

Mr. Moderator,
Fellow panelists,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I convey to you all the warm greetings from our Minister for Health. He could not attend this session due to other preoccupations. Until late last week we were expecting the Health Secretary i.e. the Vice Minister to attend. However, for last minute unavoidable reasons, he could not make it either. And has asked me to carry the flag. He sent me a country paper on Bangladesh's efforts at meeting the Health related MDGs, which I have arranged to circulate among the delegations through the courtesy of the conference secretariat. I hope you will be able to take some time out to read it.

In spite of efforts, I could not get a copy of the detailed programme or agenda of the conference before this morning. So I was actually preparing myself for presenting the country paper. However, that not being particularly relevant to this session's topic, I have decided to make a very brief presentation and share some of my very layman's thoughts about health literacy and the role of the media as well as a few comments on the experience in Bangladesh.

In a broad sense, media is all the tools and vehicles through which we communicate at individual as well as group levels. Thus everything ranging from languages, conversations and dialogues between individuals and groups, lessons and lectures by teachers, statements by opinion leaders, books, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, cinema, performing and visual arts come under this definition. However, for our discussion here, it seems that, we are focusing more on the traditional and narrow concept of the print and the electronic media. These would also include the advertising and cinematographic media.

Along with food, shelter and education Health is a most basic of human rights and states have an obligation to ensure basic health services for its citizens.

Rightly therefore, four of the eight MDGs set by the world leaders at the turn of the millennium are directly health related. Health services do not end with providing a few hospitals, clinics, doctors, nurses and some medicine. Equal and often more important is ensuring health awareness. This involves dissemination of information and raising awareness among citizens about: their rights: services and facilities available, basic health and sanitation guidelines, nature of common, contagious and dangerous diseases and how to prevent or seek to treat them; guidelines for responding to breakout of epidemics; issues of child and maternal health; family planning; nutrition; good practices and not so good practices in life style etc.

While providing education and training to produce doctors, nurses medical and health technicians, paramedics, health and medical scientists, researchers, other public health officials etc. are important components of health literacy, here, we are focusing on public awareness of all relevant health related issues.

Major challenges we face in efforts to promote Health literacy are:

- i) Prevalence of illiteracy;
- ii) Social/religious taboos, superstitions, myths;
- iii) Production and designing of education and campaign materials; and
- iv) Formation and implementation of programmes and strategies;

I think instead of talking about Health literacy we should talk about health education and communication to by pass the challenges caused by significant prevalence of basic illiteracy or use the terms interchangeably. In this session, we are focusing on role of the media in promoting Health education and communication.

At the time of independence of Bangladesh in 1971, we started at a very low base on basic literacy, health care and health literacy. Compared to the base we have achieved great success over the last 38 years. Basic literacy rate

has risen from 27% to 67%. Enrolment in schools has reached over 95% with gender parity in enrollment.

If you read the Bangladesh country paper on Health related MDGs that we have circulated, you will see that in spite of Bangladesh lagging behind in many areas as a least developed country, it has made promising progress in meeting the MDGs, more so in health related MDGs. This success has been possible to a large extent because of our success in promoting Health literacy, Health education and communication. This success is the result of our three decades of public sector efforts through a huge network of field level health and family welfare workers and paramedics, supplemented by large number of NGO's and civil society organizations, school curriculum in Health, nutrition, sanitation and supported hugely by the media. Harnessing of traditional opinion leaders like village elders, imams, priest, folk-performers etc. also helped significantly.

Unfortunately Health literacy is not good business. So the private sector is not entering the sector as needed. So the State needs to continue to play the leading role in promoting health literacy and health education. Of course NGO's and civil society organizations can and are playing extremely important supplementary roles. It is important to further strengthen the Government – NGO partnership in this regard.

Some of our major success in Health literacy / education has been in the field of population control and family planning, reducing maternal and child mortality, preventing diarrheal diseases and drastically reducing deaths from such diseases, Extended immunization programme, eradication, prevention or treatment of diseases like polio, tetanus, malaria, tuberculosis and HIV aids etc.

The media has played a very important and positive role in this regard. The media has the advantage of being a two-way channel of communication. It is the vehicle for both the demand side as well as for the supply side of the Health literacy issues, articulating demands and disseminating responses. It also plays the very important roles of a monitor, auditor and guardian.

From very early days the government has successfully used radio broadcasting as well as showing of documentary and docu-feature films at grass root levels. The print media i.e. the newspapers and magazines have also been playing an ever increasing role. With the advent of the television since the mid 1960's in our areas this media has also been playing incrementally increasing and important role. Bill boards, booklets and brochures including those of health and medical businesses have also been contributing significantly.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that while the media contributes enormously and positively in promoting health and health literacy, it has the potential for spreading misinformation or disinformation and perhaps help precipitating panic in certain situations. So the media needs to be extra cautious in ensuring the accuracy of information, particularly while they relate to health issues. Some times they would need to take responsibility and use self-censorship if necessary. In certain situations it is very important that the media avoid succumbing to the temptations of scoop hunting and sensationalism.

Finally may I congratulate and thank the hosts and the organizers i.e Chinese Ministry of Health and the ECOSOC from the bottom of my heart for the excellent and comprehensive conference arrangement and warm hospitality extended to the delegations.

Thank you all.