

WHO reform

World health days

Report by the Director-General

INTRODUCTION

1. At its 146th session in February 2020, the Executive Board noted an earlier version of this report,^{1,2} in which the Secretariat proposed to undertake a review of world health days, weeks, years or decades, including through consultations with Member States, and to submit the study on assessing the added value of, and guidance for, world health days to the Board at its 148th session in January 2021.
2. During the discussions at its 146th session, however, the Board requested the Secretariat to accelerate this process and present its findings to the Seventy-third World Health Assembly.² This updated version of the report includes the key findings of an internal review conducted by the Secretariat in March 2020 and provides additional guidance to the Health Assembly.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

3. In the light of the recent proliferation of world and regional health days, weeks, months, years and decades (hereafter referred to as observances), and in response to the request of the Board at its 146th session, the Secretariat conducted an internal review of the observances it marks. During this process, the Secretariat:
 - (a) reviewed information on existing world and regional observances, including their dates of establishment and founding organizations, and considered the Secretariat's role and engagement, including the advocacy and communications approaches applied by the Secretariat;
 - (b) reviewed relevant mandates arising from resolutions or decisions adopted by the Health Assembly, WHO regional committees and the United Nations General Assembly;
 - (c) considered whether the observances play a useful role in driving programmatic (technical), policy and Member State actions to attain global and regional goals; and

¹ Document EB146/36.

² See the summary records of the Executive Board at its 146th session, fourteenth meeting, section 5, and fifteenth meeting, section 2.

(d) reviewed the main challenges preventing stronger engagement of the Secretariat in some of these observances, as well as the financial and human resources needed to plan, conduct and measure the impact of campaigns related to observances.

4. The Secretariat has also generated significant knowledge on designing “decades of action” and building broad-based coalitions of Member States, entities of the United Nations system and other stakeholders for implementation through its recent work on the development of a proposal for a Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020–2030.¹

KEY FINDINGS

5. **Summary.** The internal review showed that world and regional observances can be powerful tools to raise awareness of priority public health issues, and that the overall communications approach of the Secretariat² enables the Organization to reach all key target audiences and constituencies with evidence-based public health messages. However, the review also showed that the success of campaigns depends on a number of additional factors, including: relevance of the subject and prioritization of the subject and the campaign by countries; agreement by key stakeholders on clear goals and objectives; having effective planning and project management mechanisms in place; and sufficient financial and human resources being allocated to campaign planning, management and evaluation.

6. **Health-related observances mandated through the United Nations General Assembly and Health Assembly.** The Secretariat noted that WHO is receiving an increasing number of mandates on observances through the United Nations General Assembly, including observances for which WHO has been requested to co-lead with another United Nations specialized agency.³ Since September 2015, more health-related observances have been established by the United Nations General Assembly than by the Health Assembly. The United Nations General Assembly has established four observances: the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) (resolution 70/259 (2016)), International Universal Health Coverage Day (resolution 72/138 (2017)), World Braille Day (resolution 73/161 (2018)) and World Food Safety Day (resolution 73/250 (2018)). Over the same time period, the Health Assembly has established three observances: International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife (2020) (decision WHA72(19) (2019)), World Chagas Disease Day (decision WHA72(20) (2019)) and World Patient Safety Day (resolution WHA72.6 (2019)).

7. **Main challenges.** The review has confirmed that there is a need to establish a clear prioritization of observances and to clarify the Secretariat’s role in relation to that of non-State actors, including the modalities of the Secretariat’s support to observances. Regarding challenges faced by the Secretariat, it was found that many WHO campaigns are planned within a short time frame, leaving insufficient time to translate core materials into all official languages and to adapt materials to regional and country contexts. Planning is often hampered by the lack of a systematic approach to such campaigns across the

¹ See document EB146/23 for further details on conceptualizing and developing a proposal for the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020–2030.

² Before each campaign, the Secretariat determines the specific objectives and goals, creates a tailor-made communication package for key target audiences, and disseminates the packages through a diverse range of channels and platforms. Generally, core materials are produced by WHO headquarters and disseminated to regional and country offices for adaptation. From among the many world observances, regional offices choose their own priorities. Some regional offices have established regional observances (see the Annex, categories 2 and 3). WHO materials are shared with governments, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, philanthropic foundations, private sector entities, as well as media organizations, WHO Goodwill Ambassadors and the general public.

³ For example, WHO and FAO were invited to jointly facilitate the observance of World Food Safety Day, in collaboration with other relevant organizations (United Nations General Assembly resolution 73/250 (2018)).

three levels of the Organization and limited availability of human and financial resources. It was also found that evaluation has not been an integral component of all campaigns, making comparison across campaigns and over time problematic.

8. **Updated list of observances marked by the Secretariat.** After completing its review, the Secretariat updated the list of world and regional observances it regularly marks (see the Annex). This supersedes the list in document EB144/39 Rev.1 on world health days. It includes over 100 observances in seven categories, depending on the mandate received and the focus of the observance. Of the 76 health-related observances regularly marked by the Secretariat, 13 have been mandated by the Health Assembly or WHO regional committees, and seven have been initiated or otherwise supported by the Secretariat. The Secretariat also marks 20 observances established by the United Nations General Assembly and other international organizations, and supports 36 observances established by non-State actors. In addition, the review identified 28 world observances, which – while not focused strictly on health – provide the Secretariat with opportunities to advocate action on critical public health issues. As new observances may be established in the coming years, the Secretariat proposes to update this list annually.

9. **Financial implications of existing and future observances.** The Secretariat's resource requirements for campaign planning, management and evaluation depend on the health topic, the Secretariat's role in the campaign and the length of the campaign. The Secretariat estimates that at least US\$ 150 000 would be needed annually per campaign, to be divided among headquarters and regional offices, for activities to plan, manage and evaluate Health Assembly-mandated and other priority campaigns. Such resources are, however, rarely available. In 2019, headquarters' spending on most Health Assembly-mandated campaigns was between US\$ 15 000 and US\$ 50 000.¹ The highest amount spent on a campaign was US\$ 70 000 (World Health Day campaign, 7 April 2019, on the theme of universal health coverage).

10. In addition, over the past year, the Secretariat has estimated that headquarters and regional offices would need a total of US\$ 1.6 million for a year-long campaign to mark the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife (2020) and US\$ 0.98 million per biennium for a campaign built around a potential World Neglected Tropical Diseases Day. At present, Member States receive information on the financial and administrative implications for the Secretariat only for observances that are proposed for consideration by the Health Assembly; there is no process in place to inform Member States about the financial implications of other campaigns.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE SECRETARIAT

11. **Application of a differentiated approach.** The Secretariat proposes to establish clear priorities and apply a differentiated approach regarding its engagement in world and regional observances. It would prioritize the 20 observances established by the Health Assembly, WHO regional committees or the Secretariat (Annex, categories 1–3). The Secretariat would also continue to prioritize a number of additional observances devoted to health that seek to advance priorities established by WHO's General Programme of Work, or where WHO is invited to observe or facilitate an observance through a relevant resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, provided that the Secretariat has adequate funding and partnership arrangements in place.

¹ At the time of writing, consolidated information on campaign spending was not available from WHO regional offices.

12. The Secretariat will introduce a standardized approach to strategically plan, manage and evaluate priority campaigns in order to maximize impact at the country level. Headquarters will develop an essential communications package in all relevant official languages and disseminate the packages to WHO regional and country offices and non-State actors in a timely manner. As requested by Member States, the theme of World Health Day will be announced during the Health Assembly of the preceding year.¹ For observances that do not fall into the prioritized group, the Secretariat will keep its support to a minimum (for example, dissemination of key messages through social media).

13. **Consultation with other entities of the United Nations system.** In the light of the ongoing reform of the United Nations and the agreed priorities of the global action plan for healthy lives and well-being for all, the Secretariat proposes to leverage existing platforms for dialogue and initiate a consultation with other entities of the United Nations system, with a view to making joint campaigns more effective and the process for establishing of new observances more consistent. The Secretariat proposes a timeline of one year to conduct this dialogue.

14. **Recommendations regarding prioritization of proposals by Member States.** The Secretariat recommends that proposals for world health observances focus on emerging priorities and global health challenges, or priorities highlighted in WHO's General Programme of Work, or health issues on which there has been insufficient progress despite the existence of a Health Assembly-endorsed global strategy or action plan. This would allow Member States and the Secretariat to expand advocacy and communications-related action on topics already identified as priorities. Any related resolution or decision by the Health Assembly should contain a paragraph highlighting the Secretariat's role regarding the proposed observance (for example, setting the theme of an annual campaign and leading the development of evidence-based public health messages). Member States may consider adopting at WHO regional committees regional observances on topics that are unique to a specific region.

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

15. The Health Assembly is invited to note the report and may wish to provide further guidance on:

- whether Member States wish to consider sunsetting any existing Health Assembly-mandated observances;
- what criteria the governing bodies should use when considering new proposals for World Health Days; and
- whether there is a need to further strengthen coordination between Member States and the Secretariat on the planning of new health-related observances.

¹ See document EB144/2019/REC2, summary records of the Executive Board at its 144th session, fourteenth meeting, section 1.

ANNEX

OBSERVANCES MARKED BY THE SECRETARIAT

This updated list of observances marked by the Secretariat is separated into seven categories, depending on the mandate received and the focus of the event (Table). Categories 1 to 6 contain observances devoted to health, while category 7 contains observances which, while not strictly devoted to health, are often used for public health advocacy. While every attempt has been made to include all relevant observances, the list, which contains over 100 observances, may not be exhaustive.

Table. Observances marked by the Secretariat, by category

<p>Category 1. World observances (devoted to health) mandated by the Health Assembly (n = 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World AIDS Day^a • World Blood Donor Day^b • World Chagas Disease Day^c • World Health Day^d • World Hepatitis Day^e • World Malaria Day^f • World No Tobacco Day^g • World Patient Safety Day^h • World Tuberculosis Dayⁱ • World Immunization Week^j • International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife (2020)^k
<p>Category 2. Regional observances (devoted to health) mandated by WHO regional committees (n = 2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African Traditional Medicine Day^l • Regional immunization weeks^m
<p>Category 3. World or regional observances (devoted to health) initiated or otherwise supported by the Secretariat (n = 7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Hand Hygiene Day • World Hearing Day • European Flu Awareness Week • International Lead Poisoning Prevention Week of Action • World Antibiotic Awareness Week • World Breastfeeding Week • Decade of Patient Safety 2020–2030
<p>Category 4. Observances (devoted to health) established by the United Nations General Assembly, other entities of the United Nations system or other intergovernmental organizations (n = 20)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Dengue Day (ASEAN) • International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (UNGA) • International Day of Persons with Disabilities (UNGA) • International Day of Yoga (UNGA)

- International Day to End Obstetric Fistula (UNGA)
- International Universal Health Coverage Day (UNGA)
- World Autism Awareness Day (UNGA)
- World Braille Day (UNGA)
- World Day for Safety and Health at Work (ILO)
- World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (UNGA)
- World Diabetes Day (UNGA)
- World Down Syndrome Day (UNGA)
- World Food Safety Day (UNGA)
- World Sickle Cell Day (UNGA)
- World Toilet Day (UNGA)
- Zero Discrimination Day (UNAIDS)
- United Nations Global Road Safety Week (UNGA)
- Decade of Action for Road Safety (2011–2020) (UNGA)
- International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development” (2018–2028) (UNGA)
- United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) (UNGA)

Category 5. Observances (devoted to health) established by non-State actors in official relations with WHO (n = 17)

- International Childhood Cancer Day
- International Day of the Midwife
- International Epilepsy Day
- International Nurses Day
- World Cancer Day
- World Heart Day
- World Hospice and Palliative Care Day
- World Hypertension Day
- World Kidney Day
- World Leprosy Day
- World Lung Day
- World Mental Health Day
- World Obesity Day
- World Oral Health Day
- World Rabies Day
- World Sight Day
- World Suicide Prevention Day

Category 6. Observances (devoted to health) established by non-State actors *not* in official relations with WHO (n = 19)

- International Condom Day
- International Day for Maternal Health and Rights
- International Overdose Awareness Day
- International Safe Abortion Day
- International Snakebite Awareness Day
- World Alzheimer’s Day
- World Asthma Day
- World Birth Defects Day
- World Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Day
- World Contraception Day
- World Pneumonia Day

- World Polio Day
- World Prematurity Day
- World Sepsis Day
- World Sexual Health Day
- World Stroke Day
- World Health Worker Week
- 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence
- Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

Category 7. Other observances (not strictly devoted to health) but often used for public health advocacy (n = 28)

- Human Rights Day (UNGA)
- International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (UNGA)
- International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNGA)
- International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict (UNGA)
- International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies (UNGA)
- International Day of Education (UNGA)
- International Day of Medical Physics (other)
- International Day of Older Persons (UNGA)
- International Day of Radiology (other)
- International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (UNGA)
- International Day of the Girl Child (UNGA)
- International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation (UNGA)
- International Mother Earth Day (UNGA)
- International Women's Day (UNGA)
- International Workers' Day (other)
- International Youth Day (UNGA)
- United Nations Day (UNGA)
- World Bicycle Day (UNGA)
- World Children's Day (UNGA)
- World Cities Day (UNGA)
- World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (UNGA)
- World Environment Day (UNGA)
- World Food Day (FAO)
- World Humanitarian Day (UNGA)
- World Population Day (UNDP)
- World Refugee Day (UNGA)
- World Water Day (UNGA)
- Decade of Action (United Nations Secretary-General)

UNGA: United Nations General Assembly.

^a Resolution WHA42.33 (1989).

^b Resolution WHA58.13 (2005).

^c Decision WHA72(20) (2019).

^d Resolution WHA2.35 (1949).

^e Resolution WHA63.18 (2010).

^f Resolution WHA60.18 (2007).

^g Resolution WHA42.19 (1989).

^h Resolution WHA72.6 (2019).

ⁱ Resolution WHA50.21 (1997).

^j Resolution WHA65.18 (2012).

^k Decision WHA72(19) (2019).

^l Regional Committee for Africa resolution AFR/RC50/R3 (2000).

^m PAHO Directing Council resolution CD44.R1 (2003), Regional Committee for Europe resolution EUR/RC55/R7 (2005) and AFRO Regional Committee for Africa resolution AFR/RC60/R4 (2010).

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