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Conference Addresses Role of Universities in Improving Global Health

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By Jessica Scully

More than 1,800 people from 50 countries came to San Francisco to discuss global health challenges and celebrate successes in a three-day conference hosted by [UCSF Global Health Sciences](#).

"[Bridging to a Sustainable Future in Global Health](#)," the 2016 Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) conference, was held April 9 to 11 in downtown San Francisco. Jaime Sepulveda, chair of the conference's local organizing committee and executive director of UCSF Global Health Sciences, said the committee designed the conference to reflect a "larger perspective of global health."

"This, we decided, would be a conference where themes such as planetary health, global health security, global health finances, refugee crises, and others were included," he said.

In his opening remarks for the conference, Sepulveda noted the event was the first CUGH conference since the United Nations issued its [2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). While some of these goals may be overly ambitious or unclear, he said, they raise an important question: what should universities' role be in improving global health?

"In my view, universities should not only be about knowledge creation through research or knowledge transmission to their students, but we also have to be about the translation and application of that knowledge to improve people's lives and social conditions worldwide," he said.

To continue existing global health successes and achieve new ones, individuals, universities, and countries must accept their interdependence in the modern world and work together, he said.

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together," Sepulveda said, quoting an African aphorism.

"Remember, in global health, we want to go far, and that means we have to go together," he added.

Conference topics reflected this focus on global and interdisciplinary cooperation and sustainability. Richard Horton, editor of the British medical journal *The Lancet*, delivered the [conference's first keynote speech](#).

Quoting authors ranging from Virgil to Friedrich Nietzsche, Horton argued that a focus exclusively on human health would fail. He argued for a new focus on planetary health, defined as the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.

Accepting that civilization depends on natural systems requires a new way of thinking about the planet and its resources, he said.

"I'm all for human rights, but I'm not for the right to destroy. And right now the right to destroy is one of those rights that governs and typifies the way we live on this planet," he said.

Other conference topics included "refugees, failed states, and weak governance settings: the future of global health," "local, national, and global efforts to reduce household air pollution: cleaning up the house," and "what's 'hot' in global health technology."

Presenters and panelists embodied the conference's focus. A panel on urban health challenges and opportunities included the mayor of Cali, Columbia; a Kenyan health researcher, and a UCLA urban planning professor and associate dean.

A discussion on how to finance global health covered current pressures on donors, their expectations for financial contributions from low and middle income countries, and how countries can transition to financing health programs domestically. Experts from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, and Mexico's Carlos Slim Foundation provided their insights.

On the final day of the conference, UC President Janet Napolitano joined leaders from Katmandu University in Nepal and the University of Miami in a panel discussion on the role of universities in global health, including ways to promote partnerships and institutional changes.

In her comments at the conference's end, Napolitano said she was "certain that the conversations and collaborations sparked here over the past few days will develop further, and help us address some of the most pressing issues our society faces."

For UCSF Global Health Sciences, the conference was "an exciting opportunity to celebrate the great progress that's been made over the past 15 to 20 years in global health, but then to turn our attention to what the future might hold," said Colin Boyle, deputy director of UCSF Global Health Sciences and also a member of the conference's organizing committee.

The 2016 event's location in San Francisco represented a "homecoming," he said. CUGH began through the work of Haile Debas, the founding executive director of UCSF Global Health Sciences, former dean of UCSF's school of medicine, and a former UCSF vice chancellor and chancellor.

"As global health became more common in the academic field, with more and more universities launching programs in that area, he wanted to create kind of a forum and an institution that could bring different universities together to educate each other, to learn from each other, and to work together on common areas of interest," Boyle said.

CUGH's inaugural meeting was held in San Francisco in 2008. The consortium was housed at UCSF until 2012, when it became an independent organization located in Washington, D.C., Boyle said.