

CONSENSUS STATEMENT OF THE SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND RIGHT TO HEALTH FOR ALL



PREAMBLE

We the delegates of the South Asian Regional Conference on Traditional Medicine and Right to Health for All, coming from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, representing government departments, academic institutions, NGOs and people's organizations affirm that the celebration and fostering of cultural diversity is an essential necessity for the achievement of Health for All. The diversity of the different cultures, communities and ecosystems, translates into interaction and co-evolvement with nature. The knowledge and values embedded in this diversity have important learnings for all of us.

Traditional knowledge systems of which Traditional healing and health systems are a part, are organic expression of the cultural diversity and of the land, forests, language and life of communities. Traditional knowledge has evolved in specific contexts and needs to be appreciated in the light of its own world view. Traditional knowledge includes both the codified and the un-codified systems of healing.

Indigenous and rural communities, particularly women have been the caretakers of the eco-systems from time immemorial. They are also the custodians of the immense knowledge and diverse forms of culture that has evolved over millennia of peaceful and sustainable co-evolution with nature.

Historically indigenous communities all over the world have been systematically destroyed by the designs of colonization. This has been accompanied by a process of devaluing their cultures and knowledge systems. This has led to the extinction of numerous cultures and knowledge systems,

and the near extinction of many others. The modern attempt at cultural and economic homogenization for the benefit of the global market has devastating effects on these cultures.

Similarly the dominance of Western bio-medicine and a science based on a Cartesian split between the mind and the matter, the industrial revolution and an attempt to control rather than co-evolve with nature, has meant that all other knowledge systems are considered as inferior or mere objects of curiosity and appropriation. This has led to erosion of knowledge and confidence of these systems and has also resulted in large scale unmet need for health care.

VISION

We reiterate the vision set out in the People's Health Charter for, “Equity, ecologically-sustainable development and peace” and, “a world in which a healthy life for all is a reality; a world that respects, appreciates and celebrates all life and diversity; a world that enables the flowering of people's talents and abilities to enrich each other; a world in which people's voices guide the decisions that shape our lives.”

EARLIER STATEMENTS

We acknowledge the following statements/declarations that reflect the continuing and historic efforts towards celebrating and preserving of diversity of healing systems:

- Convention on Bio-diversity
- The Alma Ata declaration
- The Chaibasa statement
- The Global People's Charter for Health
- The Cuenca Declaration of People's Health Movement

TRIPS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL TRADE REGIMES

We also express our concern at the harmful effects of the trade-led agreements that institutionalize unjust international trade regimes. The present trade regimes are inequitable and adversely affect biodiversity as well as traditional knowledge systems. The focus should be on developing strong national level laws to protect biodiversity as well as rural livelihoods. All clauses in the various regimes that encourage the extraction of natural resources, as well as bio-prospecting, where age old wisdom of communities is exploited commercially with no benefit to the local people need to be reviewed and rewritten to protect the interests of the poor and marginalized persons as opposed to those of the corporate industry.

AFFIRMATIONS

The present scenario is characterized by the paradox of increased usage of non-allopathic¹ systems in developed countries and urban centers and continuing dependence of large proportions of indigenous and rural

¹ Allopathic: western bio-medical system of medicine

communities in the developing world on these systems. At the same time, there is a systematic erosion of these Traditional Knowledge systems as characterized by the increasing age of the surviving practitioners and the neglect of these systems by the younger generations as well as an erosion of the bio-diversity that sustains these systems. This is partly a historical process, a continuation of the destruction wrought by colonization and also a result of forcibly altering the relationships between traditional communities and nature, degradation of the natural environment and the domination of the laws of the market over the laws of nature.

We affirm that Traditional Healing systems are not mere therapeutic alternatives to western bio-medicine. They are a totally different paradigm of healing and cannot be constrained to the point of interaction between a person requiring health care and a healer. Traditional systems are ways of life and holistic systems for the promotion of health in addition to having curative components, and should be treated as such. Moreover Traditional systems are individual specific and holistic and reducing them to alternatives to western medical cures is completely missing their message and significance.

Evaluation of any system of healing needs to be done systematically. At the same time it needs to be sensitive and cognizant to the paradigm and cosmology from which it evolved. Evaluation needs to be done keeping the ultimate goal of Health for All in mind. Evaluation needs to actively and respectfully involve both the healers, as well as people using the various systems, to take into account their perspectives and value systems.

The natural environment is crucial for the health of the human race as well as for the sustenance of traditional knowledge systems. It is absolutely essential that any further degradation of the natural environment be stopped forthwith. Another way of degradation of the environment is by the commodification of natural resources and their exploitation for profit. Here we express our concern against the concept of Intellectual Property Rights for natural resources and traditional knowledge linked to these, especially those aspects that lead to the exploitation of communities that depend on and have protected these resources. We also strongly support the protection of traditional users' rights in addition to protection of traditional knowledge. Along with this it is also important to protect the livelihoods and the knowledge of traditional practitioners of both the codified and un-codified systems.

We affirm that every decision taken that will impact on the people of the world should be guided by people in all aspects of decision making, implementation and evaluation.

Ultimately the health of the people anywhere in the world is an emergent state of a complex of interactions and can occur only in the context of equity, peace and ecologically sustainable development. However in today's day and age there are numerous processes that are increasing inequity and poverty leading to ill-health. Thus regardless of the therapeutic prowess of any single system of medicine it is essential to make a concerted effort to wipe out poverty and inequity. It is important not to lose sight of the broader social determinants of health.

TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS AND HEALTH FOR ALL

All knowledge systems can contribute towards the achievement of Health for All. While resisting the tendency of any system to monopolize, we believe that every region/community must be free to develop its own system which is safe, accessible, equitable and efficacious, and does not effect the community's self-reliance and empowerment.

Every knowledge system of the world has a crucial contribution to make towards the achievement of Health for All, no one knowledge system has a monopoly. Any attempt at domination can only be detrimental to the health of the people at large, but especially to the people who are marginalized by the present market dominated development model and continue to depend on these systems for their health in increasingly vitiated environments.

The contribution of the Traditional systems to Health for All should not be conceptualized only from the perspective of a therapeutic alternative, or their healers merely as human resources to universalize western bio-medical interventions focused on disease.

It is their holistic conceptualization of health and healing, with the emphasis on harmony and the conceptualization of health as a dynamic balance, their respect for the environment and for fellow humans and their respect of the laws of nature rather than the laws of the market that make these systems important for the achievement of Health for All.

CALL FOR ACTION

- *This is being done for the following levels: Global, Regional and Local.*
- *Under each it was suggested that we have two sections – one on what we want and one on specific actions that will bring these about.*

At Global Level

What needs to be done?

- Initiation of dialogue to increase understanding between systems and initiate multi-disciplinary research.
- Initiation of processes to resist trade led agreements.
- Initiation of processes to initiate urgent efforts to protect and rejuvenate the environment.

How to do it?

- Formation of global level committee/study circle – initiators could be World Health Organisation (WHO) and the People's Health Movement (PHM).
- Involvement of this committee in the activities of various movements against the trade led agreements..
- Concerted efforts to garner the political will to protect and

rejuvenate the environment.

At Regional Level

What needs to be done?

- Initiation of dialogue to increase understanding between systems and initiate multi-disciplinary research.
- Efforts to standardise and exchange resources and technologies within countries of the region.

How to do it?

- Formation of a regional committee such as a SAARC level committee – the participants of this conference can be a nucleus to initiate the dialogue
- This committee can initiate dialogues with various government institutions/ministries to facilitate such resource/technology sharing.
- Exploring processes such as regional licensing, exchange of faculty, common curricula and evolution of continuing education curricula to build capacity at the regional level.

At Local Level

What needs to be done?

- Protection of bio-diversity.
- Strengthening livelihoods of traditional practitioners.
- Documentation of bio-diversity.
- Revitalization of local health traditions.

How to do it?

- Formation of national level committees – including the participants and large civil society networks like the PHM.
- Initiation of micro-projects as learning and operational research.
- Conferences/workshops to disseminate various ideas / solutions.

A PEOPLE-CENTRED HEALTH SECTOR

“This Charter calls for the provision of universal and comprehensive primary health care, irrespective of people’s ability to pay. Health services must be democratic and accountable with sufficient resources to achieve this.

This Charter calls on people of the world to:

.....Support, recognize and promote traditional and holistic healing systems and practitioners and their integration into Primary Health Care”.

People’s Charter for Health, 2000