

Minutes – ‘Lessons from the Pandemic’

Tuesday 25th April 2023, 09:00-10:15, Attlee Suite (Portcullis House)

Number of attendees: ~73

1. Introduction

Dr Philippa Whitford MP (PW) began the World Immunisation Week event by addressing the importance of learning lessons from previous pandemics and other global health events, and went on to introduce the speakers on the panel.

She then ceded the floor to Dr Diana Atwine (DA), the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uganda.

2. Keynote speech by DA

DA began by addressing the increasing likelihood of pandemics due to climate change. She described the world as a “global village” and acknowledged the indiscriminate nature of pandemics. In light of this, she stressed how it is now more important than ever for governments around the world to be working together.

Following this, DA discussed the need for vaccine research and development (R&D) to be country-led, especially in the developing world. On the topic of in-country research partnerships, DA emphasised the objection to external researchers taking samples and data away from low- and middle-income countries rather than helping these countries to develop their own clinical, laboratory, research, and manufacturing infrastructures.

She then noted that routine immunisation services in Uganda were not impacted by Covid-19 to the same extent as harder-hit countries due to Uganda’s community-based approach to health service delivery, such as village task forces. Rather, she stated that Covid-19 meant that the Ugandan government could build up capacity in hospitals and opened up financing opportunities for building new and improved infrastructure in the country.

After DA's speech, the audience heard from Claire Moran (CM), the Head of Health Institutions and the Health Security Department at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

3. Keynote speech by CM

CM began by emphasising on the UK's long-standing commitment to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. She added that the FCDO is interested in looking at the current architecture around pandemic preparedness and exploring how it can be strengthened, noting that equality of voice is key to this.

She agreed with DA that we should look into having a more diversified vaccine manufacturing base, and mentioned the importance of financing for R&D tools and looking at a range of countermeasures beyond vaccines, making reference to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI).

CM ended by saying that she looks forward to the World Health Organization's Pandemic Accord and the opportunities it may present.

After CM's speech, the audience heard from Dr Seth Berkley (SB), Chief Executive Officer of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

4. Keynote speech by SB

SB began by discussing the importance of building resilient health systems, emphasising that it is not just about vaccines, but ensuring that the necessary infrastructure (including people) are there to deliver them.

Following this, he stated that the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated what long-term investment can do, mentioning also the success and effectiveness of the HPV vaccine.

SB then went on to note that the world needs to have a different mindset on vaccine wastage, reframing vaccine production not as producing waste but as a good insurance for the world.

He also noted Uganda's extraordinary success regarding routine immunisation delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic, and mentioned that Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance worked closely with the Ugandan government during this time.

Following this, SB discussed ‘zero-dose’ people, sharing that $\frac{2}{3}$ of zero-dose people live below the poverty line and that we must therefore start thinking about a systems approach to immunisation, and not just about vaccines.

He mentioned that Uganda has put emphasis on community intervention and integrated all health services at a community level, which he expressed has been very effective for the country, presents excellent value for money, and prevents donor fatigue.

After SB’s speech, PW opened the floor up for a Q&A session.

5. Q&A

Questions were asked by the audience and answered by the panel, including around the themes of: funding, promoting, and rewarding collaborative research; the importance of trade infrastructure in pandemic preparedness and ensuring frictionless movement of goods; the politicisation of vaccines; and sustaining political will on PPPR (pandemic prevention, preparedness and response).

6. Final remarks

SB stressed that, while we are currently living in a “renaissance of vaccines”, the main challenge now is how fast we can get them through production.

CM mentioned a flagship speech that Andrew Mitchell MP delivered that week on the department merger and making it work for development priorities.

DA emphasised on the need for equity and collaboration in every dialogue concerning global health, and urged for conversations to turn into action.

PW thanked all attendees for joining and contributing to the discussion.

Event ended.