

# Globalising Health through global commitments and actions

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Gagan Thapa, Minister of Health, Nepal



## About the World Health Assembly

The World Health Assembly (WHA) is a forum through which the World Health Organization (WHO) is governed by its 194 member states. It is a supreme decision making body of WHO and is the world's highest health policy setting platform composed of delegations/health ministers from member states. The members of WHA generally meet in May in WHO Headquarters in Geneva. Its main functions are to determine the policies of the organization, supervise financial policies, review as well as approve the proposed programme budget and most importantly elect the Director General. <sup>1</sup> There were 55



Picture: [The 70<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly](#)

member states<sup>2</sup> in the first WHA held in 1948 and now it has 194 members<sup>3</sup>. In addition, there are seven agencies that have observer status at the WHA namely; the Vatican, the Palestinian Authority, the Order of Malta, the International Committee of the

Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Department of Health of the Republic of China.

## Why is WHA Important?

The WHA aims to improve health all over the planet, catalysing that process through collaboration and open dialogue, and steering tomorrow's agenda to improve research, education, healthcare, and policy outcomes. It brings together researchers, physicians,

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, 70<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly Promoting Health throughout the life-course  
Link: <http://www.who.int/life-course/news/events/70-wha/en/>

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, Working for Health: An introduction to the WHO  
Link: [http://www.who.int/about/brochure\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/about/brochure_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, Member Countries  
Link: <http://www.who.int/countries/en/>

key government officials, and representatives from industry as well as from NGOs and healthcare systems from all over the world to address the most pressing issues facet of healthcare and medicine in the upcoming decade and beyond.

The policies and programmes of the WHA has a significant bearing on health care in both developed and developing nations. The WHO biennial budget is reviewed and approved at the annual assembly meetings. The WHA also helps to define the future of medicine, research and healthcare and helps to facilitate discussions and find answers to the major health challenges of both today and tomorrow. This annual meeting assures the continuity of cooperation in public health and determines the strategy for the international offensive against the major diseases.

WHA presents important elements of WHA procedures and governance, including the process for the election of the next Director-General. It outlines the relevance of the WHA for different stakeholders, how they prepare and engage with each other, and provides an overview of key issues in the Assembly. With the participation of WHO experts, topics under discussion include, among others, the programme budget, access to medicines, health emergencies, nutrition, Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## World Health Assembly 2017

The 70th WHA<sup>4</sup> kicked off at 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2017 in Geneva, Switzerland. Margaret Chan, the Director General of WHO, facilitated the opening of the session. She called upon this



WHA, which includes 194 countries, to make the goal of reducing inequalities a guiding ethical principle, and also stated that countries need to work to improve data collection and create the most responsible health strategies possible. Chan also asked governments and partners to safeguard WHO's integrity in all stakeholder engagement and mentioned that civil society

Picture: [Speaking at the Assembly, Director Margaret Chan](#)

<sup>4</sup> Pan American Health Organization, World Health Organization, The 70<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly Begins

Link: <http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php>

organizations are best placed to hold government and businesses, like tobacco, food, and alcohol industries.

At the WHA, delegates approved the Organization's program budget for 2018-2019, and discussed on a broad range of health topics. They adopted resolutions on World Health Organization's response to health emergencies, international health regulations, and pandemic influenza preparedness, among others. They also discussed on subjects such as polio, antimicrobial resistance, access to medicines and vaccines, refugee and migrant health, improvement of vector control, adolescent health, and the management of chemicals. The Assembly also reviewed a number of subjects related to non-communicable diseases, including dementia and cancer, as well as made preparations for the United Nations High-level Meeting on non-communicable Diseases to be held in September 2018.

At the Assembly, the countries agreed that opportunities to advance rapidly on the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 should be maximized, in particular with regard to the goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being at all stages of the life cycle (Sustainable Development Goal 3). Organized by the delegations of Bangladesh, Iran, Thailand, and Venezuela, the session focused on three key interrelated challenges for realizing the SDGs: poverty reduction, social justice, and environmental protection. The delegates also agreed that the ambitious SDG goals cannot be achieved without cost-effective, evidence-based strategies that ensure the strong inclusion of civil society, the private sector, academia, the news media, and other groups necessary for developing people-centered policies.

The 2017 World Health Assembly also selected Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as the



new Director General of WHO. He was nominated by the government of Ethiopia and will state his 5 year tenure since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017. At the assembly, he signed his contract of appointment up to 2022 and swore his oath.

Picture: [Newly elected Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#)

In his victory speech, Dr. Tedros<sup>5</sup> stated that these are challenging times for global health as only about half of the world's population has access to health care without impoverishment and Universal Health Coverage should be a central priority. Dr. Tedros said that he will exercise this legitimacy to bring the change and reform needed for WHO to reclaim its trust from member states and from every citizen of the world.

## Resolutions of 2017 WHA

During the 70th WHA, country delegations adopted a series of resolutions on the following subjects:<sup>6</sup>

✓ WHO's proposed programme budget of US\$4.4215 billion for the biennium, which includes a 3% (or US\$28 million) increase in assessed contributions for 2018-2019.
✓ Delegates reaffirmed the critical role played by the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework (PIP) as a specialized international instrument that facilitates expeditious access to influenza viruses of human pandemic potential, risk analysis and the expeditious, fair, and equitable sharing of vaccines and other benefits.
✓ A 5-year action plan under which WHO will collaborate with the International Labor Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in working with governments and key stakeholders to address the global health and social workforce shortfall and contribute to international efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development.
✓ A global action plan on the public health response to dementia (2017-2025), which aims to improve the lives of people with dementia, their families, and the people who care for them, while decreasing the impact of dementia on communities and countries.
✓ A resolution to strengthen the governance and leadership of national immunization programs and thus meet Global Vaccine Action Plan (GVAP) goals.
✓ Delegates asked the Director-General to provide advice to Member States on promoting the health of refugees and migrants, and to gather evidence that will contribute to a draft global action to be considered in 2019, during the 72nd World Health Assembly.
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✓ New terminology to establish a common understanding of what is meant by substandard and falsified medical products.
✓ Delegates agreed on the need to step up efforts to help Member States address the global drug problem.

<sup>5</sup> The Himalayan Times, Ethiopia's Tedros to be next leader of UN health agency

Link: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/world/ethiopia-tedros-adhanom-ghebreyesus-to-be-next-leader-of-united-nations-health-agency/>

<sup>6</sup> Pan American Health Organization, World Health Organization, The 70<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly Closes,

Link: <http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php>

✓ The Global Vector Control Response (GVCR) 2017-2030 was adopted, which aims to prevent epidemics of vector-borne diseases in all countries, reduce the incidence of these diseases by at least 60%, and cut mortality by at least 75% by 2030.
✓ An updated set of policy options and interventions to help countries meet global targets to prevent and control non-communicable diseases.
✓ A resolution calling on governments to integrate strategies for ear and hearing care within the framework of their primary health care systems.
✓ A plan to implement recommendations made by the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity. The recommendations aim to reverse the rising trend of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents.
✓ A new road map to enhance the health sector engagement in the sound management of chemicals.
✓ The delegates also paid tribute to ongoing efforts to end polio in the last three countries in which it is endemic: Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

## Major Highlights from the Past 10 Years

Below mentioned are some of the major highlights of WHA over the past decade:<sup>7</sup>

Year	Highlights
2016	The 69 <sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly took place 23-28 May 2016 where some important decisions were taken relating to the SDGs and on the new WHO framework on engagement with non-state actors. Also, the Delegates of the WHA had agreed resolutions and decisions on air pollution, chemicals, the health workforce, childhood obesity, violence, non-communicable diseases and the election of the next director general.
2015	The 68 <sup>th</sup> session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) took place in Geneva 18–26 May 2015. During the assembly the WHA agreed to the Global Malaria Strategy and Programme Budget for 2016-2017, polio, International Health Regulations, strengthening surgical care, WHO's reform of its emergency and response programme, antimicrobial resistance, immunization gaps, malnutrition, air pollution and epilepsy. Annual health awards were given by the Director-General of WHO and the President of WHA
2014	The 67 <sup>th</sup> WHA took place in Geneva on 19–24 May 2014. Over 20 resolutions were adopted by the Assembly including ones concerning strengthening of national drug management systems to address antimicrobial resistance; implementation of the Minamata Convention to protect human health and the environment from effects of exposure to mercury and mercury compounds; and improving access to essential medicines worldwide. Also endorsed was a global monitoring framework for maternal, infant and child nutrition.
2013	In the 66 <sup>th</sup> WHA the WHO Director General Margaret Chan announced the emergence of global action plans for non-communicable diseases, mental health and the prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairment calling for a life course approach which included 'equity through Universal Health Coverage.

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization, World Health Assembly 2017,

Link: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/governance/wha/en/>

2012	Among other actions, the 65 <sup>th</sup> Assembly endorsed the Rio Political Declaration to address the social determinants of health, intended to spearhead support for all countries to adopt inclusive 'Health For All' approaches to health promotion. It also endorsed the first World Immunization Week.
2011	The 64 <sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly opened in Geneva on May 16 <sup>th</sup> , where officials from 193 Member States did their annual review of the activities of WHO and set new priorities for the future. The Health Assembly also discussed specific health topics like child health, chronic diseases, malaria and maternal health, as well as the programme budget, administration and management matters of WHO.
2010	The 63 <sup>rd</sup> session of the World Health Assembly took place in Geneva during 17–21 May 2010. At this session, the Health Assembly discussed a number of public health issues, including: implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005); monitoring of the achievement of the health-related Millennium Development Goals; strategies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol; and counterfeit medical products.
2009	The 62 <sup>nd</sup> session of the World Health Assembly took place in Geneva during 18-22 May 2009 and the Health Assembly discussed on a number of public health issues, including: pandemic influenza preparedness: sharing of influenza viruses and access to vaccines and other benefits; implementation of the International Health Regulations; primary health care, including health system strengthening; social determinants of health; and monitoring the achievement of the health-related Millennium Development Goals.
2008	The 61 <sup>st</sup> session of the World Health Assembly took place in Geneva during 19-24 May 2008. Attended by a record 2704 participants from 190 countries, this session of the Health Assembly discussed a number of public health issues and adopted several resolutions. One of the key resolutions adopted by the 61 <sup>st</sup> World Health Assembly aimed at removing intellectual property barriers to essential research and development for public health. The resolution included a Global strategy on public health, innovation and intellectual property.
2007	The 60 <sup>th</sup> WHA endorsed the Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health, which aims to devise policy instruments on workers' health; protect and promote health at the workplace; improve the performance of and access to occupational health services; provide and communicate evidence for preventive action; and incorporate workers health into other policies. The Assembly also held lengthy discussions on public-health problems caused by the harmful use of alcohol. The Assembly adopted a resolution on emergency trauma care systems, which portrayed the attention of governments to the need to strengthen pre-hospital and emergency trauma care systems (including mass casualty management efforts).
2006	At the 59 <sup>th</sup> WHA, 22-27 May 2006, five resolutions were passed relating to areas of work of the cluster of Non-communicable Diseases and Mental health. These resolutions included nutrition and HIV/AIDS, WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Sickle-cell Anemia, Infant and young child nutrition and prevention of avoidable blindness and visual impairment.

## Media Coverage

It is almost surprising that 70<sup>th</sup> WHA received very little media attention. Very few media agencies covered the discussions and issues that were highlighted in the assembly. News published mostly were through the WHO, highlighting its key speeches and major resolutions. Despite these assemblies being open with many observers from all corners of

the world extending freely over the meeting hall and with no privacy over anything said or done in the assembly, media participation is substantially lacking.

Discussions and issues presented at the assembly can be vital for countries to progress towards their health agenda, but they go largely unreported. The expense of attending the WHA has several negative consequences for international health. Attending the WHA requires large amount of money and many media agencies from low and middle income countries lack funding and support in this regard. Hence, media from third world countries like Nepal have very limited opportunities to participate and cover stories that are presented in the World Health Assemblies.

Media agencies particularly from low and middle income countries like Nepal, for whom foreign travel is expensive are usually excluded from these assemblies and hence do not publish the news that are highlighted in these assemblies and these news may be crucial. Moreover, very few journalists have the sources to attend the WHA and due to this even important global health stories go unreported. Transparency, debate and accountability of countries are known to suffer because of this.

Broadcasting and publishing news on the WHA is an effective way of disseminating important information to policy makers, government and non-government agencies and other relevant stakeholders. If such international conferences are covered by the media, it can help to encourage initiatives and activities towards achieving the health agenda. Countries like Nepal should support the media and support them to attend such assemblies. Rather than taking a large group of people representing the same division/ministry, some spots must be created to engage the media in such annual assemblies.

## Nepal's Participation at the WHA

Speaking at the assembly<sup>8</sup>, Health Minister Gagan Thapa, acknowledged Dr. Chan for her 10 years of distinguished service and her contribution in improving global health and thanked WHO for the support Nepal received in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2015. He also congratulated and welcomed Dr. Tedros as the new Director General. Minister Thapa said, 'confronted with the emergence and re-emergence of many diseases and health challenged in our times, we have taken meaningful initiatives and international health partnerships and charting the course of global health diplomacy. **No longer is health an issue of single nation state and no longer is health confined to delivering health care only and if harnessed effectively through partnerships,**

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<sup>8</sup> YouTube, Gagan Thapa, Health Minister of Nepal address to the Seventieth World Health Assembly in Geneva  
Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDqdtqqDEsg>

**positive health outcomes can foster economic progress and promote peace and stability’.**

Minister Thapa however expressed his concern that things are yet to move beyond rhetoric and stated that the international cooperation must be dominated by donor relations and we have not as of yet been able to harness the true potential of partnerships and cooperation to face common health challenges. He said, **‘despite many past discourses on multi-sectoral actions and health in all policies, we have not been effective to inculcate the importance of health into the core business of other**



[Picture: Gagan Thapa, Speaking at the Seventieth World Health Assembly in Geneva](#)

**sectors’.** He also mentioned that WHO will have to play a crucial role to address the practical gaps and **needs to go beyond its customary role of facilitating health agenda to regional offices among ministries**

**of health and start constructive engagement to strengthen political will through forums like ASEAN, SAARC or African Union.** WHO can play a catalytic role to instill the idea among the political leaderships like finance ministries, foreign ministers, ministers of internal affairs that resources incurred in health are investments not expenses and that health ministries are not the sole custodian of the health sector.

Furthermore, he stated that in Nepal 67% of out of pocket expenditure on health is for drugs and medical commodities and many other countries are also confronting similar high costs on drugs and medical commodities. Health Minister added that this problem keeps straining our health systems and remains a major hindrance towards Universal Health Coverage. However, Minister stated that Nepal has not done enough to alleviate the cost of drugs and for developing countries, the disparity between the rich and the poor to cope with the burden of non-communicable diseases is now breeding a new form of health inequality. Hence, it is obligatory for us to strengthen primary health care by striking a right balance between investing in community based approached and facility based care and ensuring linkages between communities and health institutions.

Minister Gagan Thapa said that for countries like Nepal, meeting the health related goals and targets of Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, means fulfilling the pledge of leaving no one behind and together we must break down the barriers that prevent millions around the world to have equitable access to quality health care for which we must challenge our conventional thinking and customary ways of doing business and we must explore new avenues of partnerships and the WHO will have crucial role to play in this regard. He said that, it is high time for the movement to mainstream health in Global Development Agenda to tackle poverty and promote freedom and democracy.

## Positioning Nepal in the global health forums

Nepal has been participating in WHAs since many years and Nepal's commitment to improving health and wellbeing of its citizens as well as global citizenry has been well appreciated. However, mere participation may not always be enough to achieve desired goals. Assemblies like this are an opportunity to seek help and cooperation from the international level. We need to be able to highlight our positive stories, good initiatives, issues and challenges at the global level through such assemblies and international conferences like this. Furthermore, Nepal's preparation for such international assemblies is usually poor. We need to pre-assess out technical expertise through consultation with the experts of the related fields to make our participation more meaningful. We need to determine the resources at our disposal and our required expenditures in health in order to seek international support and cooperation.

Rigorous evidence generation processes are required before setting the national health agendas. Agenda setting should be given high priority and needs to be based on scientific evidence and facts rather than on assumptions and beliefs in order to make the most out of these health assemblies. We need to carefully prioritise our requirements based upon our resources and technical abilities. Merely, commitment is not enough and should be backed up by frequent follow ups and monitoring to see of the commitments are being fulfilled. We need to foresee the execution challenges before making commitments. We also require a strong institutional and policy mechanisms before undertaking any commitments. Moreover, Nepal needs to take the opportunity to seek alliances and create networks with countries of similar contexts through these annual assemblies. Such assemblies can serve as a foundation to improve the health infrastructure, international coordination and financial stability in Nepal.

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