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Apr 05, 2018 by [Tara Ornstein](#)

Watching WHO: Public Diplomacy and the People's Health Movement ^[1]

Diplomacy expert Manuel Castells defined public diplomacy as “the projection in the international arena of the values and ideas of the public.”¹ Perhaps no other international entity embodies that definition better than the People’s Health Movement (PHM), a global network that brings together grassroots health activists, civil society organizations and academic institutions from more than 70 countries. The PHM was established with the signing of The People’s Charter for Health in 2000. The PHM does not have a rigid structure, but consists of country circles and regional coalitions. The membership of country circles, also called local chapters, ranges from informal groups of individuals to legal organizations. In contrast, there are 11 regional coalitions which independently coordinate themselves, and their work is shaped by the needs and context of their particular region. In addition to these geographic groupings, the PHM also has campaign circles, which are groups that focus on specific issues such as trade and health, gender health justice, fair and healthy work and extractive industries.

In their widely read article, “Civil Society Organizations, Global Health Governance and Public Diplomacy,” Sima Barmania and Graham Lister describe how the PHM has achieved great success, particularly in improving the World Health Organization’s position and its commitments. Public diplomacy expert R.S. Zaharna explains that this may be related to the PHM’s flexible and encompassing structure. “Networks that incorporate and use diversity as a source of synergy are able to create knowledge, solve problems, and innovate...Absorbing and integrating diversity is at the heart of collaboration, the network has gone beyond exposure, beyond addition, and actively seeking integration of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.”²

In a world characterized by steep inequality, the PHM’s public diplomacy brings the concerns faced by countries and groups with limited resources to the center of global health governance.

WHO Watch

The PHM uses a range of public diplomacy techniques to achieve its goals, but its “WHO Watch” has been particularly effective. According to PHM’s North America Co-Representative Leigh Haynes, WHO Watch is both an advocacy resource and a global health governance intervention. “It is a great example of how PHM connects local to global and provides a voice of civil society to the World Health Assembly,” she added.³

Throughout the year, the website for WHO Watch is updated with research, documents, commentary and other information that helps delegates, PHM members and the general public understand the issues to be discussed at the World Health Assembly and regional meetings such as the Pan American Health Organization Directing Council in the Americas. The website is particularly helpful for representatives from countries which have limited policy resources in their own MOHs.

Prior to the World Health Assembly held at WHO headquarters in Geneva every spring, PHM members work together to draft commentary and highlight priority issues. During the assembly, the PHM delegates will make official statements from the floor and meet with country delegates about the priority issues. After the assembly, PHM will distribute a report of its findings and post-Assembly commentary.

Through WHO Watch, the PHM also participates in WHO governance meetings in Geneva, regional committee meetings and special events convened at other times of the year. According to Ms. Haynes, the purpose of maintaining a strong presence at WHO meetings is to democratize the global health decision-making process generally and not just at the assembly.³

The PHM is also calling for additional services to be provided to populations vulnerable to TB, such as prisoners, miners and undocumented migrants.

Training the Future

The PHM also provides training to young activists who attend a workshop conducted in January and May. PHM's training includes an orientation that explains the global health governance landscape and WHO's standing in this crowded field. The training enables the participants to explore the agenda items in depth and develop their analytical and advocacy skills. During the meeting, the activists document the discussions, produce daily analyses, make statements from the floor and liaise with both non-governmental organizations and official delegates from WHO member states.

Impact on TB Control

For the past decade and half, the global health community has been working to meet the Millennium Development Goals. In May 2014, the delegates at the 67th World Health Assembly approved the Global Strategy and Targets for Tuberculosis, Care, and Control after 2015, which has four main principles: government stewardship and accountability; strong coalition with civil society organizations and community; protection and promotion of human rights, ethics, and equity; adaptation of the strategy and targets at country level with global collaboration. The pillars and components of the Post-2015 Strategy reflect many of the points for which PHM has advocated. However, much more still needs to be done. Through its report, "Global Health Watch , and public diplomacy efforts, PHM is calling for the focus on TB control to be expanded from the 22 high burden countries to countries that have a high incidence rate. The PHM is also calling for additional services to be provided to populations vulnerable to TB, such as prisoners, miners and undocumented migrants.

PHM: An Example of New Public Diplomacy

In a world characterized by steep inequality, the PHM's public diplomacy brings the concerns faced by countries and groups with limited resources to the center of global health governance. The PHM plays a crucial role in WHO proceedings by ensuring that all delegates have the information they need to participate and holding the decision-makers accountable. The PHM arguably remains the foremost example of network-implemented success in global health. To learn more about the PHM's activities, please see their website.

References:

¹ Castells, Manuel. "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616, *Public Diplomacy in a Changing World* (2008): 78-93.

² R.S. Zaharna. "Network Purpose, Network Design: Dimensions of Network and Collaborative Public Diplomacy" in *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy* (Routledge, New York, 2013): 184.

³ Tara Ornstein's interview with Leigh Haynes (30 July 2014).

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