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75 years of the WHO

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Why is in news? World Health Organization (WHO) marks its 75th anniversary on 7 April 2023.

Origin of WHO

In April 1945, politicians from around the world gathered in San Francisco to establish the United Nations

At the meeting, leaders from Brazil and China suggested the creation of another global organization: one specifically devoted to global health rather than global politics.

Diplomats meeting in San Francisco, California to form the United Nations agree that throughout modern history, there has been insufficient collaboration between countries to control the spread of dangerous diseases across the world.

Together they decide on the need for a global organization overseeing global health. They plan for the creation of WHO.

Formation of WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) was born three years later, when its constitution came into effect on April 7, 1948.

It states that health is a human right that every human being is entitled to, "without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition" and that "the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security.

The organization's headquarters are based in Geneva, Switzerland, with six regional and 150 country offices across the world.

Major Contributions of WHO

Following the mandate established by Member States, WHO begins its first two decades with a strong focus on mass campaigns against tuberculosis, malaria, yaws, syphilis, smallpox and leprosy.

The great era of discovery of antibiotics begins in 1952, and WHO begins advising countries on their responsible use.

The World Health Assembly establishes the first International Health Regulations in 1969, which represent an agreement between WHO Member States to work together to prevent and respond to acute public health risks that have the potential to cross borders and threaten people worldwide.

The Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP) is created at WHO. It is the sole body within the UN system with a global mandate to carry out research into sexual and reproductive health and rights

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The first Essential Medicines List is published in 1977. This list outlines the medicines that a basic health system needs. Each medicine is selected based on evidence for its safety, effectiveness and value for money.

The International Conference on Primary Health Care, in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan in 1978, sets the aspirational goal, "Health for All", laying the groundwork for WHO's call for universal health coverage.

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (now Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance) is established in 1999. The Alliance consists of major players in global immunization, including WHO, other key UN agencies, leaders of the vaccine industry, government representatives and major foundations. Its role is to overcome barriers preventing millions of children from receiving vaccines.

Also in 1999, The first global strategy for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

The WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) is established to detect and combat the international spread of outbreaks in 2000

In 2001, The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, a new partnership and funding mechanism initially hosted by WHO, is created in collaboration with other UN agencies and major donors.

In 2003, The World Health Assembly unanimously adopts WHO's first global public health treaty, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which aims to reduce tobacco-related deaths and disease worldwide.

Role of WHO in eradication of Diseases

Inactivated poliovirus vaccine (given by injection) developed in 1952, paving the way for mass global campaigns facilitated by countries, WHO and other partners that have led to the near-eradication of polio

WHO launches the global diarrhoeal diseases programme with Oral rehydration salts (ORS) at its heart in 1978

One of the biggest successes in the WHO's quest to ensure the global population's well-being came in 1980, when the organization officially announced it had wiped out a common but deadly centuries-old infectious disease

Perhaps the most noteworthy [success] was the eradication of smallpox, the only human disease to be eradicated

In August 2014, WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The WHO Secretariat activated an unprecedented response to the outbreak

Criticism of WHO

The WHO's widely criticized response to the 2014 to 2016 Ebola epidemic led to a wholesale "transformation" of the organization

The WHO launched the Global Malaria Eradication Programme (GMEP) in 1955. It looked promising, with 15 countries and one territory managing to eradicate the disease. But there was little to no progress in sub-Saharan Africa under the program, and in many places, failure to sustain GMEP actually led to a resurgence of malaria. In 1969, the program was discontinued. The organization's agreement to give up on trying to eradicate malaria in the 1960s represents another example of what some consider a botched job

Some critics, then-US-President Donald Trump among them, complained at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that the WHO was not doing enough to support member states in their fight against the disease.

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Conclusion

WHO is entirely committed to helping countries tackle the health challenges of today and tomorrow. Seventy-five years since the Organization's creation, our work remains as important as ever.