



View Point

BRICS Health Ministers' Meeting: A Welcome Development

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The first BRICS Health Ministers' Meeting was held in Beijing on 11 July 2011. Health Ministers from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa discussed their positions on issues of common interest, identified areas of cooperation and collaboration in the field of public health and came up with an important declaration. The Health Ministers' meeting comes after leaders of the five countries held the BRICS Summit Meeting in Sanya, Hainan, China on 14 April 2011 and declared their firm commitment to strengthen dialogue and cooperation in the fields of social protection, gender equity, youth, and public health, including the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Health Ministers' Meeting was described as 'historical and timely' by Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) who participated in the meeting.

The importance of the BRICS group of countries cannot be over emphasized in terms of an emerging force in global affairs backed by their massive share of global population and economic development. The group accounts for more than 40 percent of the world population, 18 percent of global trade and 45 percent of current economic growth and thus it deserves to be a strong voice in the global political economy.

The Beijing Declaration noted that the BRICS nations face a number of similar public health challenges, including inequitable access to health services and medicines, growing health-care costs, infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB) and growing rates of non-communicable diseases. Also, the major

challenge facing BRICS countries is how to provide health care to millions of people, in particular among the most vulnerable sections of the society.

Significantly, the BRICS group of countries agreed to stand together to oppose any attempt by developed countries to tighten Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) measures which will pose barrier to access to affordable generic drugs as an alternative to expansive brand name medicine for people in developing countries. Michel Sidibé, Executive Director, UNAIDS (a Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) rightly commented: “The five BRICS countries are bringing a new voice, a new perspective and new solutions to today’s global challenges,...It is a voice with incredible economic, technological and innovative strength behind it and, at the same time, a voice intimately connected to the needs and interests of the developing world.”

It is noteworthy that India’s role in making quality, safe and effective drugs more accessible and affordable globally was praised by Health Ministers of BRICS as well as representatives of WHO and UNAIDS. In her address, Dr. Margaret Chan, DG, WHO emphasized India’s contribution and explained that when African countries wanted a new conjugate vaccine at a cost of not more than 50 cents a dose, it was the Serum Institute of India which came forward and did the job at virtually no cost. All the major manufacturers of the world were approached by WHO but could not meet the cost criteria, which was critical for the African countries. The supply of such vaccines by India has saved hundreds and thousands of lives in low and middle income African countries. India's pharmaceutical industry is the third largest in the world in terms of volume which is 10 percent of global share. However, it ranks 14th largest in the world in terms of value. The main reason for lower value share is low cost of drugs in India compared to developed countries.

Pharmaceutical sector is knowledge driven, where frontiers of knowledge are advancing rapidly, thus, Research and Development (R&D) in this sector becomes a must. The Beijing Declaration was right to acknowledge “the need to establish priorities in R&D as well as cooperation among BRICS countries, including between stakeholders from the public and private sector, in order to support the transfer of technologies and innovation in a sustainable way”. The Sanya Declaration of April 2011 had made a commitment to engage in joint research on economic and trade issues. A study of R&D in BRICS countries incorporating case studies of

pharmaceutical could be research of immense importance. While Institutes like Central Drug Research Institute (CDRI), Lucknow, Indian Institute of Chemical Biology (IICB), Kolkata, Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT), Hyderabad have played key role in drug discovery research and process technology, pharmaceutical companies like Ranbaxy, Dr Reddy Laboratories, Cipla and others have played an important role in making India a trusted global player in the field of drugs and pharmaceuticals.

Notably, basic health indicators of BRICS countries (Table) suggest that there is a great scope for learning from others' past successes. Average global life expectancy at birth is 68 years, while it is 83 for Japan and 79 for USA. India and South Africa could study experiences of China, Brazil and Russia to understand reasons and learn lessons for better performance in the area of basic health as reflected in the data related to life expectancy, infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate. This brings the broader question of political economy of public health in emerging economies like BRICS which needs to be studied for policy implications.

BRICS: Select Health Indicators:

Country	Life expectancy at birth (Year 2009)	Infant mortality rate (0-1yrs) per 1000 (Year 2009)	Maternal mortality rate per 100000 (Year 2008)
Brazil	73	17	58
Russian Federation	68	11	39
India	65	50	230
China	74	17	38
South Africa	54	43	410

Compiled from WHO statistics

Significantly, the Beijing Declaration committed to “continue to collaborate in order to advance access to public health services and goods in our own countries and deliver more cost-effective, equitable and sustainable solutions for common health challenges...also committed to support other countries in their efforts to promote health for all”. Further, the health ministers agreed to establish a technical working group to discuss specific proposals, including the idea of setting up a BRICS network of technological cooperation. This is certainly a welcome initiative aimed at the needs and interests of BRICS group of emerging countries as well as the developing world.

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