

Global Civil Society Conference on Health concludes with a Joint Declaration on how to shape Universal Health Coverage to achieve the Right to Health

Dakar, Senegal: 21st February 2014

- ***“Civil society has a key role to play as a watchdog in the development of our country’s health system,”*** Mme Awa Marie Coll Seck, Minister of Health and Social action of Senegal.
- ***“Who drives the agenda for universal health coverage? Is it governments? Is it civil society?”*** Rukia Cornelius, World AIDS Campaign, South Africa.

The Minister of Health and Social Action of Senegal opened a three-day civil society organisation (CSO) conference on universal health coverage (UHC) in Dakar, which concluded yesterday with a joint declaration on how to shape UHC to achieve the right to health.

Representatives of civil society from 23 countries – from El Salvador to Zimbabwe –shared experiences, and discussed the efforts required to address the global health challenges of implementing UHC at the country level.

“We are proud to have brought together civil society from across the health sector to unite in discussing the implementation of UHC in different national contexts,” said Guy Aho Tete Benissan, Regional Coordinator of REPAOC, Senegal. “But we must go beyond the health sector.”

“A multi-sectoral approach, and adequate and sustainable funding is essential to making UHC a reality,” the Minister of Health and Social Action declared in her opening speech, as she urged all stakeholders – including CSOs – to work together to implement UHC.

The conference, convened by Action for Global Health in partnership with the Network of West African NGO Platforms, REPAOC, presented an opportunity for CSOs from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe to discuss the future of health from a grassroots level – and from diverse perspectives.

Civil society agreed that there are three critical elements that are essential in achieving the right to health and tackling inequities within health systems: the full participation of communities, political will, and addressing the social determinants of health.

‘Health happens in the community. Not in a health facility,’ said Margarita Posada, Foro Nacional de Salud, El Salvador, who stressed that UHC must consider the social determinants of health.

Participants agreed that the full funding of UHC is feasible and that the necessary resources are not beyond the capacity of nations. But there is an urgent need for political will and global solidarity to prioritise the health of citizens – especially with regard to the most vulnerable and excluded.

“UHC can never succeed without will and political commitment,” said Joan Awunyo-Akaba, Ghana Platform of Health NGOs. “At the same time we need to strengthen civil society to better understand UHC – and empower them to defend their right to health.”

The discussions highlighted the crucial role of UHC in realizing the right to health, while recognising that it is not an end in itself. Indeed, it is essential to have an ‘enabling environment’ – politically, socially and legally – as well a more integrated approach between the different sectors contributing to the right to health, such as food security, clean water and sanitation, education, and peace and security.

The meeting concluded with the recognition that governments and civil society must work together to ensure that UHC addresses inequalities within health systems by guaranteeing services to those who are currently marginalized and excluded.

"People do not access healthcare because of their sexual orientation, disability, or because they use drugs... Civil society needs to advance the right to health. Because it is a right," concludes Massogui Thiandoum, ANCS, Senegal.

REPAOC and Action for Global Health have announced their intention to mobilize global alliances to speak with one voice to amplify the call for the right to health. For their part, national participants committed to share the outcomes of the meeting, and to use the statement as an advocacy tool, through their national and regional platforms.

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Action for Global Health (AFGH) is a broad European network of 15 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocating in Brussels, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Spain and UK towards the right to health for all and the health Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The goal of AFGH is increased support from European decision-makers of full funding of health, of strengthening health systems and ensuring fair access to healthcare, accountable and responsive to the needs of vulnerable and poor people. www.actionforglobalhealth.eu @AFGHnetwork

Le REPAOC est constitué de 10 plates-formes d'ONG d'Afrique de l'Ouest. Il regroupe au total plus de 800 ONG locales, nationales et internationales agissant quotidiennement sur le terrain auprès des populations les plus marginalisées. Le REPAOC entend œuvrer collectivement à lutter contre la pauvreté et à promouvoir les droits de l'Homme au niveau régional et international dans un contexte d'accroissement des inégalités Nord-Sud mais également Sud-Sud. www.repaoc.org.