

UPF Paris, France: Governments' handling of healthcare during the COVID-19

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Paris, France -- Governments' handling of healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic was the topic of an online meeting.

The webinar, held on December 19, 2020, was titled "What Lessons Can Be Learned from the Health Crisis? Health Systems and Their Management in the Spotlight."

It was a joint effort of the Western Europe and Middle East branches of UPF and the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), a UPF association.

As the coronavirus continues to affect people around the world, governments are being criticized for their responses to the pandemic. Many health problems not related to COVID are being sidelined. What lessons can be learned, and what models can be followed? Is it possible to improve health systems, democratic governance and the role of scientific research?

As the moderator, Dr. Allal Amraoui from Morocco, a physician and member of parliament, introduced the panelists and guided the conversation.

The first speaker was Hon. Jean-Marie Bockel from France, a former senator (2004-2007, 2010-2020). As the outgoing mayor of Mulhouse, the city that was most affected by the pandemic in France during the first wave, he summarized what he experienced.

Dr. Sonia Ben Cheikh from Tunisia, a virologist and a minister of public health (2019-2020), emphasized that prevention is the best method to solve the health crisis.

Emmanuel Dupuy from France, the president of the Institute for European Perspective and Security (IPSE), addressed unilateral cooperation as a solution to a crisis of this magnitude.

Since health is precious, not only at the individual but also at the collective level, Dr. Allal Amraoui highlighted the international dimension of the pandemic, the responsibility of the state to protect public health, and the responsibility of all individuals to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The first speaker, Hon. Jean-Marie Bockel, explained that in March 2020, the French city of Mulhouse saw the first coronavirus cluster. A military hospital had to be installed. The emergency services were saturated; they lacked respirators and masks. They were also the first to call on other hospitals for help, in France and also in Switzerland and Germany.

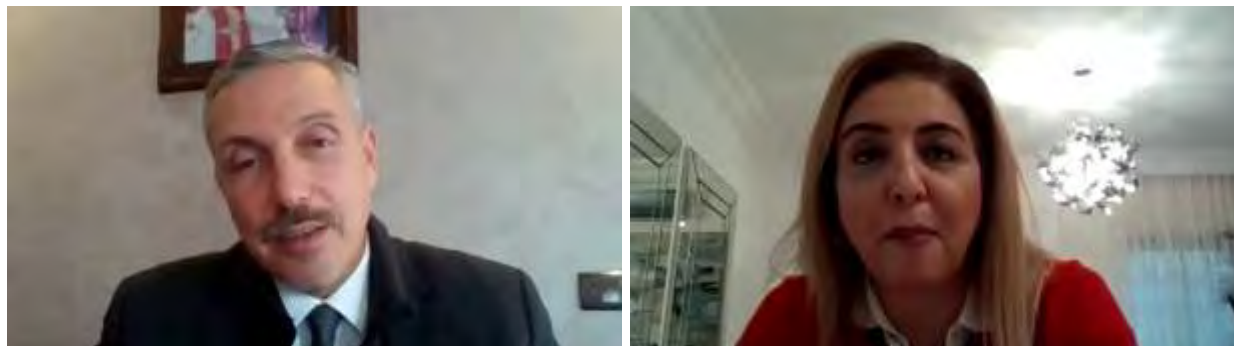
Mr. Bockel recalled that a Senate delegation of which he was a member studied the examples of Switzerland and Germany. The delegation concluded that to function well in times of crisis, France would need to decentralize more and place more responsibility in the hands of department leaders.

Mentioning that health systems have collapsed in both rich and poor countries, Mr. Amraoui, the moderator, said that we must learn from our experiences during this pandemic in order to better prepare for future crises and protect households and the most vulnerable categories of people.

Dr. Sonia Ben Cheikh spoke about her experience as Tunisian minister of health from October 2019 to March 2020. She emphasized prevention as the best solution to the pandemic: wearing masks, hand hygiene, airing houses, and social distancing, even if vaccines are available.

Tunisia, as well as Morocco, has a very well-developed basic healthcare service, with dispensaries spread throughout the country that can stop the most common infectious diseases, she said. The second level of healthcare is the hospitals.

However, with COVID-19 the whole system has been shifted to the third level of healthcare, i.e., university hospital centers. The first wave of the epidemic hardly affected Tunisia, but since the end of the summer, there have been more than 4,000 deaths. In conclusion, Dr. Ben Cheikh said that Tunisia needs to decentralize healthcare systems and focus on local systems and preventive medicine.



Dr. Amraoui quoted UN Secretary-General António Guterres -- "With solidarity we can defeat the virus" -- as he spoke of the importance of solidarity and coordinated action of the human family beyond existing divisions. He wondered whether this crisis is not the result of mismanaged globalization.

Emmanuel Dupuy said that Africa, with its young population and only 3 percent of people older than 70, has been little affected by the pandemic. He spoke of four lessons to be learned.

Investment in infrastructure is insufficient.

The health issue has a very significant impact on families in economic difficulties due to declining wages and unemployment.

There is a need to rethink health policies and governance by dedicating a larger share of GNP to the development of agriculture and business, while overcoming debt and combating tax evasion.

Partnership between countries on both the south and north of the Mediterranean must be encouraged.

Mr. Dupuy spoke of the need to address environmental issues to contribute to the resilience of health systems. Finally, he advocated the regionalization of the World Health Organization (WHO) to improve its global governance and local effectiveness.

Questions from the audience addressed natural and preventive methods, the role and effectiveness of WHO, and the availability of medicines and vaccines. Many solutions were proposed, such as the fight against excessive individualism and the return to a sense of community, a good policy that is concerned with prevention and also with mental health.

It was recommended that the Maghreb countries of Northwest Africa should cooperate and share their experience with the rest of Africa and that WHO should regionalize in order to reduce administrative costs and be more effective. Finally, it was agreed that each person needs to become responsible and to prepare for another possible crisis.

To conclude the conference, Jacques Marion, the UPF president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, gave an introduction to IAPP, which was founded in Korea in 2016 and exists all over the world. The Moroccan chapter of IAPP was inaugurated in Rabat in November 2018, he said.

For years, Mr. Marion said, UPF has been working to foster dialogue and reconciliation in regions where peace is threatened. The primary focus of UPF activities in 2021 will be the prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula and also the Middle East, he said. UPF branches in Africa, Europe and the Middle East will jointly organize conferences to promote peace and development in the region.

(Translated from the French by Yvo Bruffaerts, UPF coordinator for Western Europe. Chantal Chételat Komagata, UPF coordinator for Europe, and Alan and Brigitte Sillitoe of the Communications Department for UPF Europe and the Middle East contributed to this report.)