

1. Ebola: deadly pathogens exploit our vulnerabilities to health security

The unparalleled Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa was a grim reminder that the world is ill-prepared to respond to any severe, sustained and threatening public health emergency. Given the interconnected and interdependent nature of 21st century societies, the entire world is put at risk when a deadly and dreaded virus strikes a country with a weak health system that is unable to cope.

The Ebola response was highly complex. It required large-scale continuous efforts by national governments, with the cooperation of both health and non-health sectors. At the international level, it triggered a massive multi-agency, multi-country response that mobilized thousands of international experts.

Ebola highlighted the importance of community engagement in public health. Cultural traditions in West Africa that include close contact with corpses, which can be highly infectious, helped the virus spread. Ebola taught us that community engagement and cooperation are vital to ensure local populations are fully committed to the response to public health emergencies.

Ebola changed the health security landscape. Various global and regional initiatives have been put in place to provide opportunities to advance health security, including the IHR Review Committee recommendations and the post-2016 IHR monitoring and evaluation framework,



Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, Director General of Health Malaysia, presented the views of Western Pacific Member States on health emergencies at the Health Assembly in Geneva, in May 2016.

including the Joint External Evaluation Tool.

Within WHO, Ebola prompted major reform of the Organization's emergency work. A new Health Emergencies Programme was established to oversee and implement WHO's work in emergency risk management. The programme design was reviewed and endorsed during the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly in May 2016.

Ebola virus infected more than 28 000 people, leaving 11 000 dead. But more than the number of cases and deaths, Ebola drives home a clear message – there is a great need to invest in health security in between emergencies in order to withstand future shocks, whether they come from runaway viruses, natural hazards or unknown threats. Such preparedness efforts entail coordination and a commitment to work together. ■