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IFMSA Policy Document Peace and Health

Proposed by Team of Officials

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Policy Commission

- Menna Zohny, IFMSA-Egypt, mennatallahyz@gmail.com
- Omnia Siddig Ahmed Elgailani, MedSIN-Sudan, omniaelgailani@gmail.com
- Mahmood Al-Hamody, IFMSA Liaison Officer for Human Rights and Peace Issues, lrp@ifmsa.org



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Policy Statement

Introduction

The state of health is not only defined by the personal state of wellbeing, but also by the intersection of underlying factors. Violence, in all of its types: direct, structural and cultural, affects human health either by impacting the individual wellbeing or by impacting the underlying determinants of health. On the other hand, the state of community health, as a fundamental factor for livelihood and development, can undermine or underpin peace. Hence, peace and health are closely interlinked and interdependent; one is essential to reinforce the other.

IFMSA position

The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) identifies peace as both the absence of conflict (negative peace) and the presence of equity and social justice (positive peace), and affirms that both states are mutually reinforcing. The IFMSA believes that healthcare workers, through their leadership and contact with the community, have a unique and key role in promoting peace through provision of care, promotion of community health and shaping equitable policies. The IFMSA also believes that youth, as vital members of the community, have an active role as agents of peace through empowering education and meaningful engagement. Furthermore, the IFMSA affirms that peace is fundamental for safe and equitable access to healthcare, for delivery of quality health services, continuity of medical education and full enjoyment of the right to health.

Call to action

Therefore, IFMSA calls on:

Governments to:

- Develop and implement all their policies and activities with guidance and respect for international human rights law, and comply with the principles of international law at all times;
- Refrain from engaging in acts of violence and manage all forms of conflict through peaceful resolution while advocating for peace through prevention and removal of threats to peace;
- Ensure the protection of civilians, especially youth and children, at times of armed conflict and emergencies including post-conflict periods from all forms of violence;
- Ensure full access to equal education, social justice and security without any form of discrimination for a peaceful and democratic society;
- Sign and ratify relevant international documents, treaties and conventions which aim to regulate usage, trade and all other activities related to weapons of mass destructions, conventional weapons and other types of weapons with the overall aim to reduce their usage;
- Ensure equitable distribution of resources and protection of free flow of information;
- Implement programs to educate, raise awareness and share knowledge of intercultural learning and diversities in all spheres of people's lives.

International organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to:

- Act in line with their mandates, guided by the four basic humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence; protect global, regional and national peace, facilitate efforts to build sustainable peace solutions
- Collaborate with governments in producing legislations and policies that protect and fulfill human rights and promote social justice as prerequisites for peace.
- Collaborate with other international organisations and NGOs to develop programs and initiatives to support the creation of culture of peace within all communities



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International Federation of
Medical Students' Associations

- Build the capacity within a civil society to understand the importance of peace and peacebuilding, to equip them with tools and skills to advocate for peace and peacebuilding
- Collect data on the relationship between health and peace, implication and influence of these two areas, report all forms of violence perpetrated by State or non-state actors.

The health sector and medical schools to:

- Develop and implement inclusive policies that promote tolerance among all people regarding cultural diversity and human rights
- Organize regular contacts between health professionals of all communities, through the promotion of multiple cross-community conferences, workshops and seminars on the topic of Health & Peace.
- Allocate time and funds for research on Health and Peace and the phenomena which threaten peaceful environments and societies to better guide implementation of international humanitarian law
- Actively engage in peacebuilding process through different mechanisms including humanitarian medical work and advocacy against all forms of violence and human rights violation
- Build an inclusive health system which is a basis for attaining positive peace and restore functional health system in conflict and post-conflict area
- Incorporate Peace, Peacebuilding and Health content into the medical curricula, balancing the human rights, medical and public health dimensions
- Ensure that medical students and health professionals are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to recognize and lead efforts to build and promote a culture of peace, both in their practice and in their civil lives in communities they serve.

IFMSA National Member Organisations (NMOs) and medical students to:

- Actively work on the topic, raise awareness of the current status of peace in the world, and invest time and resources into projects and activities on health aspects of peace and peacebuilding
- Relate peacebuilding and its impact to Sustainable Development Goals
- Advocate for peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, fighting against inequalities, poverty, racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, LGBTphobia
- Review national health care policies and plans in the field of peace, security and health, and check the language used on youth. Consequently develop national strategies to include inclusive language on youth and references to resolution 2250 into above mentioned documents
- Stimulate youth engagement and advocacy around the world through capacity building events and workshops
- Facilitate cross cultural learning for medical students by offering exchange programs, opportunities to attend IFMSA meetings and other possibilities for international collaboration
- Promote peace through health and discuss how it can be incorporated in medical students' curriculum, based on social accountability and human values, to enhance physician competencies



Position Paper

Background Information

The concept of peace has evolved over the years from the mere absence of war (which has been defined as negative peace) to encompass furthermore the absence of structural violence, or the presence of social justice (which has been defined as positive peace) [1][2]. This expanded definition entails the presence of attitudes, institutions and structures that promote “egalitarian distribution of power and resources” and, hence, create and sustain more peaceful societies [2][3].

In addition, in 2016, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted and ratified the Declaration on the Right to Peace marking an important milestone for the promotion of global peace and underpinning human rights towards the sustainable development of humankind. As human rights are indivisible and interdependent, the right to peace, hence, is fundamental to fulfil all human rights and is also impacted by them. Furthermore, the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) declares that health is “fundamental to the attainment of peace and security”, and the WHO also highlights that the role of health workers in preserving and promoting peace “is the most significant factor in the attainment of health for all” [4][5].

These new dimensions and perceptions of peace provide a basis for understanding the complex relation between peace and health in a given society which are all key elements for provision of health. This position paper aims to further explore this relation to shape IFMSA’s position and guide its advocacy on peace and health related issues.

Discussion

1. Negative Peace and Health

Conflict and war have devastating impacts on the health of individuals and communities. In addition to casualties and disability caused, they deplete scarce resources and disrupt the societal infrastructure [6]. Hence, they negatively impact the various social, economic and environmental determinants that shape and support health.

In addition, healthcare is also prone to be ‘weaponized’ during armed conflicts: “a strategy of using people’s need for health care as a weapon against them by violently depriving them of it” as defined by The Lancet–American University of Beirut Commission on Syria [7]. Parties to the conflict attack health facilities and personnel or interfere with the delivery of services for their own strategic goals and, hence, impeding people’s basic right to health [8].

Furthermore, with the advancement of technology, weapons and means of war advance as well. These advancements might come with major collateral impacts on health both on the short and long terms.

1.1. War and conflict

Wars, conflicts and insecurity have a profound impact on individuals' health. Casualties are only one part of the direct consequences of war, next to a damaged infrastructure and environment. Direct consequences of war result in indirect ramifications as well, such as fragile protection of human rights, displacement of people, economic instability, damaged social fabric and other social activities, increased vulnerability and birth of a culture of violence. All of these determinants and repercussions are causes of short and long-term adverse effects on the psychological and physical wellbeing of individuals. In addition, public health is also not spared with deepened disparities in health status within populations, predisposition to spread of communicable diseases, increased burden of non-communicable diseases as well as exacerbated mental health problems [9].



1.2. Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)

Weapons of Mass Destruction are defined as any radiological, chemical, biological and any weapons developed in the future that, at low-doses, can either kill or bring significant harm to a large number of people or cause destructive damage to man-made and natural structures, or the biosphere [10][11]. In addition to the grave short term impacts, WMDs may also have long lasting effects on health depending on the agent used, dose, route of exposure, and victims' susceptibility. Such effects range from malignancies, adverse pregnancy outcomes and immune system dysfunction to neurological, psychiatric and even cardiac problems [11].

Nuclear weapons, as a weapon of mass destruction, still remain a key attribute in the security policies for many countries despite the tragic historical events and catastrophic potential, and possessing them has become a perverse status symbol. According to the Federation of American Scientists, nine countries together possess around 13,000 nuclear weapons, of which roughly 1,800 assets are on high-alert status – ready to be launched within minutes of a warning [12]. The magnitude of their power is unparalleled, with the International Court of Justice stating in 1996 “the destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be contained in either space or time. They have the potential to destroy all civilization and the entire ecosystem of the planet” [13].

A single nuclear warhead, if detonated on a large city, could kill millions of people, with the effects persisting for decades, affecting generations of people living in surrounding areas. In the horrific cases of the atomic bombs which fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, resulting in the deaths of more than 200,000 people, with more continuing to die since, the ongoing medical consequences are evident [14]. Aside from the direct aftermath of burns and radiation sickness leading to the loss of life, the ongoing effects of radiation exposure led to documentation of high rates of leukemia, cancer deaths, cataracts, thyroid disease, cardiovascular disease and in utero radiation exposure leading to limb deformities and neurological defects [15].

2. Positive Peace

Positive peace, as defined by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) is “the set of attitudes, institutions and structures, which when strengthened, create and sustain a more peaceful society” [16], or as “the absence of structural violence within a society, where structural violence is defined as when damage to an individual or groups occurs because of an unequal distribution of resources (or access to them) in a given society” [1]. This shift from the perception of peace as solely the absence of war and violence - now termed Negative peace - has shed light on the idea that direct, short-term interventions to halt violence are insufficient and not sustainable. It further reinforces the need to identify the root structural causes predisposing to violence, and necessitate investing in developing the institutions and attitudes of society as prerequisites to foster peace. This also changes the rhetoric to acknowledge social injustice and systemic inequalities as invisible drivers of violence [17].

The concept of positive peace has proven important in its ability to “Predict, Prevent and Sustain”. Firstly, it can indicate the resilience of communities and their abilities to respond and adapt to shock and crisis without bowing. Thus, indicators of positive peace can help predict where breakdowns in peacefulness are likely to happen, particularly in societies with “Positive Peace Deficit”; whose score for negative peace (i.e lack of violence) outperforms the score for positive peace (i.e strong structure, institutions and attitude), which are found to be at higher risk of violence [18]. Secondly, owing to its predictive ability, positive peace can serve as a preventive tool, prioritising prevention of violence through investing in building resilient societies. Lastly, this approach provides a more sustainable solution, decreasing the chances of recurring violence and offering cost-effective structural changes [19].



The provision of positive peace has a multitude of beneficial effects on societies by addressing structures, institutions and attitudes to create a nurturing environment for individuals in a peaceful society. These effects include resilience to man-made and natural crises, better outcomes for the environment, social and economic wellbeing of individuals, higher per capita income, better performance on global goals and more peaceful societies [16]. This consequently leads to improved health status of the community as the underlying determinants of health are underpinned.

Positive peace is composed of 8 key, intersectional and interdependent pillars that provide guidance on how to achieve it. These pillars are: 1) Well-functioning Government, 2) Sound Business Environment, 3) Equitable Distribution of Resources, 4) Acceptance of the Rights of Others, 5) Good Relations with Neighbours, 6) Free Flow of Information, 7) High Levels of Human Capital and 8) Low Levels of Corruption [16]. This can be interlinked with the provision of healthcare and the AAAQ framework, where a well-functioning government will ensure the existence of high quality services, develop infrastructure to make healthcare physically and financially accessible and meet relevant standards. Equitable distribution of resources ensures services are available on non-discriminatory basis. Acceptance of the rights of others puts human rights at the center, ensuring social accessibility and acceptability of health services. Free flow of information guarantees information accessibility about services as well as reaching all members of society with limited literacy. High levels of human capital ensures availability of services owing to sufficient manpower, and lastly low levels of corruption reflects on the availability, accessibility and quality of health inclusively.

3. Public health aspects

War and conflict pose a profound challenge to the development and sustainability of a society, its health status and its integrity of healthcare systems [20]. The impacts of conflict on health extend beyond only losses in life to destruction of infrastructure, depletion of resources and disruption of services. In result, populations affected by conflict suffer from a wide spectrum of public health issues mediated by several factors including displacement, food shortages, and the collapse of basic health services, giving rise to complex humanitarian emergencies [21].

The impacts of hostilities and violence on public health can be either direct or indirect. Casualties and injuries, as direct outcomes in conflicts, overload the demand on the health facilities and services, which could already be damaged and undermined, disrupting and jeopardizing the health system [22]. On the other hand, conflicts disrupt human rights, which, in turn, impacts the health status of the affected communities as underlying determinants [23]. The lack of basic rights, as lack of security, loss of livelihood and work, food insecurity, lack of shelter or lack of safe water and sanitation, create new health vulnerabilities and reinforce pre-existing ones of those who are disadvantaged. These outcomes result in inequitable access to health care while predisposing fragile and unhealthy living conditions as a result of poverty, marginalization and discrimination [23].

4. Medical Peace Work

Health professionals, often perceived by the society as a symbol of altruism and legitimacy, hold a special position and responsibility to promote peace. Health workers can be agents of peace through various courses of action both directly and indirectly. From time to time, health professionals serve as mediators in conflicts. This was evident through many truces negotiated on medical and public health grounds, among which was the Day of Tranquility program in the Salvadoran Civil War during which the truces were maintained to allow the delivery of vaccines in the conflict zone [24]. Medical staff can also serve as a contact point between the vulnerable population in conflict-affected areas and the outside world. There have been many cases in which medical teams systematically reporting human rights abuses in the communities they serve in resulted in the cessation of the abuse [25]. In addition, healthcare work can promote peace by strengthening the social fabric. The development of an inclusive



healthcare system can bolster social responsibility and civic identity and, as a result, weaken the hate and identity-based hostilities which are a prelude to conflicts. Mental health and psychosocial support services in post-conflict areas are also a potential peace-building tool through the alleviation of suffering and supporting rehabilitation [26]. Additionally, when health professionals are fully aware of the terminology in international law, as “superfluous injury” or “unnecessary suffering”, they are able to limit the destructive consequences of war through reporting, advocacy and providing expert opinions [27]. These crucial roles of the health sector in peace building reaffirm the duty of health professionals in the peace process and the necessity for the integration of peace education and human rights based approach in the health system.

Medical education is pivotal to capacitate health professionals to actively promote and uphold peace through their practice. Until recently, peace and peacebuilding have been neglected in medical curricula. However, as conflicts arise on a global level, the need to systematically address this issue on a university level becomes apparent [28][29][30]. Human rights education in medical curricula helps build the necessary capacities in medical students to promote and safeguard peace by upholding human rights and deconstructing systems of abuses. This can prove to be an effective adjunct to international political efforts [31]. As physicians are often called to work in conflict and war stricken areas, catering to the patients' needs proves challenging in many ways, even more so for their role as mitigators of life. Without comprehensive peace education, health professionals can fall victim to counterproductive mindset and become an amplifying factor of violence themselves [32]. Building a strong educational framework on peace and peacebuilding can alleviate those challenges and give future practitioners the necessary skills and knowledge to understand intercultural realities, prevent violence and foster peace [33].

5. Youth, Peace and Health

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development puts people and their wellbeing at the center of all actions, following the principle to “leave no one behind”. SDGs goal number 16 aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”[34].

Young people comprise more than 1.8 billion of the total world population of whom 400-600 million are estimated to live in violence and conflict-affected areas [35][36]. Adolescent and youth are among the most vulnerable, and often most affected, during periods of violence and conflict. Hence, active involvement and meaningful engagement of youth in efforts for maintenance and promotion of peace and security are crucial [37]. Oftentimes, the political language addressing young people portrays them as either “passive” or “recipient” agents in conflict, or ascertains the perspective of youth as the “problem” and “perpetrators” of violence. However, such attitudes and assumptions undermine the crucial role young people play as catalysts of development in the society and active agents in promoting a more peaceful and socially inclusive environment. Conversations around youth and conflict must shift from blaming and exclusion to understanding and inclusion, focusing on their potential substantial contributions at socio-economic and political levels [38].

For young people to have a positive influence on their societies and their own lives, they need an enabling environment with peace, justice and inclusion. However, creating such an environment in any country is not possible without engaging youth meaningfully. Structural barriers, social inequities and lack of investment in relevant mechanisms remain predominant challenges hindering young people from influencing decision making processes [39].

On 9th of December 2015, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted the legally binding resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security [37]. This was a historic milestone towards recognizing and solidifying the active role of youth in peace processes at all levels. Through this resolution, Member



IFMSA

International Federation of
Medical Students' Associations

States were urged to consider establishing inclusive mechanisms for youth to participate meaningfully in peace processes and conflict resolution [37]. It further highlights that youth contribution and potential should be valued, recognized and supported as key to shaping sustainable peace and contributing to justice, reconciliation and economic prosperity [37].

Peace is achievable only through intersectoral and interprofessional collaboration. Furthermore, sustaining peace requires long term actions, education and community work. Hence, as medical students, youth, and future health care professionals, we have an undisputed duty to promote the ideals of peace and peacebuilding.

IFMSA with its strong partnerships with other youth and non-youth organisations has an ideal position to reach out and initiate collaborations with these partners to promote the ideas of peace and peacebuilding. IFMSA NMOs have the unique opportunity to work with medical students in medical schools and universities and to advocate towards these institutions to include the education on 'Peace and Health' into medical schools' curricula.

Medical students are able to provide sustainable and durable solutions for peace, because a strong value for peace and peacebuilding gained during this early, yet important, period of future health care professionals' lives, will keep preserved in a person's heart long after the graduation, during their professional careers and civil duty. The IFMSA exchange projects and the participation of students from all over the world make the organisation a unique platform for cultural and educational exchange as well as peacebuilding. Through peer-to-peer education, training and capacity-building, IFMSA can be at the forefront in the planning and delivery of workshops and campaigns to provide a youth perspective on national sustainable development discussions and to ensure that youth are meaningfully engaged.



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International Federation of
Medical Students' Associations

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