there is a global inequality in access to quality health services that adds to the vulnerability of communities.

- Inequality in access to health, shown by the gap between annual health expenditures per person of \$7,285 in the USA and less than \$10 in Myanmar, Eritrea and Ethiopia (World Bank)
- NCDs as global health issues account for nearly three of every four deaths globally, but 77% percent of those deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.
- Mental health and psychological status, especially for those vulnerable and children witnessing catastrophic losses (children in Gaza as an example).

Adding to that, we cannot neglect the increasing attacks and targeting of health facilities and health personnel in conflict areas. Giving one example here from Gaza where there have been so far at least 435 serious attacks on health facilities or personnel in six months equivalent to 73 attacks per month, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) in addition to 369 attacks also reported in the occupied West Bank. This number exceeds the number of attacks per month in all other war-torn countries since 2018, including Ukraine who records the second highest number at 67 attacks per month, and the Democratic Republic of Congo with an average of 11 attacks per month.

So, Today's and tomorrow's global health and global security challenges provide clear warning signals for all of us working in the humanitarian field; signals of imminent dangers that our mission to save lives and alleviate suffering, and our principles of focusing on humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independent actions, are being challenged, discredited and even instrumentalized.

Among many questions facing us all now: How can we navigate and better respond to global disruptors including future pandemics and instability around the globe? For all of the above: No one country or organization can do it alone!

Approaching the topic of Global Health Challenges and Global Health Security through the lens of a changing world order, that is currently in a blender, the global cooperation and collaboration is crucially required for more robust Global Health Security policies and actions, however, the potential negative impact on this will need to be closely monitored and actions need to be taken to influence, mitigate for, and/or adapt. What will emerge is unclear, but indications are:

1. Global consensus is increasingly not achievable on issues of serious national and international concern like global warming/climate action, pandemics, security, conflict resolution, etc. Issues that typically need global collaboration and goodwill, as in pandemic response, will be more difficult to address. On COVID, the WHO is attempting to address and better prepare (WHA 2023) lessons learned and is working on a new convention. Some of the introductory text currently states: “in recognition of the catastrophic failure of the international community in showing solidarity and equity in response to the coronavirus disease pandemic, the WHA convened... “¹;
2. The definitions of Security and Globalism are being re-written; health security for whom? High Income countries with power and leverage? Or LMICH as well? Who is prioritized to receive (recalling the PPE and vaccine inequities)
3. Technologies for good-will be weaponized to achieve political, economic and military objectives; and in the coming era, this will be on fast paced and polarizing.
4. The Global humanitarian system is being instrumentalized by many nations, and tasked to fix what governments and diplomats have failed to/or attempted to fix.
5. As humanitarians we also often compete and accept the watering down of principles and values in our quest to reach people in need, and/or secure more funds. This continues to expose us to manipulation, fragmentation, and

¹ Bureau’s text of the WHO convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response; WHO CA+, Jun 2023 (https://apps.who.int/gb/inb/pdf_files/inb5/A_INB5_6-en.pdf)

loss of trust from the communities we serve, and should ultimately be accountable to.

It is not all negative,

- we have had successes in navigating humanitarian spaces and access around sanctions and counter terrorism clauses imposed by many donors, in many countries. The harm to average people, patients, families, those in poverty is real, unintended or not. The process has been long and difficult, and we continue our silent humanitarian diplomacy to do so.
- We have also had success in convincing many nations to ensure PPE and COVID vaccines are prioritized to refugees, migrants, and marginalized segments of society, our collective HD succeeded!

Governments and diplomates have an equal and important part to play. The Gaza crises is a global moral and ethical failure, and not to be treated as a humanitarian one with solutions of more aid trucks etc. The approach by some governments to simply demand more compliance from humanitarian agencies in the form of cumbersome requirements that do not make any field sense and in fact endanger our teams and access, etc. will only compound the suffering of people and trigger further crises.

For our collective humanitarian diplomacy to succeed in addressing the many global health challenges, we need to keep establishing renewed ways of respectful partnerships that focus on principles we agreed to long ago around international laws and ethical conduct.

Among all, we should not forget where our strength is; In our presence at/ with local communities, being their voice, understanding their needs and advocate for them at the global platforms. (a boot and a suite).

Thank You!