Meeting between Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) Steering Committee (SCOM) members and the Chair of the Advisory Group on Reform of WHO’s Work in Outbreaks and Emergencies

17 September, 2015
14:00 – 15:30 (CEST: Central European Summer Time)

The teleconference focused on three issues – primarily on (1) WHO reform; but also addressing (2) GOARN partner’s contributions to the Ebola response, including (3) the next Phase of the Ebola response (Phase 3).

The strategic objectives for this third phase are to (i) accurately define and rapidly interrupt all remaining chains of Ebola Virus transmission, and (ii) identify residual risks of Ebola infection, manage these risks and respond to their consequences. The Phase 3 strategy envisages continued capacity for surveillance and response well into 2016 due to the substantial risk of people being newly infected because of persistent virus among male survivors. The teleconference was an important opportunity to recognize the support of GOARN partners in the Ebola response, and advocate for continued and sustained technical support during the next phase of response. A copy of the final version of this strategic framework is to be shared with GOARN partners.

1  WHO Reform

The Chair of the Advisory Group, David Nabarro, explained that the Advisory Group on the Reform of WHO’s work in Outbreaks and Emergencies has been set up to advise and guide WHO’s Senior Management on the Emergency Reform process. The Advisory Group is consulting with WHO’s operational partners so as to understand their interests in the ongoing reform process.

The ensuing discussion focused on the following areas:

1. The role of the proposed unified platform for support to Operations:

   The operational platform will be newly established across the organization and will be designed to seamlessly engage and involve WHO’s operational partners so as to ensure an effective response to all hazards, including acute and protracted crises, with the most appropriate engagement of partner organizations. It is envisaged that the platform for support to operations will function as a distinct entity within WHO, with the capacity to ensure surge of activities and to stretch deeply into multiple locations where expertise is needed. It will be accessible to, and used by, all parts of WHO using new and standardized “fit-for-purpose” business processes designed solely to ensure operational effectiveness. It will be accessible to multiple partners and collaborators, including members of GOARN, will support national, sub-national and district authorities, and will be functional in protracted crises as well as acute
outbreaks and emergencies.

The operations platform should permit a more predictable, dependable, capable, adaptable, and accountable service, with functions that include leadership, coordination and technical assistance. Member States have identified adaptability as a key trait of the support they desire from WHO. This is due to the differing needs of governments, ranging from requiring limited “technical” support in some cases to needing more “continuous” or “comprehensive” support in other contexts. An SCOM member spoke, in a similar vein, about the need for GOARN partners to be able to provide “strong, expandable and well-resourced contributions” as part of the overall platform.

Effective action in Outbreaks and Emergencies relies heavily both on the full range of WHO’s expertise and contributions from partners and collaborations – including with GOARN partners. It is important that WHO and partners and collaborators are able to commit to contribute predictable capacities during outbreaks and emergencies. Members of the GOARN network and the WHO already have a well-established partnership, with a strong track record in outbreak response. Additional pre-agreed protocols, operational mechanisms, strong coordination procedures, memoranda of understanding and other agreements as relevant could contribute to simplified administrative procedures when requests for support are received.

The new platform for support to WHO operations will require appropriate Command-and-Control; Standard Operating Procedures; the capacity to facilitate effective international operations of partners and the ability to coordinate effectively. It will need to be established on the premise that partners, when enabled to work effectively together, are able to offer the expertise required for maximum effectiveness in outbreak and emergency situations. The Platform will be tailored to ensure effective response to people’s needs in specific national settings: it will be designed to enable the partners – who are contributing to urgently needed actions in outbreak and emergency situations – to be fully effective. Indeed, their contributions will benefit from the existence and functioning of the platform.

2. The relationship between disease outbreaks and humanitarian emergencies

Several GOARN Steering Committee members recognized that WHO’s emergency reform process must usher in a unified operations platform taking an “all-hazards” approach. GOARN partners have specific areas of strength, and the core business in relation to outbreak alert and response and this should not be diluted when it comes to providing support to WHO’s work in other areas.

The West Africa Ebola outbreak has initiated a multi-dimensional and complex crisis with humanitarian and governance impacts. GOARN’s support to the Ebola response has again illustrated the need for those with expertise in outbreaks to be prepared for, and able rapidly to work within, humanitarian contexts. Steering Committee members recognize the inevitability that comprehensive responses to future major outbreaks will require coordinated rapid and sustained mobilization of multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary expertise, and support from “outside of infectious disease community.”
Some GOARN partners noted that their individual organizations are looking carefully at the outbreak and humanitarian response interface to ensure they are aligned. Similarly, a point was raised on the apparent “tension between humanitarian and outbreak response:” this could be overcome by clear appreciation on the different approaches and a flexible operational response system that utilizes available resources, ensuring that they are applied to the required needs.

3. Human resources implications of WHO’s ongoing work in outbreaks and emergencies, including from a management perspective

It was noted that for GOARN to help WHO establish and run the operations platform, the Network of partners must engage in different stages. This would include sharing information on alerts, risk assessments and operational posture, and additionally, to expand and strengthen membership accordingly (particularly in Africa and South America). An expanded GOARN network is necessary to mitigate an over-reliance on a limited group of partners, but also to engage partners with cross cultural and linguistic ties. Expanding GOARN’s membership base also helps ensure efficient application of the International Health Regulations (2005).

Along with insurance coverage, other basic staffing considerations raised included identifying new ways that ensure that personnel costs for those deployed to an emergency response are covered either in response operations costs, or investment in partners response capacity. Until recently, in most cases, GOARN home institutions ensured that deployed staff continue to receive their salary/remuneration during the international missions. As the demographics of the network change to reflect greater involvement across all regions, a different funding approach is needed. This is to ensure the required staff from such partners are rapidly available to support a GOARN response. In addition, for long-running operations like the Ebola crisis – where GOARN partners have been directly involved since March 2014 – the funding and costs of sustained support will need to be addressed comprehensively.

4. Competency of and training for personnel engaged in outbreak and emergency work, including the need for leadership and coordination:

Many GOARN members identified the need for greater investment in a response training programme and increased advocacy and recognition of the contribution of partners and stakeholders. Partners recognize close linkages to sustained engagement with partners, which will in turn widen the skills base, and support predictable access to the global health emergency workforce. Securing adequate financial resources, to strengthening international response capacities was seen as key to this.

Strong coordination is very important for ensuring an effective rapid response to an outbreak or emergency. The GOARN training programmes in leadership and coordination, support establishment of a strong mechanism for collaboration and information sharing in the field.

In addition training to reinforce technical expertise of personnel deploying to an
outbreak or response, alongside ensuring that various GOARN partners possess the resources and experience to work in emergencies, is also needed.

The breadth of technical expertise required to fully address global outbreaks and other emergencies is broad. At present the capacity of WHO and GOARN alone is unable to respond sufficiently in all cases. This reality prompted the question of “how do we maintain that cadre of expertise on a needs basis?” Increased resources was often mentioned, as were suggestions such as engaging technical experts (in academia) who do not routinely work on emergencies, as well as improving training, development of a GOARN fellowship programme, and tapping into existing WHO Collaborating Centers.

One cautionary point raised was the need to continually emphasise “technical quality”, while supporting efforts to increase the quantity of personnel available to work in emergencies. Such a consideration becomes a question of the selection process, and of rapidly deploying experts with the right skills and team ethic into the right location, no matter how austere the environment.

5. Leadership considerations for WHO in its work in emergencies and outbreaks

The need for clear leadership of emergency response, and effective coordination of multiple agencies and partners, including GOARN, remains a major challenge. Clarifying roles and expectations with more formal commitments and agreements both before and during crises may help to improve the efficiency of the response.

Areas where clarity over mandates were required included in political, technical and financial arenas. One speaker noted, the operations platform, required a balance between being flexible and coordinating events/emergencies and a more formal clarity of roles and mandates. Recognised leadership and management skills during the crisis are essential. GOARN partners play a mainly operational and technical role, while WHO has the political mandate and responsibility. WHO has been the strongest supporter of GOARN, and partners see the creation of the new platform and centre as a unique opportunity to further build on this track record.

6. The importance of considering Regional contexts and resources in responding to outbreaks and emergencies

The discussion noted that the response to outbreaks across all regions of the world require regional response capacities for effective action. The GOARN Steering Committee and OST have maintained “regionalisation” as a key strategy, but it has been difficult to implement successfully across all regions because of chronic underfunding and lack of staff in regional offices. Supporting regional activities to develop and operate GOARN will help to address the need for a greater spread of partners, and ensure rapid response.

Clarifying, how the platform will engage partners, and manage the political – public health – operational implications of rapid international deployments at country level was also raised as a high priority. This is especially important in the context of seeking/receiving rapid governmental permission for GOARN members to operation
in-country, and for coordination and leadership in the field.

Experience with “cultural diversity” enables effective emergency responses in countries and regions, and skills and capacities in this field were suggested as being essential for a GOARN/WHO operations platform-led response. Draft 21 September

7. Safety and security of staff deploying under GOARN/WHO mechanisms to work in outbreaks and emergency response

The discussion touched on the need for WHO and the operational platform to ensure that personnel supporting outbreaks and emergency responses received all necessary safeguards to carry out their work, including insurance coverage and appropriate protection for their health while in the field. Working under the UN banner was an advantage to GOARN partners involved in outbreak response. Once experts are deployed, it is critically important that there be some assurance of safety and security for these people in the field.

8. The need for political cover from WHO while also being able to work autonomously

One issue noted during the discussion was the need for GOARN partners to have good access to support WHO’s senior management. Strong WHO leadership is needed in operational responses to ensure rapid deployment of appropriate teams and experts, resolve disagreements on interpretation or implementation of public health advice, or to address concerns / tensions between partners or with countries.

It was also noted that GOARN’s strength, is both derived from its make-up of independent technical partners, as well as the backing and political and operational support provided by WHO.

WHO’s new platform will need to address the cooperation/integration of partners in core activities, resolve internal policies and politics, and relationships with Member States, whilst providing and facilitating the functioning of international alert and mechanisms like GOARN.
Annex of Participants

David Nabarro, Chair, WHO Advisory Group
Denise Werker, WHO Advisory Group Member
Gabrielle Fitzgerald, WHO Advisory Group Member

GOARN Steering Committee (SCOM)
Institut Pasteur, Senegal - Dr Amadou A. Sall, Scientific Director; Deputy Chair of the GOARN SCOM.
Instituto Nacional de Enfermedades Virais Humanas “Dr Julio I Maiztegui” Argentina - Dr Delia A. Enria, Director.
National University of Singapore - Dr Dale Fisher, Clinical director of medicine and Head, Division of Infectious Diseases, National University Hospital, Singapore.
European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control - Dr Josep Maria Jansa, Head of Section, Epidemic Intelligence and Response.
Galveston National Laboratory - Dr James W. Le Duc, Director.
Curtin University - Professor John S. Mackenzie, Research Associate/Professor.
Institut Pasteur International - Dr Jean-Claude Manuguerra, Head, Laboratory for Urgent Response to Biological Threats.
Public Health England - Dr Brian McCloskey, Director of Global Health.
Public Health England - Dr Tina Endericks, Deputy Director Global Health.
Ministry of Health Singapore - Dr Poh Lian Lim Yap, Senior Consultant, Communicable Disease Division. Dr Lim is also member of the WHO Advisory Group.
Public Health Agency of Canada - Mr Nicolas Palanque, Director, Office of Situational Awareness and Operations, Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response.
UNICEF - Dr Heather Papowitz, Senior Advisor, Health Emergencies.
Institute of Tropical Medicine, Belgium - Dr Evelyn Depoortere, International Health Expert.
Path West - Professor Paul Effler, Medical Coordinator/Adjunct.

Apologies:
US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Ray Arthur, Director, Global Disease Detection Operations Center.
Médecins Sans Frontières - Myriam Henkens, International Medical Coordinator.

World Health Organization

Bruce Aylward, Assistant Director-General, Special Representative of the Director-General for the Ebola Response and Assistant Director-General, Emergencies
Daniel Kertesz, Lead of the WHO Reform Project Management Team,
Shams B. Syed, Technical Officer, Department of Service delivery and Safety
Stephane Hugonnet, Medical Officer, Global Preparedness Surveillance and Response
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Paul Garwood, Communications Officer, WHO Reform Project Management Team

WHO Regional Offices
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