
World health days

INTRODUCTION

1. At two meetings held in October and November 2017, respectively, to consider, among other things, the provisional agenda of the Executive Board's 142nd session, the Officers of the Board discussed the subject of World Health Days. Noting the proliferation of requests for specialized health "days", the Officers recommended that a future session of the Board give comprehensive consideration to the costs and benefits of such "days" and referred to the possibility that the Secretariat might prepare an analysis of the matter, including a mapping of world days/weeks and an evaluation of their effectiveness, together with an examination of possible alternatives to such events.¹ The present report has been prepared as a first step to enable the Executive Board to give further consideration to the matter. It examines why such "days" have come into existence, enumerates the various events concerned and discusses approaches to monitoring their effectiveness.

Mandates and current practice

2. The observance of international days, years and other anniversaries has been a feature of WHO's activities for decades. Some activities were planned as periodic events from the outset, for example UN Global Road Safety Week). Others were first programmed for a specific year and later became regular events. For example, the Move for Health campaign was initially developed as the central focus of World Health Day 2002, after which the Health Assembly urged Member States to celebrate a Move for Health Day annually in resolution WHA55.23 (2002).

3. The numerous international days, weeks, years and decades observed by WHO include World Health Day, World No-Tobacco Day, World Tuberculosis Day, World Blood Donor Day, World Malaria Day, World Hepatitis Day, World Immunization Week and others included in Table 1. On these occasions WHO promotes activities of varying type and scale.

4. Other organizations of the United Nations system have also established days, weeks, years and decades in the field of health. They have designated specific days, weeks, years and decades as occasions to mark particular events or topics in order to promote, through awareness and action, the objectives of the organization.² An example is the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace, established in 2013 in United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/67/296.³ WHO has been explicitly

¹ See document EB142/1 (annotated) and Note for the record of the meeting of the Director-General with the Officers of the Board, held on 23 November 2017.

² United Nations. International Days [website]. New York: United Nations; 2018 (<http://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/international-days/>, accessed 27 September 2018).

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2018/03/idsdp/>

mentioned in some of the resolutions establishing such occasions¹ and may participate in activities in these contexts. WHO also participates in certain international days, weeks, years and decades established by non-State actors, for instance through co-sponsoring activities on such days.²

5. The World Health Assembly has established mandates regarding the observance of international anniversaries through resolutions. The operative language used varies, ranging from “resolving” that a certain day shall be established as an international anniversary, to “agreeing” to the establishment of an international anniversary, to “urging” Member States to celebrate a certain day as an international anniversary.³

6. In 1980 the United Nations General Assembly adopted guidelines for international years and recommended that the specialized agencies and other organizations within the United Nations system should adopt and apply them when proposals for international years were made.⁴ In the case of specialized agencies, the proclamation of international days depends on their governing bodies and internal regulations. UNESCO has established a procedure for the proclamation of international days.⁵ No guidelines exist within WHO. To date the mandate for world days in WHO has been based on a specific technical rationale in the area in which the respective day was established, rather than on an overall strategy for international anniversaries or the assessment of proposals for new international days against pre-defined and pre-agreed criteria. No single office within the United Nations appears to have responsibility for coordinating and overseeing the implementation of international days proclaimed by the various entities of the United Nations system.

Rationale and objectives

7. Beyond the overall mandates and rationale noted earlier, a broad range of specific objectives have been noted in relation to United Nations and WHO international events.

8. In 1980 the United Nations Economic and Social Council recognized the contribution that the celebration of international years “can make to the furtherance of international co-operation and understanding.”⁶

9. Objectives for international events established by resolutions of the World Health Assembly relate mainly to health promotion and awareness-raising. They include: health promotion, agenda-setting, public information and education, advocacy for action and fighting discrimination and stigma.

¹ See, for example, United Nations General Assembly resolution 61/225 (2006) on World Diabetes Day; General Assembly resolution 70/259 (2016) on United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025); General Assembly resolution 70/260 (2016) on Improving global road safety.

² See, for example, information regarding WHO’s activities on World Suicide Prevention Day and World Rabies Day at www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/wspd/en and www.who.int/rabies/WRD_landing_page/en.

³ See resolutions WHA2.35 (1949); WHA42.19 (1989); WHA50.21 (1997); WHA55.23 (2002); WHA58.13 (2005); WHA60.18 (2007); WHA63.18 (2010); WHA65.18 (2012); and WHA67.9 (2014).

⁴ United Nations General Assembly decision 35/424 (1980).

⁵ UNESCO. Procedure for the proclamation of the international days. 2017 (www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/resources/international-days-years-decades/international-days/, accessed 27 September 2018).

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Council resolution 1980/67.

10. Other objectives mentioned in Health Assembly resolutions are: to mark the culmination of a designated year; to serve as overarching event for regional and country initiatives; to reaffirm commitments; to assess progress; to organize specific activities; and to commemorate or celebrate.

Summary list of world days, weeks, years or decades related to health

11. Table 1 provides a summary of key health-related anniversaries observed by WHO, United Nations entities and partners.

- 110 events in a calendar year (102 days, 4 weeks, 4 decades)
- 13 established by WHO resolutions
- 55 established by resolutions of other United Nations organizations
- 42 events with WHO and partners without related resolutions (2 events led by WHO; 4 events led by other UN agencies; and 36 events led by other partners)

Table 1. Summary of world days, weeks, years or decades related to health, organized by month

| | World day, week, year or decade | | World day, week, year or decade |
|---------|---|----------|---|
| January | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Braille Day (other) • World Leprosy Day (other) | February | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Cancer Day (other) • International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (UN) • International Epilepsy Day (other) • International Day of Women and Girls in Science (UN) • International Childhood Cancer Day (other) • World Day of Social Justice (UN) • Rare Disease Day (other) |
| March | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zero Discrimination Day (other) • World Hearing Day (other) • International Women's Day (other) • World Kidney Day (other) • International Day of Happiness (UN) • World Oral Health Day (other) • International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UN) • World Down Syndrome Day (UN) • World Water Day (UN) • World Tuberculosis Day (WHO) • International Day of Solidarity with Detained and Missing Staff Members (UN) | April | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Autism Awareness Day (UN) • International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (UN) • World Health Day (WHO) • World Creativity and Innovation Day (UN) • World Malaria Day (WHO) • World Immunization Week (WHO) • World Day for Safety and Health at Work (other) |

| | World day, week, year or decade | | World day, week, year or decade |
|-----------|---|---------|---|
| May | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Asthma Day (other) • World Press Freedom Day (UN) • World Hand Hygiene Day (other) • International Day of the Midwife (other) • UN Global Road Safety Week (UN) • International Nurses Day (other) • International Day of Families (UN) • World Family Doctor Day (other) • International Day of Living Together in Peace (UN) • International Day of Light (UN) • International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (other) • World Hypertension Day (other) • International Day to End Obstetric Fistula (other) • Menstrual Hygiene Day (other) • World No-Tobacco Day (WHO) | June | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Blood Donor Day (WHO) • World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (UN) • International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN) • World Refugee Day (UN) • International Day of Yoga (UN) • International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (UN) |
| July | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Population Day (UN) • World Brain Day (other) • World Hepatitis Day (WHO) | August | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Breastfeeding Week (WHO) • International Youth Day (UN) • World Humanitarian Day (UN) • African Traditional Medicine Day (WHO) |
| September | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Physical Therapy Day (other) • World Suicide Prevention Day (other) • World Sepsis Day (other) • World Alzheimer's Day (other) • International Day of Peace (UN) • World Pharmacists Day (other) • World Lung Day (other) • World Rabies Day (other) • World Heart Day (other) | October | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Day for the Elderly (UN) • International Day of Non-Violence (UN) • World Mental Health Day (other) • International Day of the Girl Child (UN) • International Day for Disaster Reduction (UN) • World Sight Day (other) • World Hospice and Palliative Care Day (other) • International Day of Rural Women (UN) • World Food Day (UN) • World Statistics Day (UN) • World Osteoporosis Day (other) • United Nations Day (UN) • World Polio Day (other) • World Psoriasis Day (WHO) • World Stroke Day (other) • World Cities Day (UN) |

| | World day, week, year or decade | | World day, week, year or decade |
|------------|--|----------|---|
| November | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World Pneumonia Day (other) • World Antibiotic Awareness Week (other) • World Diabetes Day (UN) • International Day for Tolerance (UN) • International Student Day (other) • World Toilet Day (UN) • World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (UN) • World Day of Research for Health (other) • Universal Children’s Day (UN) • International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN) | December | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Day of Persons with Disabilities (UN) • International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development (UN) • International Anti-Corruption Day (UN) • Human Rights Day (UN) • International Universal Health Coverage Day (UN) • International Human Solidarity Day (UN) |
| Other days | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move for Health Day (WHO) • World Skin Health Day (other) • World Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health Day (WHO) | Decades | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Decade for Action Water for Sustainable Development (UN) • United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (UN) • United Nations Decade of Sustainable Energy for All (UN) • Decade of Action for Road Safety (UN) |

WHO: established by resolution of the World Health Assembly.

UN: established by resolution of a United Nations entity.

other: initiative of WHO and partners.

Evaluation

12. Criteria for evaluation of the effectiveness of international days, weeks and years may differ across topics, objectives, activities and events. Some key considerations for evaluation are listed below.

13. **Type of event.** Measures of success may be different for periodic days and weeks, versus a unique year or decade. A useful approach may be to review progress against actions recommended when the anniversary was established. For example, for international decades, whether mechanisms to mobilize public support and carry out the related activities were successfully established at the national level, and how.

14. **Global mandate.** Member State requests for world days on specific themes (e.g. in resolutions of the Health Assembly and United Nations General Assembly) are a key driver for observing these days. A first step would be to evaluate to what extent the observance of these days fulfils those mandates – recognizing that mandates may be variably interpreted. It may also be helpful to evaluate established mandates to determine which are still relevant; whether some could be combined; what the expected results are; and whether there are alternative ways to achieve the desired impact.

15. **Country relevance and capacities.** Evaluation could consider the relevance of a specific event in terms of country health plans and priorities, and country capacity to stage the event. On occasion the Health Assembly has noted the need for WHO to support country capacities with regard to the

observance of international anniversaries. For instance, Health Assembly resolution WHA63.18 (2010) requests the Director-General “to support, as appropriate, resource-constrained Member States in conducting events to mark World Hepatitis Day;” For World Immunization Week, resolution WHA65.18 (2012) requests the Director-General to “provide support to Member States in mobilizing the resources necessary to sustain World Immunization Week, and to encourage civil society organizations and other stakeholders to support the initiative.”

16. **Costs.** The success of world days also could be evaluated against the costs of implementing the planned event. Comparison with alternative strategies to achieve similar results, and with similar campaigns within and outside the Organization, would inform this analysis. Estimated global costs for a world day can range from US\$ 100 000¹ to US\$ 1 million.² Further costs may also be incurred for regional and country activities.

17. All three levels of WHO struggle to meet the resource requirements of organizing numerous world days, weeks and years. Currently individual technical departments are largely responsible for designing campaigns and producing materials, usually with ad hoc budgets. A centralized communications budget for prioritized world days and activities would help support this work.

18. **Spectrum of results/impact.** Currently, no standardized methods are in place to define and measure the range of potential results generated by world days. Results may include: greater public awareness, media coverage and policy dialogue; “brand promotion” and enhanced stakeholder perceptions of the organization and campaign; resource mobilization; increased service coverage (e.g. for immunization campaigns); initiation of further research; policy change; improved utilization of services; and, ultimately, benefits for health, human rights and sustainable development. Short-term results such as media coverage can be directly attributable to the world day; however the contribution of world days to longer term outcomes, including benefits to health, human rights and sustainable development, may be more difficult to assess.

19. **Benchmarks.** Across the spectrum of results for world days, the development of benchmarks may be helpful. For example, citations are an accepted measure of impact in scientific publications and could also be a benchmark for the success of WHO world days and related reports. A technical publication that generates 500 to 1000 citations is generally considered to be “high-impact”. With reference to the work of other multilateral organizations, The World Bank Group’s World Development Reports and UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children reports generate 300 to 3000 citations depending on topic and year; articles in high-impact journals can have from 300 to 11 000 citations. In comparison, WHO’s World Health Reports, formerly associated with world health days, regularly generate more than 5000 citations. The World Malaria Report 2014, associated with World Health Day and World Malaria Day in 2014, has over 17 500 citations and the World Health Report 2000 on health systems has over 15 000 citations. In the past, a flagship World Health Report was produced for World Health Day, with both the report and day focusing on the same topic. In part due to resource constraints, this practice has stopped.

¹ EB136/33 Rev.1. (2015)

² Resolution EB120/R.16 Malaria, including a proposal for establishment of World Malaria Day. In: Executive Board, 120th session, Geneva, 22–29 January 2007. Resolutions and decisions, annexes. Annex 6. Geneva, World Health Organization; 2007:125 (EB119/2006-EB120/2007/REC/1; http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB119-120-REC1/B119_B120_REC1-en.pdf, accessed 25 November 2018).

20. Beyond citations, a range of other results could also be evaluated. A report to the Seventieth World Health Assembly on antimicrobial resistance reviewed the activities conducted for World Antibiotic Awareness Week in 2016 and noted: “Engagement with a broad range of partners, opinion-leading media and the public through social media around the UN General Assembly high-level meeting on antimicrobial resistance ... was highly effective, resulting in unprecedented reporting on the issue and millions sharing WHO’s infographics on antimicrobial resistance through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.”¹ These are relatively basic ways of looking at communications coverage, and deeper analyses would be required to determine longer term impact.

21. **Monitoring and evaluation methods and resources.** Meaningful evaluation of world health days would require resources. Resource needs would vary based on the scope of the activity and methods used, which may range from narratives from the organizers to more comprehensive impact assessments.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

22. The Executive Board is invited to note the report and provide guidance to the Secretariat on future actions, if any.

= = =

¹ Document A70/12.