



# Global Health Diplomacy: A Strategic Opportunity for Egypt



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## Introduction

Science diplomacy is a driver of scientific and technological excellence, a key for tackling global challenges and a powerful tool for improving relations across countries, regions and cultures. It is one of the best sources of soft power & an important instrument in today's increasingly complex world.

## Global Health Diplomacy

Global Health Diplomacy (GHD) brings together the disciplines of public health, international affairs, management, law and economics and focuses on negotiations that shape and manage the global policy environment for health. The relationship between health, foreign policy and trade is at the cutting edge of global health diplomacy. (WHO, 2019)

The goals of this unit are:

- To support the development of a more systematic and proactive approach to identify and understand key current and future changes impacting global public health
- To build capacity among Member States to support the necessary collective action to take advantage of opportunities and mitigate the risks for health

The strategic relevance of health has changed, as health has become an integral part of economic, geopolitical, security, and social justice agendas, including human rights and domestic-foreign policy, among other emerging agendas. Policies in the areas outside of the health sector, such as trade and economic

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development, now need to be complemented by those in the areas of environment and health. There is an increasing recognition of health as a goal of foreign policy and as a key contributor to development, peace, poverty reduction, social justice and human rights. (EMRO, 2019)

## **Role of Diplomacy in Health**

The role of diplomacy in health is vital. An increasing number of health challenges can no longer be resolved at the technical level only – they require political negotiations and solutions, and often need to involve a wide range of actors.

Global health diplomacy focuses on those health issues that need the cooperation of many countries to address issues of common concern, but health diplomacy can also play a central role at the regional, bilateral and national level.

Health diplomacy refers to the negotiation processes that shape and manage the policy environment for health. It is conducted in many venues, some of which are focused on health negotiations during the annual meeting of the World Health Assembly, and some of which have a broader agenda, such as the United Nations General Assembly or the Human Rights Council (EMRO, 2014)

Strengthening health diplomacy will depend on strong leadership and political commitment that positions health higher on both the political agenda and the development agenda. This can include the role of heads of government in taking health issues forward, helping set the agenda and strategic goals, and making political space and resources available. (EURO, 2015)

Health diplomacy contributes to relationship building. It can help overcome obstacles and be a cross-cutting catalyst for many initiatives. It can help develop community trust, create and coordinate response, improve access and create an atmosphere for engagement while ensuring harmony with regional cultures.

Health diplomacy can raise awareness that health is not just a national issue but has many global and trans-boundary dimensions and can significantly contribute to global public goods and

people's welfare all around the world. It responds to the fact that many of the health challenges of the 21st century will require solutions that will be political rather than technical.

Health diplomacy is important for the countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region because many of the development issues they face relate directly to health and because it is disproportionately affected by manmade and humanitarian crises. It is gaining in relevance as the Region has to find solutions to issues that require global action and collaboration across borders, such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), humanitarian health relief, non-communicable diseases and antimicrobial resistance. But experience also shows that health diplomacy at the national and regional level is critical for the implementation of health programs through complex partnerships. For example, polio eradication in the region is dependent on successful negotiations with many players whose trust has to be gained, in order to strengthen control programs and create a safe and secure environment for vaccination campaigns. (EMRO, 2019)

## **Health Diplomacy in Egypt**

As a developing country with vast human resources and a rapidly-growing economy, reforming Egypt's health care sector is a top priority for the national social development agenda.

This sector had not been overlooked, even before the Egyptian revolution took place in early 2011, there was a concrete governmental vision for a healthcare system in 2025. Today, the current political situation confronting Egypt as it weaves its new future poses numerous challenges on many fronts, most important of which is mobilizing more economic resources for developing our human assets. Therefore, it is only natural that such a vision for health enhancement will gain more traction and becomes a paramount pillar guiding the process of the needed health care reform to build upon achieved past successes while working to address upcoming challenges. (The Centre for Global Health and Diplomacy, 2018)

Work streams demonstrated the defined dimensions of the Egyptian health reform program, the most crucial of which include providing high quality care through financially-sustainable health insurance, spreading the coverage of primary care services, enhancing family planning services at a national level, institutionalizing and strengthening consumer protection, in addition to encouraging public-private partnerships.

Overall, Egypt's health indicators have improved significantly since 1960, with a health profile that is increasingly similar to developed countries. This continuous improvement in all aspects of public health in Egypt has indeed been internationally recognized, however, still concurrent with these successes, the spread of non-communicable diseases remains prevalent, most notably cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and chronic respiratory diseases. (World Bank, 2018)

In response, Egypt has embraced the WHO Strategy and Action Plan to control and prevent these illnesses. Several initiatives were, in fact, launched in this regard at no cost to all Egyptians, including--but not limited to--the Children's Cancer Hospital "57357", the National Breast Cancer Screening Program, the National Hepatitis Campaign, and the National School Feeding Program. This, while also running multiple campaigns to promote increased awareness of these common diseases that have inflicted Egyptian society. (The Center for Global Health and Diplomacy, 2018)

## HCV in Egypt

Egypt has one of the highest global burdens of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections; it is estimated that prevalence of HCV is around 4.5% to 6.7%. Over the past few years, remarkable developments in the global commitment to address viral hepatitis have been witnessed. In May 2016, 194 countries of the World Health Assembly unanimously adopted the first-ever Global Health Sector Strategy on viral hepatitis, 2016–2021. Through these high-level strategies, countries made a commitment to eliminate viral

hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. (Asmaa G et al, 2017)

Egypt had recognized the enormous health, social and economic burden of hepatitis infection, which was the driver to establish national response to fight the disease. It has become clearer that the root causes, as well as catalysts of transmission of HCV and hepatitis B (HBV), are strongly associated with healthcare-related malpractices. There was an ever-growing need to establish a comprehensive Infection Prevention and Control program in the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP). Such a program was successfully launched in 2001 and has succeeded in improving adherence to infection prevention and control practices and developing the national infection control guidelines. This was followed by the establishment of the Egyptian National Committee for Control of Viral Hepatitis (NCCVH) in 2006, which started to treat patients using interferon regimen. (Akel W et al, 2017)

By October 2014, and through successful model of health diplomacy and negotiations, the NCCVH introduced the first approved highly effective direct antiviral agent (DAAs) for nationwide treatment of HCV infection at 1% of its international price at that time; this medication has been shown to cure over 90% of those receiving such treatment. Subsequently, the MoHP introduced other approved DAAs consecutively during 2015 and 2016, in addition to encouraging the local manufacturers to produce highly effective generic medicines to effectively implement the elimination program in the shortest possible time. (MOHP, 2016)

In 2014, the MoHP in Egypt launched the "Plan of Action for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis", which focuses on seven main components for viral hepatitis prevention and control, namely surveillance, infection prevention and control, blood safety, hepatitis B vaccination, care and treatment, communication, and research. (Omneya et al, 2018)

This large national program to treat patients with HCV infection was found to be feasible and manageable. Scaling up of the treatment program was possible with the availability of

more medications, with greater affordability through allocating more resources and decreasing costs, along with the decision to treat all stages of fibrosis and removing the requirement of a strict fibrosis assessment. (Seida et al, 2018)

In 2016, the World Health Assembly approved the first global health sector strategy on viral hepatitis; a strategy that contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Egypt is working towards achieving elimination, as a pioneering country, through real political leadership, commitment from MoHP to accomplish this task in collaboration with all other stakeholders; and presence of coordinated health civil society organizations working hand in hand with health authorities to identify cases from different geographical areas, and there are ongoing activities to implement the needed strategic directions to achieve global targets, such as eliminating hepatitis by 2023. (MOPMAR, 2016)

Hence, despite the high prevalence of hepatitis as an old and long-standing disease in Egypt, the resultant health workforce is well trained to manage such illnesses, utilizing those skilled healthcare workers dealing with liver diseases for decades and building upon their capacities. Egypt has an ambitious goal of eliminating hepatitis; this

goal is guided by a clear political vision from the Egyptian president. (Elzanaty et al, 2015)

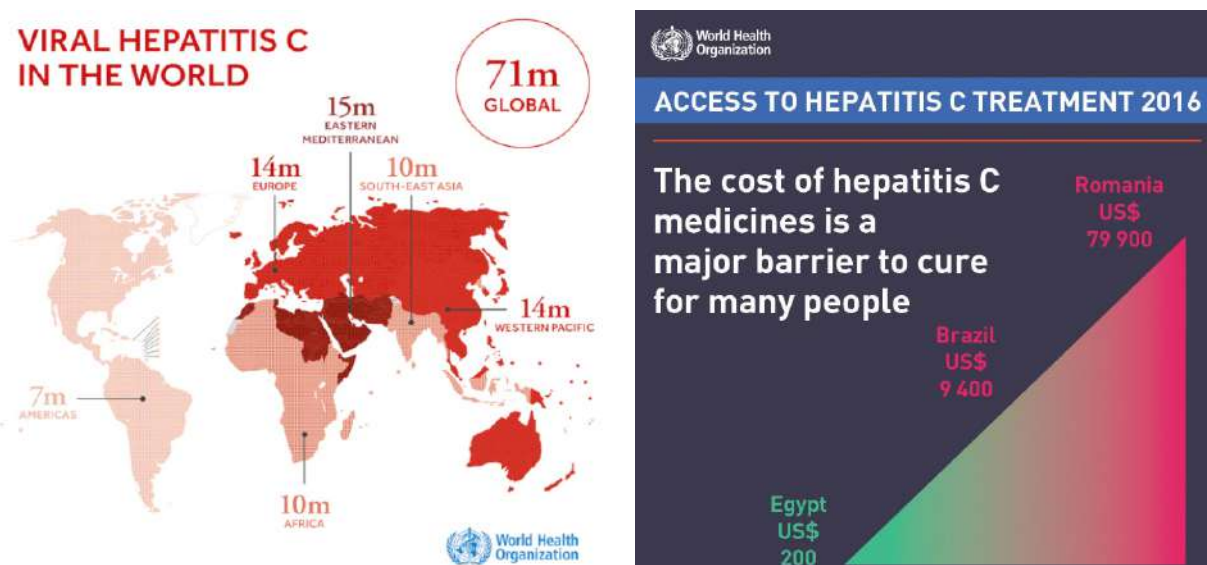
In October 2018, Egypt started a major screening in the worldwide for HCV and the non-communicable diseases (Hypertension, Diabetes and Obesity). The aim is to screen 45 million citizens in one year, respecting the WHO core testing principles of providing consent, confidentiality, counseling, correct results and connection to treatment for all people who will be discovered positive. (Doss et al, 2018)

Meanwhile, international partners such as the World Health Organization (WHO), USAID, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Bank are working closely with the Government of Egypt to technically and financially support the optimistic goal of eliminating HCV. Building national capacities in managing huge data influx is very crucial to achieve such a target.

### Potential for Strategic Health Diplomacy:

The point of weakness can be turned into a point of strength. The successful model of Egypt in treatment of HCV can be a wide door for health diplomacy between Egypt and other countries and even international organizations.

**Figure 1: Worldwide HCV prevalence rate, and the cost of treatment in Egypt compared to other countries**



Source: WHO, 2016



The prevalence of hepatitis is growing, but eliminating this global scourge is achievable. Doing so by 2030 would prevent nearly 36 million infections and 10 million deaths. However, the cost of vaccines, treatment, diagnostics, education, and coordination currently stand in the way of epidemic control. (Gower et al, 2014)

Egypt could make benefits from its successful initiative in treatment of HCV with this large-scale experience and also the low price of the medications when compared to other countries. This can be achieved by health diplomacy through strengthening bilateral with other countries, especially which cannot afford the high prices of the treatment. Also making strong relations with the international organizations as WHO will be helpful in this mandate. Besides, joint manufacturing may also consider a way of collaboration with the advanced countries in these fields to enhance the national industry.

## Conclusion

Health diplomacy is very important in raising awareness that health is not just a national issue but has many global and trans-boundary dimensions. It responds to the fact that many of the health challenges of the twenty-one century will require solutions that will be political besides being technical. Egypt, as a developing country with vast human resources and a rapidly-growing economy, reforming health care sector is a top priority for the national social development agenda. Besides, Egypt has embraced the WHO Strategy and Action Plan to control and prevent the spread of non-communicable diseases.

Hence, Egypt has a very challenging opportunities concerning health diplomacy, by taking advantages in its successful initiatives in treatment of HCV, breast cancer, children cancers and non-communicable diseases through its specialized centers and low pricing of medications worldwide. Egypt can achieve a lot through using health diplomacy. Strengthening bilateral with other countries, especially which cannot afford the high prices of the treatment. Also making a strong relation with the international organizations as

WHO will be helpful in this mandate. Besides, joint manufacturing may also consider a way of collaboration with the advanced countries in these fields to enhance the national industry.

Finally, Global Health Diplomacy can be considered a strategic opportunity for Egypt to make a great advancement and improvement in terms of science diplomacy and can help it to empower and strengthen its bilateral and international relations with other countries and international organizations.

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