



Faster, Smarter, Safer:
Progress and Pitfalls in Outbreak Preparedness
Event Summary

September 26, 2018

Event Overview

On September 26, 2018 on the sidelines of the 73rd UN General Assembly, PATH, Panorama, and the United Nations Foundation hosted an event to celebrate the global community's success in stemming recent outbreaks while highlighting what still needs to be done to ensure the world is prepared for a major outbreak.

Almost 100 individuals attended **Faster, Smarter, Safer: Progress and Pitfalls in Outbreak Preparedness**, where leaders from the public and private sectors spoke about how leadership, innovation, and partnerships can converge to stop a threat in its tracks.

Event Participants – *in alphabetical order by last name*

- Alex M. Azar II, Secretary of Health and Human Services, United States
- Her Excellency Dr. Awa Marie Coll Seck, Minister of State, Republic of Senegal
- Steve Davis, President and CEO, PATH
- Sheri Fink, The New York Times
- Gabrielle Fitzgerald, CEO, Panorama
- Dr. Julie Gerberding, Executive Vice President & Chief Patient Officer, Merck
- Dr. Oly Ilunga Kalenga, Minister of Public Health, Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, Regional Director for Africa, World Health Organization
- Dr. Joshua Obasanya, Director, Prevention and Programs Coordination, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control
- Mr. Elhadj As Sy, Secretary General, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Co-Chair, Global Preparedness Monitoring Board
- Dr. Sylvain Yuma, Secretary General for Health, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Event Summary

We are in the 100th anniversary of the devastating 1918 influenza outbreak. Infectious diseases continue to impact millions of people around the world, especially in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Nigeria, and Madagascar. While diseases continue to pose a threat, the global community is reaching new heights of success combatting outbreaks. Driven by resilient leadership, innovation, and partnerships, diseases like Ebola, Nipha, Lassa fever, and the plague are being fought with greater efficacy than before. To discuss recent global health achievements and areas for improvement, PATH, Panorama, and the United Nations Foundation hosted a two-hour panel alongside the 2018 UN General Assembly.

Moderated by Steve Davis, President and CEO of PATH, and Sheri Fink, Pulitzer Prize-winning Correspondent at the New York Times, the panel discussed critical and timely topics ranging from public-private cooperation to the latest updates on the DRC's tenth Ebola outbreak. The morning's main

takeaway was the need for constant outbreak preparation, especially in moments of “peacetime.” This message was communicated early during Mr. Davis’s opening address, during which he implored the audience that “we get caught amid the calm between the storms in this work. . .when the things get bad it’s on everybody’s agenda. But then the support quickly disappears, and we are back to business as usual. . .We have to keep focus.”

Maintaining vigilance and preparedness during periods with few outbreaks is a difficult proposition; a lack of immediate urgency produces complacency. But practitioners and experts agreed on the necessity for readiness. Alex Azar, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, agreed with Mr. Davis’s remarks by saying, “we have to keep the pressure, always be prepared, always advance our work against infectious diseases.” Constant readiness allows the international community to better respond when epidemics foment, like the recent Ebola outbreak in the DRC.

While the Ebola virus in the DRC has not yet reached the massive scale of the 2014 epidemic, more than 11,000 people are at risk of infection. According to Dr. Oly Ilunga Kalenga, DRC Minister of Public Health, in videotaped remarks, there are four factors that have hampered elimination efforts: the outbreak occurred in a high-density area, the regional population is highly mobile, good road conditions facilitated transport of people to several cities, and the security situation is tense. Because of the specific context of the area of infection, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, noted that “there’s been a distinct effort needed to gain the trust of families and communities to have their cooperation.” For effective response to outbreaks, “this type of expertise needs to get into these situations from the beginning.”

The herculean effort is being organized by the DRC government in conjunction with a coalition of more than 40 countries and partners. The broad coalition faces resistance on the ground due to dissent about the direction of the ongoing war; according to Dr. Sylvain Yuma, DRC Secretary General for Health, “resistance in a family that had experienced the community death and refused contact with [the] whole system” allowed the epidemic to continue. Even so, Minister Ilunga noted that new tools and resources, such as the experimental vaccine, allowed the DRC to break the chain of transmission more quickly.

The experience managing and organizing the campaign -- including the vaccination efforts, data collection, commissions, and committees -- produced a model that was used during the recent Cholera outbreak in the DRC and can be extrapolated to other epidemics as well. Harkening back to the panel’s opening statement, the recent Ebola epidemic has, according to Dr. Yuma, demonstrated the necessity to build the DRC’s capacity to “prevent, detect early, and respond effectively [to outbreaks].”

The buttressed country capacity Dr. Yuma referenced must be built with the support of partners in all sectors. One example is the private partners who produced the Ebola vaccine, which has proved invaluable in the fight against the disease. Dr. Julie Gerberding, Merck Executive Vice President and Chief Patient Officer, noted that in addition to creating the vaccine, “the private sector helped with things like diagnostics, supply chain logistics, data... and that’s one of the reasons why CEPI, the new organization that’s been designed to try to replicate this experience, is so critical to global health.” Dr. Joshua Obasanya, Director of Prevention and Programs Coordination for Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, concurred by noting, “I don’t think the private sector partners that we’ve been working with in this context see this as a market opportunity. They see it as a responsibility and a commitment to the global community...”

The Global Health Security Agenda is another example of a multisectoral partnership encompassing countries, international organizations, businesses, and NGOs. Secretary Azar noted that “the U.S. Government strongly supports the GHSA as one mechanism for focusing the world on these [outbreak] threats.” Put another way by Her Excellency Awa Marie Coll Seck, Minister of State to the President of Senegal, “we need to look at this Global Health Security Agenda... we need to work together and have more solidarity.”

Elhadi As Sy, Secretary General of the IFRC and Co-Chair of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, posed a provocative question to the audience. Recognizing that we are in the hundredth anniversary of the Spanish Flu, he noted that “if we ask ourselves, are we really ready for [the next] big airborne [disease], I think you all, in your own perspective and rights, have your own answer to that question.” By working together, the global community can achieve a state of preparedness so that it is equipped to deal with the next major disease outbreak.

While the world’s state of readiness may not be perfect, there have been marked improvements in the global capacity to fight disease since the 2014 Ebola epidemic. Gabrielle Fitzgerald, CEO of Panorama, stated that the public health community has seen “significant improvements in WHO, exciting development of Merck’s experimental vaccine. . .[a] significant increase and utility of the JEE process.” She continued with areas that are still in need of improvement: there has been insufficient funding for implementing JEE recommendations, lack of progress on developing new drugs and diagnostics, and limited monitoring and accountability of recommendations. She challenged the audience “not accept that the cycle of panic and neglect is ok. Rather let’s move toward a time where we have a continuous focus on preparing for the next outbreak on the horizon. As Ban-ki Moon said four years ago this week, inaction is not an option.” With inspired leadership, innovation, and partnerships, progress will be made towards greater outbreak preparedness.