

Introduction

This publication reports on the discussions at a July 10–11, 2006, conference on East Asian Regional Cooperation in the Fight against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. More than 100 government, business, NGO, and philanthropic leaders from around the world gathered in Beijing, China, for the event, which was jointly organized by the Friends of the Global Fund, Japan (FGFJ), the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This conference was designed to build upon the English and Chinese publication of *Fighting a Rising Tide: The Response to AIDS in East Asia*, and it included many of the experts who began cooperating with one another through the study that culminated in this book.

The stories and experiences shared at this conference provide compelling evidence of just how indispensable regional and cross-border cooperation is in the fight against communicable diseases. Germs and viruses need no passports to cross borders, and conventional responses that stop at national boundaries are bound to fall short in this era of growing mobility and interdependence. The ways in which disease spreads, the porous nature of national borders, and the realities of life for the most vulnerable people among us increasingly mean that responses must be cooperative in order to work. In addition, regional cooperation has the potential to make domestic responses more effective. For example, regional cooperation encourages policymakers and frontline responders in different countries to share best practices, and it has the capacity to crystallize the focus of national leaders, mobilize political support, and reinforce domestic leadership to fight communicable diseases.

However, there is clearly less of a foundation for regional cooperation in East Asia than in other areas such as Europe and North America. The incredible diversity in the region in terms of culture, history, language, and politics is compounded by the relative lack of strong regional institutions and networks. Organizations often run into problems at the starting gate in just identifying whom they should be working with on the other side of the border, and there are few established patterns of cooperation to ease the difficulties in dealing with the complex issues that inevitably arise in collaborative efforts. Despite these challenges, however, there are numerous

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exemplary cases of emerging regional and cross-border cooperation in the region, ranging from joint harm reduction initiatives on the China-Vietnam border to efforts by NGOs to ensure continued access to antiretroviral (ARV) treatment for migrant workers when they cross borders. These projects, some of which were presented at this conference, can serve as models for deeper and more meaningful regional cooperation.

Drawing on their personal experiences, the conference participants recommended a number of steps to help increase regional and cross-border cooperation and make it more effective. The first thing that is needed is greater information sharing—between counterparts engaged in cooperative initiatives and, in a more general sense, at the regional level about the epidemiology of communicable diseases, the state of responses, and ongoing cooperative initiatives in individual countries and localities. A heightened degree of flexibility is also crucial so that regional and cross-border approaches can be tailored to local conditions. Responses should not just involve foreign ministries or health ministries; rather they also need to be cross-sectoral, cross-agency, and cross-disciplinary in order to be most effective. For example, the case of an innovative HIV prevention effort targeting migrant construction workers employed on the Second Mekong International Bridge project illustrates the importance of involving construction and labor ministries, development agencies, local businesses, and NGOs in responses to communicable diseases. The role of NGOs, in particular, was stressed by conference participants as especially vital in regional and cross-border cooperation, because they are often best placed to reach the mobile populations, ethnic minorities, and vulnerable groups that national and local governments struggle to engage. Finally, there is a pressing need to strengthen the sense of East Asia community and build up regional organizations, forums, and networks in order to create an institutional framework to tackle communicable diseases.

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