

YMCA MODEL UNITED NATIONS 2025

Topic Descriptions

Committee: World Health Organization

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Topic 1: Addressing Health Challenges in Humanitarian Crises

Introduction & Historical Background

Humanitarian crises are emergency situations that create life-threatening conditions for communities. These include natural disasters, political unrest, and population displacement, which lead to increased mortality, malnutrition, disease, and other healthcare emergencies. In the midst of these crises, the need for effective humanitarian aid becomes critical to alleviate suffering and save lives.

Humanitarian efforts during conflict were first documented during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1814), when surgeons became vital for their ability to quickly return soldiers to the battlefield. The renowned **International Red Cross** and **Red Crescent Movement** were created by Henry Durant after witnessing the neglect of wounded soldiers at the Battle of Solferino. The organizations rapidly expanded globally, establishing national units to care for injured soldiers in conflict zones. Over the past three centuries, humanitarian efforts and organizations like the Red Cross have evolved from government-run initiatives focused on military health to **comprehensive care for all citizens affected by conflict and disasters**.

Current Status

With escalating political unrest, climate change disasters, economic instability, and widespread displacements, the demand for humanitarian services is more critical than ever. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that, in 2024, 300 million people will require humanitarian assistance and protection due to the various conflicts in their regions. Organizations like **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)** and the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** consistently deploy emergency medical teams and mobile clinics to crisis areas. The ICRC has around 20,000 staff members globally, providing aid and ensuring the safety of victims. However, humanitarian healthcare has faced immense challenges, with attacks on healthcare facilities and workers becoming increasingly common. In 2023, there were over 1,400 attacks on healthcare infrastructure in conflict zones like Ukraine, causing significant casualties and disruptions to essential services.

Themes to Consider

Access to healthcare services becomes increasingly difficult to provide within areas impacted by humanitarian crises. Humanitarian workers regularly face significant **safety risks** which hinder their ability to access and treat patients. Parties involved in **armed conflicts** and **violence** can attempt to weaken vulnerable communities by obstructing humanitarian aid through the harassment and terrorization of humanitarian workers. **Infrastructure damage** caused by such conflicts and or natural disasters also restricts the availability of medical care for affected populations due to a shortage of suitable facilities available to accommodate healthcare clinics. While humanitarian zones are recognized as safe, demilitarized zones outside of armed conflict, it can still be dangerous to cross through those regions; imported resources can be limited due to funding, supply, and personnel shortages.

Humanitarian crises response has benefited from the use of emergency medical response teams, immunization campaigns (such as those led by UNICEF and WHO), readily

available emergency health kits, specialized training programs for humanitarian healthcare service, mobile clinics, and other resources. By deploying humanitarian assistance promptly and efficiently (through timely intervention, strategic planning, and innovative assistance strategies), the risk of a secondary crisis (e.g. famine or infectious disease outbreaks) can be mitigated.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the WHO ensure equitable access to healthcare services for populations affected by humanitarian crises, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas?
2. What strategies can the WHO utilize to prevent and control disease outbreaks in overcrowded humanitarian zones and emergency shelters?
3. How can the WHO improve the coordination and efficiency of emergency medical teams in responding to natural disasters and emergencies?

Resources

1. Fogarty International Center. "Advancing Health Research in Humanitarian Crises." 25 July 2023, <https://www.fic.nih.gov/About/center-global-health-studies/Pages/health-research-humanitarian-crises.aspx>.

Description: Provides summary of the importance of global health research on improving quality of healthcare in humanitarian emergencies.

2. Keck School of Medicine of USC. "What Is the Role of Public Health in a Humanitarian Crisis?" 8 November 2023, <https://mphdegree.usc.edu/blog/humanitarian-crisis>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Explores how public health interventions play a crucial role in humanitarian crises support and protection of affected population.

3. Kluge, Hans. "Why we need to strengthen health responses in humanitarian crises." World Economic Forum, 26 February 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/02/why-we-need-to-strengthen-health-responses-in-humanitarian-crises/>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: The article advocates for enhancing health responses during humanitarian crises, providing current event examples.

4. Kohrt, Brandon A., et al. "Health research in humanitarian crises: an urgent global imperative." *BMJ Global Health*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6861060/>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Comprehensive scientific journal that discusses the urgent need for health research in humanitarian crises.

5. "Public Health Challenges During a Humanitarian Crisis | Rollins School of Public Health | Emory University | Atlanta GA." *Rollins School of Public Health*, 25 October 2023, <https://sph.emory.edu/news/news-release/2023/10/public-health-challenges-during-humanitarian-crisis.html>.

(Highly Recommended) Description: Explains how humanitarian emergencies worsen health issues, particularly impacting vulnerable groups in conflict-affect regions like Gaza.

6. "We coordinate." OCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/ocha/g/we-coordinate>. (OCHA)

Description: Provides information on the United Nations Officer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Topic 2: Foodborne Illnesses

Introduction & Historical Background

Foodborne illnesses are caused by consuming contaminated food or beverages that contain bacteria, viruses, parasites, or toxins produced by microorganisms. Food sources are often contaminated during the processing, packaging, and transportation stages of production, as well as through natural occurrences like toxins and environmental pollutants. Crop contamination may arise from exposure to contaminated water, soil, or pesticides, while in livestock, it can result from contaminated feed and unsanitary conditions (e.g. small and overpopulated sheds, filthy feedlots, unmanaged bodily waste in enclosures, etc) .

Throughout history, **poor sanitation practices** in processing plants, farms, and markets have led to widespread foodborne illnesses, causing outbreaks of diseases like typhoid fever, tuberculosis, and cholera. These diseases were often linked to consuming food and drink tainted by the feces and urine of animals/crops carrying the pathogens. In 1963, the Codex Alimentarius Commission was established by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to set international food safety standards. Additionally, nations have implemented their own **food safety protocols**, with the United States establishing bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to **regulate food safety and public health**, effectively managing potential outbreaks of foodborne diseases.

Current Status

There has been a direct link between food safety and nutrition and food security internationally, as an estimated **600 million people fall ill annually** after consuming contaminated food—420,000 of such cases ending in mortality. Children below the age of 5 are of the most vulnerable population to foodborne illnesses, as they carry around 40% of the total foodborne disease burden worldwide. In regions such as Southeast Asia, more than 15 million people are burdened annually by diseases like Salmonella, E. coli, Norovirus, and Hepatitis A. These diseases are worsened by the region's rapid population and economic growth, which boosts agricultural output and meat production. This often leads to neglect of sanitary standards to meet demand, increasing the prevalence of disease-ridden food. While efforts remain to prevent contamination and control foodborne illnesses, challenges such as inadequate food safety regulations, improper food handling practices, and emerging pathogens continue to contribute to the global burden of contaminated foods.

Themes to Consider

The future of foodborne illness prevention is dependent on strengthening worldwide **food safety regulations**. Global cooperation is required to effectively implement and enforce comprehensive food safety regulations and standards to ensure food is safely produced and processed before distribution and consumption. This involves the promotion of improved **agricultural practices**, setting sanitation standards and exercising the safe and sustainable production of crops by enforcing producers to minimize the risk of contamination during growing, harvesting, and handling of products. The modern food supply chain has introduced additional opportunities for contamination and mishandling because of multiple-border trade routes and

producers prioritizing profit over safety. Therefore, **enhancing hygiene and sanitation standards** throughout the supply chain is crucial. Regulations should promote rigorous hygiene practices among food handlers, equipment sanitation, and cleanliness in preparation and storage areas.

Education and awareness programs, especially in areas more susceptible to contaminated food sources, can play a crucial role in emphasizing the importance of hygiene and sanitation practices for all active roles within the food industry from producer to consumer. When addressing bacterial, viral, and parasitic risks associated with contaminated food sources, **prioritizing research and innovation** in infectious diseases can empower struggling nations to enhance detection, prevention, and control of identified foodborne pathogens. This, in turn, can contribute to enhancing food safety throughout the global supply chain.

Discussion Questions

1. What can the WHO do to support international collaboration and better track and respond to foodborne disease outbreaks across borders?
2. How can the WHO help countries improve sanitation practices along the entire food supply chain to minimize the risk of contamination and prevent foodborne illnesses from worldwide distribution?
3. How can the WHO collaborate with international organizations and governments to launch initiatives that increase global awareness about foodborne illnesses and their prevention?

Resources

1. "About Codex | CODEX ALIMENTARIUS FAO-WHO." *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*,
<https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/about-codex/en/#c453333>.

Description: Provides information on the Codex Alimentarius to help understand previous global food safety initiatives.

2. Ali, Sultan, and Abdullah F. Alsayeqh. "Review of major meat-borne zoonotic bacterial pathogens." National Library of Medicine, 15 December 2022,
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9799061/>.

Description: Information on how foodborne diseases presents itself in livestock meat (zoonotic diseases).

3. "Food safety." *World Health Organization (WHO)*, 19 May 2022,
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/food-safety>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Provides a grand overview of the multitude of facets involved in food safety, addressing illnesses, priorities, WHO response, and more.

4. "International Cooperation on Food Safety." *FDA*, 25 March 2024,
<https://www.fda.gov/food/international-interagency-coordination/international-cooperation-food-safety>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Addresses the importance of international cooperation to assure food is safely transported throughout the food supply chain

5. Scallan, Elaine, et al. "Foodborne Diseases in the Global Community - PMC." *NCBI*, National Library of Medicine, 10 November 2004, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3329057/>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: The journal discusses the prevalence and impact of foodborne diseases on the global population.

6. "WHO steps up action to improve food safety and protect people from disease." *World Health Organization (WHO)*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-06-2021-who-steps-up-action-to-improve-food-safety-and-protect-people-from-disease>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: The article outlines the World Health Organization's efforts to enhance food safety measures and prevent diseases linked to food consumption.

Topic 3: Maternal and Child Health

Introduction & Historical Background

Maternal and Child Health focuses on the well-being and healthcare needs of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, as well as the health and development of infants and children. Services provided for maternal and child healthcare include prenatal care, mental health services, safe childbirth practices, vaccinations, nutrition support, and early child development programs. The United Nations prioritizes maternal and child health in its third Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), aiming to reduce global maternal and child mortality by ensuring **access to reproductive healthcare** and advocating for **family planning** (contraception). Initiatives like Every Woman Every Child (EWEC) and the WHO's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health have made strides in improving maternal and child healthcare services. Yet, considerable efforts are still needed to tackle persisting challenges.

Current Status

Maternal health indicators reveal significant disparities in the quality of care worldwide. Despite efforts to improve access to skilled midwives, emergency obstetric care, and family planning services, maternal mortality rates remain high in regions like sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where healthcare access is limited. **Socioeconomic inequalities** exacerbate this issue, with nearly 95% of maternal deaths occurring in low-income countries lacking adequate healthcare for expectant women. Child health is particularly vulnerable in the first month of infancy, with nearly half of childhood deaths under 5 occurring during this period. In the past two decades, despite a notable 34% decrease in the maternal mortality ratio (MMR, number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births), maternal and childhood mortality rates remain alarmingly high. Premature birth, birth complications, neonatal infections, and congenital anomalies continue to be the primary causes of neonatal mortality, posing significant risks to infant well-being.

Themes to Consider

Addressing **socioeconomic barriers** to healthcare for women and children is vital for improving their well-being. Countries should prioritize essential newborn care by ensuring access to antenatal (before birth) and postnatal care (after birth), skilled health personnel, and emergency obstetric and newborn services. Financing and allocating resources to high-impact interventions, such as care for small and sick newborns and emergency obstetric care, are essential for reducing maternal and newborn mortality rates. Access to **sexual and reproductive healthcare services** in impoverished areas is essential for empowering young women who often lack autonomy over pregnancy decisions; however, these services are frequently too costly or entirely unavailable. These inequalities put them at risk of unwanted or dangerous pregnancies, resulting in an increased possibility of maternal and infant mortality due to inadequate prenatal care.

Moreover, access to **mental health services** during pregnancy and postpartum is essential to support mothers experiencing conditions like postpartum depression. Mental health programs provide resources and support to help mothers cope with the emotional challenges of

motherhood, reducing the risk of stress, anxiety, and depression, benefiting both mothers and their children. Unfortunately, maternal mental health is sometimes stigmatized due to insufficient awareness of the issue and conflicting cultural attitudes in various countries.

Immunization is also crucial in preventing the spread of infectious diseases like Malaria, HIV, and Tuberculosis in children. It also protects pregnant women and their unborn babies from severe complications before, during, and after pregnancy. However, while vaccinations are readily accepted in first-world countries, many developing nations face challenges in providing adequate immunizations, especially in densely populated, underprivileged areas.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the WHO address socioeconomic disparities in maternal and child health outcomes to ensure equitable care for all populations?
2. What strategies can be implemented to reduce maternal mortality among underprivileged and marginalized and minority populations, including indigenous communities and refugees?
3. How can the WHO ensure universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, respecting individual rights and cultural beliefs?

Resources

1. "Every Woman Every Child ∴ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform." *Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/everywomaneverychild>.

Description: Briefly summarizes the mission of the Every Woman Every Child initiative established by the UN.
2. Kanem, Natlia. "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: The Cornerstone of Sustainable Development." UN Chronicle, August 2018, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-cornerstone-sustainable-development>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Underscores the critical importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights as fundamental to sustainable development.

3. "Maternal mortality." *World Health Organization (WHO)*, 26 April 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Overviews the overarching ideas surrounding maternal mortality with statistics and helpful solutions.

4. "Newborn mortality." *World Health Organization (WHO)*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/newborn-mortality>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Overviews the overarching ideas surrounding newborn mortality with statistics, causes, WHO responses, strategies, and more crucial information.

5. PAI. "Making the Connection Between Maternal Health and Reproductive Rights." 28 July 2015,
https://pai.org/resources/making-the-connection-between-maternal-health-and-reproductive-rights/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwo6GyBhBwEiwAzQTmczcYqbbk1MCXXbet1vjKrn4z0tqaB9VLt-HjWx5hRhEsHYeYqURpxoCZUoQAvD_BwE.

Description: The article delves into how ensuring access to reproductive rights correlates with improved maternal health outcomes.

6. Sahoo, Krushna C., et al. "Challenges in Maternal and Child Health Services Delivery and Access during Pandemics or Public Health Disasters in Low-and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review." 30 June 2021,
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8306470/>.

(Highly Recommend) Description: Examines challenges in delivering maternal and child services during pandemics or public health disasters in underprivileged countries.