Engaging the Community and Civil Society in Ensuring International Health Regulations Reflections for Action During COVID-19 Response

N.W.A.N.Y. Wijesekara *

* Correspondence: novil.wijesekara@gmail.com   https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8218-500X

Abstract

The International Health Regulations (IHR) are a set of legal instruments to make sure that the countries are ready, and committed to detect, assess, notify, report and respond to Public Health events of International Concern (PHEIC) such as COVID-19 outbreak. They are largely focused on the efforts by the states or governments in ensuring the health security of the citizens. However, as evident from the current COVID-19 outbreak, stakeholders beyond the government are needed in the response to such events of unprecedented nature. It is recommended to engage the community and the civil society at all stages of IHR implementation so that their engagement could be more meaningful during the times of crisis.

Keywords: *International Health Regulations, COVID-19, Public Health Emergency of International Concern, PHEIC, Community engagement, Civil society engagement*

The usefulness of the International Health Regulations (IHR) which are a set of legal instruments to make sure that the countries are ready, and committed to detect, assess, notify, report and respond to Public Health events of International Concern (PHEIC) such as Covid-19 outbreak has clearly been demonstrated. While the commitment of government and their stakeholders in implementation and progress in the field of IHR is essential, it is also important that the community and civil society are actively engaged in the IHR monitoring and implementation. During the Covid-19 response, it has been found that the response of the community as well as the civil society too has been tremendous, not only in curtailing the outbreak, but also to ensure the functioning of the society through out the drastic health interventions that needed to be implemented at community level.

However, at present, there is weak, or no mechanisms to obtain the views and participation of the community and civil society in an organized and sustained manner for the monitoring of IHR at different country level. Even though the countries have the liberty to portray the community perceptions on IHR monitoring mechanisms such as the Self-Assessment Annual Reporting Tool (or SPAR), Joint External Evaluations (JEE) and Simulation Exercises, it is likely that the community and civil society role could be masked and be made secondary during such government-lead initiatives. Hence, it is essential that the a systematic and organized voluntary mechanism to be established to assess and build the community and civil society capacity towards IHR implementation. Community and Civil Society Engagement in independent review of cross-cutting issues such as human rights, HIV/AIDS, climate change and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been well-established, common, meaningful and fruitful (Canales 2013; European Economic and Social Committee 2018; OHCHR 2020; Smith et al. 2017).

It is essential that a Community and Civil Society Self- Assessment Annual Reporting (CCSAR) on IHR tool and a mechanism is established at each country as well as subnational level, regional and global level. All civil society organizations networks and consortia, including those already active in different sectors such as health, environment, resilience building, disaster response and community empowerment must be consulted and engaged in obtaining their perspectives on the status of

implementation of IHR. These CCSAR consultations could be compiled as advocacy reports and must be submitted to the government counterparts so that they could take remedial actions based on the points highlighted. The format of the CCSAR tool can mirror the SPAR or JEE tool, it should focus on community and civil society aspects of each domain.

The governments, donors and technical agencies, especially the World Health Organization must facilitate and support the establishment, implementation and monitoring of CCSAR at national, sub-national, regional and international level. In addition, the need to build the capacity of the community and civil society in the respective fields which will contribute towards the implementation of IHR cannot be overemphasized. It is important that a community and civil society movement must be established towards ensuring

government accountability towards adherence to IHR at all levels.

References

Canales, Nella. 2013. "Civil Society and the Integration of Climate Change Risks into Planning and Policy-Making." *World Resources Institute*. Retrieved July 16, 2020 (https://www.wri.org/our-work/project/world-resources-report/civil-society-and-integration-climate-change-risks-planning).

European Economic, and Social Committee. 2018. "Civil Society Indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals." *European Economic and Social Committee*. Retrieved July 16, 2020 (https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/civil-society-indicators-sustainable-development-goals).

OHCHR. 2020. "Civil Society: UN Human Rights Resources for NGOs, Human Rights Defenders, and Other Actors in Civic Space." Retrieved July 16, 2020 (https://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/CivilSociety.aspx).

Smith, Julia, Christoforos Mallouris, Kelley Lee, and Tobias Alfven. 2017. "The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Monitoring the Global AIDS Response." *AIDS and Behavior* 21(Suppl 1):44–50.