Book Review

Textbook of international health: Global health in a dynamic world

Anne-Emanuelle Birn, Yogan Pillary, and Timothy H. Holtz

In the 1970s, when Paul Frederick Basch (1933–2001), Professor Emeritus of Health Research and Policy at Stanford University School of Medicine, wrote the first version of the now classic International Health (1978), the world was very different from today. The Cold War had reached its apex in a world strongly polarized between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, there was a third way: that of the non-aligned countries, comprised of former colonies in Asia and Africa that were becoming independent from their Western colonizers. These countries had only recently joined the international community, with shocking health indicators – high rates of maternal and under-five morbidity and mortality and of infectious and parasitic diseases. These nations emerged from their colonial wars with completely destroyed infrastructures, as well as public sectors yet to be institutionalized – including health systems that were either extremely fragile or non-existent.

In this environment, Paul Basch began his intellectual adventure and produced the first universally accepted text on international health. The seminal meetings on human environment in Stockholm (1972) and the Conference on Primary Health Care (1978) in Alma Ata (which had posed the challenge of a globalized and transforming world with immense social, health, and environmental needs) had taken place recently.

The book survived all transformative events in the 1980s, when the Soviet Union implemented glasnost and the perestroika and the Berlin Wall fell at the frontier between the two worlds on 9 November 1989. Despite the enthusiasm at first, the 1990s
represented a regression. It was a lost decade, both economically and politically, in which the ‘Washington consensus’ prevailed – with its recommendations for constraints upon the State and the liberalization of markets (the invisible hand), and the World Bank’s infamous report on health (1993).\textsuperscript{4} However, 1990s was also the decade in which the United Nations carried out its great sectoral conferences (on environment, women, childhood, human rights, social development, habitat, among others), that sought ‘to prepare the world for the twenty-first century’ and led to the Millennium Summit, in the year 2000, whose participants ratified the United Nations Millennium Declaration and established the Millennium Development Goals.\textsuperscript{5}

Basch’s witnessing of the previous 20 years resulted in a new edition of the book, in 1999, through the same Oxford University Press – thoroughly influenced by the two decades culminating in the powerful events in 1989.\textsuperscript{6} Basch’s death in 2001 terminated his continuous and brilliant thinking on global transformations and their impact on the field of health, but not that of many of his followers and friends.

Anne-Emanuelle Birn, Yogan Pillay, and Timothy Holtz assumed responsibility for continuing the enterprise. In 2009, they launched a completely revised and updated edition of the Textbook. It contains information and analytic perspectives for students and professionals, and addresses a wide diversity of topics: the historical origins of the modern field of international health; epidemiological profiles of global health and disease; globally available data on health; the global dimensions of the social determinants of health; health economics; health and the environment; the organization of health-care systems, and international health agencies, and other programs affecting global health. The very useful and extensive Appendix offers interesting websites for readers.

Indeed, the book synthesizes historical, cultural, environmental, economic, and political information to provide a comprehensive global overview of the many factors that determine the health of individuals and populations. As Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu said in his inspired Foreword to the book, ‘it discusses the various ways in which governments, organizations, and peoples can work together more effectively to improve health and enable us all to live more fulfilling, productive and happier lives’ (pp. vii–viii).\textsuperscript{7}
The world has become far more complex in the last 20–30 years. From the development of productive forces and the international division of labor and production – facilitated by globalization – important challenges have come to the fore. New infectious diseases emerged while older ones reemerged. Additional complications include the epidemiologic polarization, a double burden of diseases in developing countries that overload fragile health and social protection systems, and, most recently, the global crisis of capitalism – including food and energy prices sub-crises – that have been especially cruel to the poorest social classes in the poorest countries in the world. State violence has been spreading worldwide, with powerful countries promoting wars that fundamentally respond to economic interests. In non-democratic countries, these wars decimate ethnic and social groups considered expendable by governments. Important South-South cooperation has been developing fast in the last 10 years; this deserves greater attention from the authors who dedicated only three pages to this topic.

The ideas of international health and global health have also changed. Although the authors’ discussion of these concepts is very elucidating, we should include the definition of global health proposed by the US Institute of Medicine in its 2009 report, *The U.S. Commitment to Global Health: Recommendations for the Public and Private Sectors*:

> The goal of improving health for all people in all nations by promoting wellness and eliminating avoidable disease, disability, and death. It can be attained by combining population-based health promotion and disease prevention measures with individual-level clinical care. This ambitious endeavor calls for an understanding of health determinants, practices, and solutions, as well as basic and applied research on risk factors, disease, and disability.\(^8\)

Without specific mention of the field of ‘health diplomacy’,\(^9\) the book abundantly alludes to this new field of political operations, that I define as a field of knowledge and practices, as well as a set of technical and political resources of the foreign affairs, health and other governmental sectors oriented to health subjects in bilateral, multi-lateral, regional, and global settings. Peace and prosperity can
be promoted using the ‘diplomacies of peace’, such as ‘health diplomacy’ and ‘science diplomacy’. With its all-encompassing view, clear and rich in humanist thinking and social and human commitment, this book is a stimulating contribution to all health and diplomacy professionals engaged in these new and fascinating domains of International Relations that make us more capable of changing the world into a better place to live.

References


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