



## **International Health Agencies: A study of WHO, UNICEF and UNDP**

### **Introduction**

The United Nations Organisations (UN hereafter) founded in the year 1945 has several specialized agencies. The work of the specialized agencies is multiple and extensive specifically covering issues concerning health, sports, education, environment, disaster management, livelihood, conflict transformation, world's peace, etc. The World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are among the key specialized agencies mainly working in the field of health and other associate themes. International health organizations work as an agency for health related issues. The functional nature of the health agencies are generally divided into three types: multilateral organizations, bilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

One of the primary themes that connects the interventions of WHO, UNICEF and UNDP are its commitment to themes of the UN Resolution (A/RES/67/296) which aims at establishing an umbilical link between health care issues and physical fitness from the early childhood. Such an idea of health and fitness has resulted in the deepening of the meaning of healthy life conditions and development. In order to raise awareness of this potential, 6<sup>th</sup> April has been declared as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (IDSDP) by the UN General Assembly. The adoption of this Day signifies the increasing recognition by the United Nations of the positive influence that sport can have on the advancement of human rights, and health, development and peace.

### **Types of Health Agencies**

The term multilateral means that funding comes from multiple governments as well as from non-governmental sources. The World Health Organization (WHO) is the premier multilateral international health organization as it is an internationally consented agency. The World Bank is an inter-governmental organisation. Bilateral agencies are governmental agencies in a single country which provide aid to developing countries. The largest of these is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Theoretically, most of these agencies are meant to be autonomous organizations which, by special agreements, work with the UN and each other through the coordinating

machinery of the Economic and Social Council. According to ECOSOC's constitution (1948), its principal goal is "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health."

### **Health Agencies and Their Multiple Initiatives**

The interventions of the health agencies are specific since they concentrate their activities on particular themes and issues. For example, WHO focuses on generating a global monitoring health mechanism while setting up norms and standards for international health system. UNICEF deals with children's education, welfare and development while UNDP focuses on health, education, sports and youth employment. In conjunction with WHO and the World Bank, UNICEF sponsors Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases. The activities of the health agencies such as WHO, UNICEF and UNDP can be discussed as below:

### **The World Health Organization**

The World Health Organization was established as a specialized agency of the UN in 1948. More than half of the UN members ratified the WHO when it came into existence officially on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1948 which is today celebrated as the World's Health Day. The founding charter of WHO is known for its high ambitions as it objectively declares for "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health," with health being very broadly defined as "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

With this objective in mind, WHO supervises and coordinates health initiatives around the world. WHO initiatives on health cover the eradication of smallpox, cholera, HIV and typhoid, etc. WHO adopts a holistic approach to health issues as it pays equal attention to an overall healthy environment through awareness to prevent chronic diseases, people friendly medical policy, proper sanitation, cleanliness, fighting drug abuse and addiction.

Structurally speaking WHO has multiple structures of health governance. The World Health Assembly meets once a year to approve the budget and decide on major matters of health policy. All the 190 or so member nations send delegations. The World Health Assembly elects 31 member nations to designate health experts for the Executive Board, which meets twice a year and serves as the liaison between the Assembly and the Secretariat, which carries on the day-to-day work of the WHO.

### **WHO and Sports**

Since 1984, the World Health Organization has been organising sporting events all over the world to encourage healthy lifestyle. WHO's commitment's to sporting events is associated with its fight against drug abuse, unhealthy lifestyle and tobacco use. WHO's vision also sees crucial link between sport, physical activities and health. Under the aegis of WHO significant programmes like the 2008 Action Plan on Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) and the 2004 Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (DPAS) have been developed and endorsed by the World Health Assembly. The documents have come to provide a primary guideline to providing healthy

childhood. Another interesting initiative in this regard is the WHO technical meeting in December 2009 on population based prevention strategies for childhood obesity. According to WHO estimates the prevalence of childhood obesity worldwide is increasing, with more than 22 million children globally now classified as overweight. In order to control the increasing obesity amongst the children WHO continues to sponsor sporting events in association with the governments.

WHO initiatives on sporting activities have the following objectives concerns;

- Policy awareness
- Children's health
- Active participation of UN members
- Prevent childhood obesity
- Research, documentation, intervention and monitoring
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### **The role of UNICEF**

The role of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the field of improving health has been no less significant. UNICEF, initially known as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, was established by the General Assembly in December 1946. The objective was to help the needy children particularly those who were affected by the World War II.

UNICEF was made a permanent UN organization in 1953. Monetarily supported by the donations of UN member states, it has helped providing food to children in more than 100 countries around the world. UNICEF takes up the monitoring responsibilities under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF spends the majority of its program resources on physical health and youth development. UNICEF dedicates its services to the protecting and supporting of the world's most vulnerable children, particularly those who come from poorer countries. Its primary focus is on the children under the age of five. For example, in 1994 UNICEF received about \$1 billion in contributions, all voluntary - 70% from governments and 30% from private sources. In 1994 UNICEF spent \$202 million on child health, \$81 million on water supply and sanitation, \$30 million on child nutrition, and \$216 million on emergency relief. UNICEF runs many of the child health programs in cooperation with WHO. One of the significant aspects of its interventions is in the field of sports and extra-curricular activities. UNICEF has tied up with internationally renowned sporting institutions to spread the message that good health is intrinsically rooted in sporting and its allied physical activities.

### **The role of UNDP**

The United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) are at present operational at least in 166 countries. UNDP is the UN's global development network, focusing on the challenges of good governance, poverty reduction, energy and environment, and HIV/AIDS, etc. UNDP also coordinates national and international efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals aimed at poverty reduction. UNDP is credited for regularly publishing the annual Human

Development Report which consists of an overall statistical report on the state of affairs in the world.

UNDP's work on rule of law, justice and security seeks to enhance physical and legal protection of people and communities, ensuring legal representation, access to justice and empowerment of communities and civil society. Consolidated programmes have been developed in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo (UN administered territory), Liberia, Nepal, the occupied Palestinian territory, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Sudan (North and South), etc.

UNDP also has a considerable rule of law, justice and security portfolio in development contexts. The Global Programme on *Accelerating Access to Justice for Human Development* was launched in 2009 to focus on strengthening and expanding UNDP's on-going engagement and contribution to rule of law and access to judicial services for poor and vulnerable in over 90 countries worldwide. The main focus has been on ensuring rights of people from a bottom-up paradigm. The objective is to increase people's legal protection, opportunities and choices so that they are empowered to defend themselves and improve their lives and economic sustainability.

## **UN and Sports**

Annually between 2003-2007 and bi-annually since 2008, UN Member States have unanimously adopted a series of resolutions all entitled "Sport as a means to promote education, health, development and peace", recognizing the potential of sport to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and noting the potential that sport has to contribute to the well-being of societies.

In 2005, Resolution 58/5 proclaimed 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education (IYSPE 2005). In 2008, Resolution 63/135 welcomed the integration of the Secretariat of the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG) into the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), under the leadership of the Special Adviser.

Aptly responding to the initiatives of UN, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also known as private voluntary organizations (PVOs), provide approximately 20% of all external health aid to developing countries. The largest NGO devoted to international health in the United States is Project Hope, with an annual budget exceeding \$100 million. Worldwide, the most important NGO in long-term international health is probably Oxfam, International. Founded in the United Kingdom in 1943, it now has affiliates in 10 other countries, including the United States. Recognizing the importance of sustaining momentum around the development potential of sport, UNOSDP performs the following duties:

- Holds conferences and issues reports
- Spread awareness about the benefit of sports

UNOSDP was instrumental in organising the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Beijing in 2008. UNOSDP also serves as the official secretariat for the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG), an inter-governmental policy initiative whose aim is to promote the integration of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) policy recommendations into the country and international development strategies of national governments.

## **Conclusion**

The role of UN health agencies is so enormous that it has to work in multiple ways in order to produce a holistic approach to global health policy engineering. Despite exemplary fund mobilisations and populism, health care issues remain a major handicap for many in Asia and Africa. Control over basic healthcare systems and life-saving medicines by the capitalist organisations have worsened the situation. Today, universal access to dignified health care is an uncommon reality for millions. The poor, women and children remain even more vulnerable to such a reality. The UN health agencies, therefore, will require addressing the realities at the ground. The connection between health and sports shall have to be articulated properly in terms of an effective policy in the long-run.

Let us remind ourselves what the UN Secretary General has to say about healthy development and sports. In the words of Ban Ki Moon "Sport has become a world language, a common denominator that breaks down all the walls, all the barriers. It is a worldwide industry whose practices can have widespread impact. Most of all, it is a powerful tool for progress and for development".