

COMMUNIQUE OF THE 2ND BIENNIAL DELEGATES' CONFERENCE OF THE WEST AFRICAN HEALTH SECTOR UNIONS' NETWORK (WAHSUN) HELD ON APRIL 18-20, 2016 AT THE BENIN ROYAL HOTEL, COTONU, REPUBLIQUE DU BENIN

Introduction

The 2nd Biennial Conference of the West African Health Sector Unions' Network (WAHSUN) was held on April 18-20, 2016 at the Benin Royal Hotel, Cotonu, Republique du Benin. Delegates from health sector unions in: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo participated actively in the Conference-in-session.

After extensive deliberation on issues of critical concern to the health of the people in West Africa, the health system and the conditions of the health workforce in the sub-region, the Conference-in-session resolved thus:

Resolutions:

1. Combating Communicable Diseases;

Conference-in-session observed the severe challenges that have been faced with the outbreak of such communicable diseases as: Ebola Virus Disease; Meningitis; Cholera & Lassa Fever, in several countries within the region over the past two years. The spread of these diseases, it noted is attributed to weak health systems and the prevalence of dire socio-economic conditions of the majority of the populations. It equally appreciated the role of WAHSUN member-unions in playing a central role in the national responses, which have resulted in the curtailing of such outbreaks, despite the huge logistical constraints they faced.

WAHSUN thus calls on the governments of ECOWAS member-states to prioritize health, by deploying adequate resources required for crisis preparedness. The need for national ministries of health to deepen collaboration with WAHSUN member unions for more robust response cannot be over emphasized;

2. Social Care and Protection for Ebola Survivors:

Conference-in-session bemoaned the abandonment of Ebola survivors and their family members, by the governments of countries that have been badly hit by the scourge particularly in Sierra Leone and Liberia, as it undermines the extent of co-operation that could be expected from communities in the possible situation of any subsequent outbreak of communicable diseases.

WAHSUN thus calls on the Liberian and Sierra Leonean governments to ensure social care and protection for the affected persons. Member states of ECOWAS and the international community are enjoined to render the necessary assistance the Sierra Leonean and Liberian governments require;

3. Health Insurance Schemes for Health Workers

Conference-in-session considered the fact that health workers have repeatedly put their lives on the line in the course of caring for individuals affected by diseases such as Lassa fever and particularly EVD. Even with the best form of personal protective equipment, the lives of hundreds of health workers have been lost in the line of duty, with their families left to fend for themselves.

In the face of these developments, WAHSUN calls for the establishment of health insurance schemes for health workers in all the ECOWAS member-states. Further, ECOWAS member states are called upon to respect International Labour Standards on Occupational Health and Safety, and as well guarantee the security of health workers;

4. Health Employment and Career Progression

Conference-in-session was alarmed by the worsening state of low employment in the face of unemployed health professionals, vis a vis growth in populations. The embargo on recruitment of health workers, despite this debilitating reality, was particularly considered worrisome, as was the stagnation of the career progression of the subsisting workforce, resulting in the dampening of morale, in most of the countries.

WAHSUN thus demand that the member states of ECOWAS embark on mass recruitment at all levels of healthcare delivery, and the promotion of health workers as and when due, for the health workforce constitute the bulwark for safeguarding the health of society as a whole, as we have recently seen;

5. Reinstate Liberian Workers' Leaders

Conference-in-session expressed its angst at the refusal of the Liberian government to reinstate comrades George Poe Williams and Joseph Tamba being the President and General Secretary of the National Health Workers' Association of Liberia, for exercising their legitimate rights of organizing a trade union. WAHSUN fully supports NAHWAL's filing of a complaint against the Liberian government to the ILO, using its supervisory mechanism.

Conference-in-session thus calls on the international trade union movement and well-meaning governments across the world to support the struggle for trade union rights and the reinstatement of comrades George Poe Williams and Joseph Tamba in Liberia as well as due recognition of the rights of NAHWAL to organize by the Liberian government, at the forthcoming International Labour Conference;

6. Against Privatization: Health is a Fundamental Human Right

Conference-in-session reflected on the spate of privatization drives in the health sector across the sub-region taking different guises such as outsourcing/contract staffing and "Public Private Partnerships". Considering the universal recognition of health as a

fundamental human right, WAHSUN reiterates its position that privatization of healthcare delivery is antithetical to the goal of Universal Health Coverage and attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conference-in-session thus condemns the rabid thrust of privatization, including of teaching hospitals as well as primary health care centres in countries such as Nigeria and Togo. WAHSUN further calls on the trade union movement in the sub-region to take a cue from the successful mass mobilization of workers' resistance to privatization mounted by the Nigeria Labour Congress against the Imo state government, in the South East of Nigeria;

7. Fighting Corruption in the Health Sector

Conference-in-session averred that corruption in general is a major cankerworm that has contributed significantly to the underdevelopment of Africa. In the health sector, the cost of corruption is the loss of lives and should thus be given zero-tolerance. WAHSUN thus expresses surprise that, despite the avowed commitment of the Federal Government of Nigeria to its anti-corruption crusade, allegations of corruption and highhandedness at the Federal Medical Centre, Owerri which have provoked workers restiveness are yet to be thoroughly addressed.

WAHSUN thus called on the Federal Government of Nigeria to expedite necessary action including thorough investigation and prosecution, rather than the lukewarm posture being demonstrated on the matter by the country's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC);

8. Training of the Health Workforce

Conference-in-session was of the view that the training and re-training of the health workforce is of critical importance in the light of the resurgence of old health challenges and the emergence of new ones.

WAHSUN thus supports the ongoing harmonization of certification for various cadres of health professionals as it would further the enhancement of the potentials of health workers in training. WAHSUN further calls for regular on-the-job training for building the capacity of serving health workers;

9. Organizing Young Workers

Conference-in-session was very proud of the leaps and bounds made by member unions in organizing, mentoring and integrating young workers in the decision-making structures and processes of our unions, as the youth represent the future of our movement and indeed a better society for humanity. WAHSUN thus resolved to deepen collaboration and exchanges between young members of its member-unions with programmes and activities for youths, as well as affirmative action for the inclusion of an expanding number of young members in general activities of the Network;

10. Check-Off Dues Subscriptions

Conference-in-session affirmed the importance of the material sustenance of trade unions for the defence of workers' rights as well as for the necessary social dialogue, which alone can promote industrial harmony, peace and social justice in the workplace.

WAHSUN thus finds it incomprehensible that the government in Cote d'Ivoire has thus far refused to implement the check-off dues system for trade unions ease of access to membership subscriptions as is the norm in today's world and which used to be the case in the country, before this was unjustly rescinded in 2011. This, the Conference-in-session noted, is a counter-productive attack against the trade unions.

WAHSUN thus calls on the Ivorien government to address the issue by re-instituting the automatic check-off system. Further, WAHSUN calls for the implementation of subsisting laws for automatic check-off dues in Togo, which have thus far been thwarted;

11. Non-release of Scheme of Service

Conference-in-session recalled WAHSUN's established grievance on the non-release of an updated scheme of service for nurses and midwives in Nigeria, providing for due internship for students of the nursing & midwifery profession. This is despite subsisting court rulings directing that this be done and earlier resolutions of WAHSUN calling on the Federal Government of Nigeria to respect the rule of law.

WAHSUN once again calls on the Nigerian state to redress this injustice in the interest of continued peaceful relations in the country's health sector;

12. Growth of WAHSUN and a New Phase

Conference-in-session noted the growth and development of WAHSUN over the past few years with pride. The Network has thus far expanded to include the most active health sector unions in two thirds of the ECOWAS member states, and across language barriers. Conference-in-session equally observed the rising profile of joint work and influence with the aim of better defending health workers as well as advancing the cause of Universal Public Health Coverage.

In this context, WAHSUN adopted a new constitution and a Strategic Action Plan reflecting its current state of development after nine years of the existence of the Network, towards taking it to greater heights. The Conference-in-session further resolved to mark the 10th year anniversary of the establishment of WAHSUN in 2017 at Nigeria;

13. Election of WAHSUN Executive Board

The Conference-in-session elected the following as the WAHSUN leadership for the next two-year period:

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| i. | Chairperson: | Comrade (Rev) Richard K. Yeboah (Ghana) |
| ii. | Secretary/Coordinator: | Comrade B. O. A. Ayelabola (Nigeria) |
| iii. | Vice-Chairperson: | Comrade Abdulrauf Adeniji (Nigeria) |
| iv. | Vice Chairperson: | Comrade Garlo Isaac Williams (Liberia) |
| v. | Vice Chairperson: | Comrade Boubacar Bobaoua (Niger) |
| vi. | Vice Chairperson: | Comrade Abdul M. Kamara (Sierra Leone) |
| vii. | Vice Chairperson: | Comrade Kwaku Asante-Krobea (Ghana) |
| viii. | Vice Chairperson: | Comrade Mariam Tiemtore (Burkina Faso) |
| ix. | Women Leader: | Comrade Antoinette W. N'Guessan (Cote d'Ivoire) |
| x. | Youth Leader: | Comrade David Tenkorang-Twum (Ghana) |

Conclusion

Delegates to the 2nd Biennial WAHSUN Conference expressed satisfaction and appreciation of the warm hospitality received from our brothers and sisters in the Republic of Benin. The Conference ended with renewed commitment to the tenets of the Network, in the public interest and for the full implementation of its resolutions by the WAHSUN leadership and all member-unions.

Comrade (Rev.) Richard K. Yeboah

Chairperson

Comrade B.O.A. Ayelabola

Secretary/Coordinator