

Advancing the Role of Higher Education Institutions in Attaining the Health-related Sustainable Development Goals: Proceedings of the 53rd Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health, 21-23 September 2022, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are acknowledged as key drivers in realizing health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The University of the Philippines Manila, College of Public Health (UP CPH) together with the Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH), hosted the 53rd APACPH International Conference last 21-23 September 2022. The conference discussed current issues relating to the attainment of SDGs and promoted collaboration of leading academic institutions and other stakeholders in addressing various public health challenges. The conference revolved around the challenges and opportunities in attaining health-related SDGs, and the good practices and roles of HEIs in addressing health disparities. The lack of certification framework of public health tertiary programs, pedagogy and infrastructure, and ambiguous roles and network of public health professionals were discussed. The conference served as a platform for discussing potential resolutions and ways forward in addressing these challenges. Opportunities for improvement such as updating of policies and curricula, strengthening of internship and community engagement programs, establishment of capacity-building partnerships and programs, and developing multidisciplinary-competent faculty and students were identified. This paper provides the highlights of the conference focusing on the good practices and roles of HEIs in addressing health disparities, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, and other issues and challenges in attaining SDGs.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, higher education institutions, public health



eISSN 2094-9278 (Online)
Published: March 31, 2025
<https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.v59i4.9667>
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INTRODUCTION

The invaluable role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as key drivers in realizing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has long been acknowledged and deemed vital in supporting the attainment of these goals alongside the various sectors in the community. HEIs are key drivers for the achievement of the full set of these goals. HEIs, primarily universities, significantly contribute to human resource formation, knowledge generation, and innovation, all of which are influential factors in realizing health-related SDGs.¹ In a global survey that assessed the current

approaches of HEIs and other organizations in achieving sustainable development, there was a notable interest and collaboration to address sustainability issues. It also revealed a trend of higher education institutions incorporating SDGs into their curriculum, research, and campus management, with an exploration of best practices in this regard.²

The Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH) is composed of the leading and most influential public health universities and institutions from 23 member countries across the Asia-Pacific Region. From its humble beginnings in 1984 with only five members, APACPH has grown to include members across the globe that foster network collaborations and paved the way for teaching and research in addressing pertinent public health challenges. The UP CPH together with the APACPH, hosted the 53rd APACPH International Conference last 21-23 September 2022 with the theme, “Advancing the Role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Attaining the Health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” The conference aimed to discuss pressing issues relating to the attainment of SDGs and promote collaboration of leading academic institutions and other stakeholders in addressing various public health challenges.

HEIs serve as major facilitators in the achievement of SDG 4 focusing on quality and inclusive education through teaching and learning innovations, productive research outputs, and initiatives on health and wellbeing. This is expected to contribute to the general social, environmental, and economic development of the community. In addition, these institutions systematically investigate pressing issues and barriers, and later provide solutions and knowledge to address barriers and promote good practices to advance the pursuit of attainment of SDGs.

SDGs serve as a great opportunity to encourage institutions and countries to advance sustainability research through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research to solve concrete social problem.³ Along with the other issues affecting the delivery of quality and inclusive education, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a challenge for HEIs in undertaking their part in achieving SDGs. It disrupted the operation and practice of almost all institutions globally. Impactful and significant contributions to the achievement of SDGs can be ensured through appropriate institutional setups, adequately funded programs, and meaningful engagements of stakeholders which ultimately lead to the achievement of equitable impact on health.⁴ Better measurement and evaluation must begin with improved primary data. Fostering national partnerships with governmental institutions and HEIs will be a key component in this regard.⁵

This paper reports the conference’s highlights focusing on the challenges and opportunities in attaining SDGs, and good practices observed by institutions. The event further explored and navigated the discussion on the role of HEIs in the attainment of SDG through its sub-themes: HEIs in training the health workforce; research on health-related

SDGs; and HEIs’ service to the community. In addition, this paper also aims to present opportunities and good practices across various HEIs which can be adopted in the local setting.

The conference focused on the critical role of HEIs in addressing global health challenges, promoting health equity, and achieving SDGs through research, education, and community engagement. The conference started with the General Assembly that highlighted the importance of international linkages, multidisciplinary competencies, global issue awareness, research, negotiation, and entrepreneurial skills for future public health professionals. The General Assembly was followed by the meeting of Deans which tackled the role of the public health sector in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasis was given on incorporating public health courses in higher education. Moreover, the different challenges and gaps in public health education were also discussed during the first day. The second day of the conference featured two plenary sessions and a parallel symposium. The plenary sessions discussed the role of HEIs in addressing global health challenges in the era of SDGs, and the role of HEIs in reducing health disparities. After the plenary sessions, three parallel symposia were conducted with cross-cutting themes. The first parallel symposia focused on three main themes: training the health workforce, research on health-related SDGs, and achieving SDG 3 (Promoting Good Health for All). The last day of the conference featured two parallel symposia. One of the symposia delved into school health promotion in the Asia-Pacific Islands and service to the community. The second symposia covered rural and island health, oral health promotion, injury prevention, and disaster management in the Asia-Pacific.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ATTAINMENT OF SDGS

HEIs and public health professionals need to promptly adapt to changes brought about by a multitude of factors in the society, from the wide array of public health problems to national and regional policies that combat current issues and problems.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, several lessons were emphasized: (1) strengthen the five levels of prevention; (2) strengthen primary health care to ensure the capability of students in terms of community participation, intersectoral coordination, support mechanism, and appropriate technology; and (3) build global resilience towards pandemic preparedness (e.g., against monkeypox, pathogen X). These would be conceivable with a proactive and innovative outlook in education where (1) curricula are revised; (2) academic policy is updated; (3) internship and community engagement programs are enhanced; (4) partnerships on education, capacity-building, and research are strengthened; and (5) the competencies of faculty and students are improved.

In response to COVID-19 pandemic, the need to link community and biomedical perspectives was emphasized as preventive intervention by promoting vaccination. The

mechanism of vaccines against COVID-19 was explained and the conclusion was drawn that they all demonstrated favorable efficacy. However, boosters and therapeutic interventions are also needed. It was emphasized that these vaccines must be provided to the eligible population. To achieve better uptake of vaccines, there must be effective communication and understanding between the public health experts and the population to ensure better health outcomes. This way, people are better informed about vaccines and other public health interventions, and will be more likely to use these measures. It is also important that the vaccine trials should undergo a review from an Ethics Review Committee with an expert vaccine panel to comply with public health ethics and laws.

In the Philippines, public health problems are deeply rooted in the complex and intertwining political, economic, social, and environmental realities. Currently, no public health degree program is regulated by Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and Professional Regulation Commission (PRC). Additionally, there is no uniform competency framework for public health and there is no professional public health society that regulates the specialty. There is also no database that tracks graduates of public health in the country. Therefore, there is a need to develop standardized academic public health programs and a database that will monitor its graduates.

Schools are important avenues for influencing health in communities. Involving various stakeholders in school health policy implementation, curriculum evaluation, and decision-making allows for the development of contextualized and sustainable initiatives in local settings. This was proven by the progress of programs and activities to support child health and development as reported by representatives of Asia-Pacific countries such as Fiji, Micronesia, Tonga, Guam, Japan, and the Philippines.

In addition to the pivotal role of HEIs, community- and school-based approach, it was also discussed that there should be a focus on women's health since a large proportion of healthcare workers in the Philippines were female. This is very important in the realization of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by involving diverse sectors to integrate frameworks for inclusion of women. There are currently efforts to file an act to accommodate the needs of women as healthcare workers for better benefits for healthcare frontliners. However, concrete and reactive efforts into taking care of women in healthcare should be done to create a better healthcare system. These gender equality mechanisms also need to be sustainable and participative to realize optimal outcomes.

Universal Health Care (UHC) in the Philippines was also highlighted as one of the chief responses of the country against public health problems. UHC ensures quality, safe, and affordable primary care services for all. This mandates the Department of Health (DOH), the PRC and the CHED to reorient the health profession education curriculum towards primary health care to prepare health professionals

to deliver quality primary care. When primary care services are strengthened, there will be greater efficiency in the healthcare system, and consequently, more equitable access to healthcare services.

Further, several needs were identified from the conference. First, there is an urgent necessity to scale up the level and reach of education of public health professionals with appropriate aptitude and knowledge. Second, there is a need to revise public health curriculum to enable competencies that are well suited for the tasks and demands to address public health needs, particularly in health policy, management, and leadership. In addition, the need to adopt more dynamic, responsive, and participative pedagogical techniques was also identified. Lastly, expansive knowledge generation and evidence building research should be done to effectively respond to the disadvantaged and marginalized populations.

HEI INITIATIVES IN ADDRESSING HEALTH DISPARITIES

The conference sessions mainly focused on the efforts of HEIs in addressing health disparities in the era of SDGs. As the pandemic showed the long-standing problems with public health, HEIs - both locally and globally - have responded by strengthening public health in higher education curricula. The keynote lectures highlighted the importance of research and evidence-based learning in training students to become future leaders in the field of public health.

In the Philippines, current efforts and proposals among HEIs propel the quest in advancing their contribution in realizing SDGs. These include plans to establish graduate programs on Disaster Risk Reduction Management for Health (DRRM-H) and Field Epidemiology (FE), and local and international accreditation of the Bachelor of Science in Public Health and Master of Public Health (MPH) programs. The recently approved and implemented dual degree program offered by CPH and College of Medicine, Doctor of Medicine - Master of Public Health is also given credit in the advancement of SDGs through HEIs.

Generally, there is a need for the local health systems to achieve better health outcomes for all Filipinos through effective leadership and governance with key stakeholders. It was also stated that partnerships must have trust among the parties involved. This is why local chief executives and health systems sustainability play a crucial role in ensuring improvements in health indicators.

CONCLUSION

The conference highlighted the crucial roles of HEIs in achieving SDGs by educating and training public health professionals and improving current health systems. Major challenges in the pursuit included lack of certification framework in the higher education programs, limited infrastructures and pedagogy, and unclear roles and networks of public health professionals.

Harmonization of the HEIs' efforts through partnerships and initiatives serves as the driver in overcoming these challenges and in improving the system which supports the attainment of SDGs. This conference served as an impetus for enhanced mobility and empowerment of HEIs and stakeholders in working towards achieving SDGs and improving public health systems globally.

Acknowledgments

The authors extend their gratitude to the organizing committee of the 53rd Asia Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH) Conference, its sponsors, the APACPH, and the University of the Philippines College of Public Health.

Statement of Authorship

All authors certified fulfillment of ICMJE authorship criteria.

Author Disclosure

Funds and sponsorships were received from partner agencies, but they did not exert any influence over the conduct of the conference nor in the writing of this manuscript, including subsequent revisions.

Funding Source

The authors received no financial support for the authorship of this article.

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