

Speech by SFH at Policy Dialogue Session of Asia Summit on Global Health (English only) (with photos)

Following is the welcome speech by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, at the Policy Dialogue Session of the Asia Summit on Global Health today (November 24):

Margaret (Founding Dean of Vanke School of Public Health, Tsinghua University, Dr Margaret Chan), Takeshi (Regional Director for the Western Pacific, World Health Organization, Dr Takeshi Kasai,), Ye Kung (Minister for Health of Singapore, Mr Ong Ye Kung), Professor Ash (Director General, Ministry of Health, Israel, Professor Nachman Ash), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to join today's Policy Dialogue Session. The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) since early last year has posed tremendous challenges to almost every corner of the world including Hong Kong. The theme of the Summit "Shaping a Resilient and Sustainable Future" is most timely.

Over the past 22 months, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has strictly implemented the strategy of guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of local infections. With the concerted efforts, Hong Kong has weathered four waves of surging cases and brought the epidemic under control since May 2021, and Hong Kong never experienced a shutdown like most cities in the world during the pandemic.

While we will continue our fight against COVID-19 with dedication and devotion, it is equally important for us to take advantage of this relatively reassuring situation to consolidate our experiences and identify opportunities ahead of us in formulating public health policies for more resilient, equitable and effective long-term public health. Hong Kong has faced challenges in the fight against COVID-19 in the past two years and we need to invest in our health care systems such as our infrastructure in primary, secondary and tertiary care; and innovation and technology in the Hong Kong context.

Investing in Health Care Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand tests the efficiency and equity of our health system, and on the other hand manifests Hong Kong's whole-of-society resilient and mutual-help spirit in difficult times. During the epidemic, our public hospital system provides isolation and clinical treatment to the COVID-19 patients, while our primary healthcare system demonstrates the cornerstone functions in the fight against the epidemic at the community level, such as facilitating testing, vaccination, and caring for post-discharge COVID-19 patients.

Leveraging Innovation and Technology

Second, we see enormous opportunities in the development and application of innovation and technology development in healthcare and other sectors. The application of innovation and technology has played an indispensable role in facilitating the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the robust application of geographic information system to develop an interactive map dashboard on the Government's thematic website within a very short time at the beginning of the epidemic, and a case investigation and management portal to link up information systems of various departments and agencies for central collection of information needed for contact tracing.

Since last year, the HKSAR Government has also been working with the cross-disciplinary team of a local university in conducting sewage surveillance. Hong Kong is a global leader in the research and development and application of sewage surveillance, and the technology is becoming increasingly mature. The above examples demonstrate that Hong Kong's potential in innovation and technology development are being unlocked. We have a solid foundation in research and a good number of world-renowned experts, whose achievements have been widely acclaimed.

Collaboration with Different Sectors Locally and Globally

Third, COVID-19 underscores the importance of co-operation and efforts by individuals, as a community, and as a global citizen and I am confident that this form of collaboration will be extended beyond the pandemic.

The WHO has indicated repeatedly that no less than a global effort is required to end a global pandemic and "no one is safe until everyone is safe". According to a statement made by the WHO, the global picture of access to COVID-19 vaccines is still unacceptable. Only 20 per cent of people in low- and lower-middle-income countries have received a first dose of vaccine compared to 80 per cent in high- and upper-middle-income countries. As a modest effort, the HKSAR Government has earlier reached an agreement with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the drug manufacturer AstraZeneca on the donation of 7.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to the COVAX Facility. By doing so, the HKSAR Government reaffirms the importance of international cooperation in fighting COVID-19 together. Locally, thanks to the concerted efforts of our community, we have been able to respond promptly and successfully to four waves of epidemics.

Closing

Before we embrace all the forthcoming new developments in the post COVID-19 era, we must not forget to prepare ourselves for the next unforeseeable wave of COVID-19 or the next pandemic. We will learn from our past experience and make timely adjustments to the measures to protect the health of citizens.

Finally, the HKSAR Government is happy to share experience and work together with the global community towards the future direction of building a

more resilient and sustainable public health system.

Thank you for having me and I wish you all a very rewarding summit today.

