



Nordic Ambassadors' Forum - Towards a Healthier Future

9 December 2021

Remarks by Ambassador Annika Thunborg

- Good morning Europe, good afternoon the Philippines, Magandang hapon!
- Let me start by greeting my Nordic colleagues, thanking the Nordic Chamber of Commerce NordCham for organizing this event, and expressing my gratitude to the companies that sponsor it especially AstraZeneca, the Swedish-British pharmaceutical giant. I am looking forward to our discussion here today about the Nordic health care systems and how we can collaborate further with the Philippines.
- The Nordic health care systems have a lot in common and I believe that I and my colleagues will reinforce each other's perspectives the way we always do as Nordic countries, but I also hope we will provide complementary information.
- The times we live in make it difficult to talk about health care without putting it into the context of covid-19. No one was prepared to deal with a pandemic of this magnitude. The closure of borders, the lack of medical equipment, the lack of personnel, the unequal distribution of vaccines especially in the beginning of the roll-out, the lock-downs and the wider socioeconomic implications, all this makes it necessary to reflect on the importance of building resilient and sustainable universal health care systems and create mechanisms that help us collaborate better internationally and regionally. In Sweden, we especially need to focus on the elderly and the situation in the elderly care facilities - these suffered the worst consequences, the elderly losing their lives, at the beginning of the pandemic before we learnt to manage the crisis better.
- Sweden fared poorly in the beginning, but over the last year, we have fared comparatively well although we opted for maintaining an open economy without lock-downs, and open pre-, primary and secondary schools, I think we were the only country in the world to maintain the schools open, and we did so because we believed that this was better for children's overall health which also includes mental health issues. Children need to meet their teachers, their schoolmates, and need to be outdoors and physically active, this is what we believed, and we think we did the right thing since we didn't see transmission in the schools. Of course, Swedish children are healthy, benefiting from worldwide renowned maternity- and child health care. The general population is also healthy, comparatively speaking, this is a result of

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having mainstreamed public health perspectives into society as a whole and of all citizens having access to high quality universal public health care. The life expectancy in Sweden is close to 85 years for women and over 81 years for men.

- Sweden, as its Nordic neighbours, is committed to multilateralism and we are some of the biggest per capita donors in the world to the UN system, both core and project funding, including to the WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA – three of the international and UN agencies devoted to health here in the Philippines, not to forget the agencies devoted to food security, to fighting poverty and other root causes of poor health.
- In the context of the pandemic, Sweden has been the largest per capita donor to the COVAX mechanism with a financial contribution of 280 million USD. We are also donating vaccine doses and will have contributed at least 6 million such doses in 2021 to those in greatest need as determined by the COVAX partners. One of these countries has been identified as the Philippines to which Sweden has donated 1,5 million doses of the Jansen vaccine, a delivery which will take place now in December, facilitated by UNICEF. The delivery will be used in remote areas where a single dose vaccine is considered to be the most advantageous.
- I would also like to mention Swedish-British biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca which so far has supplied over two billion doses of its vaccine to more than 170 countries across the world. Two thirds of these vaccine doses were delivered to low and lower middle-income countries such as the Philippines including through the COVAX mechanism. What is especially interesting with the AstraZeneca vaccine is that it was created by the company in cooperation with Oxford University in the UK as a not-for-profit vaccine. This however is not surprising to me since Swedish companies are known for their high quality and innovative products and services, their commitment to corporate social responsibility and sustainable business practices.
- AstraZeneca is normally not involved in vaccine development and production but is an expert company in non-communicable diseases such as oncology (cancer), renal and metabolism, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease among other areas. In the Philippines, they have initiated CSR Programs such as the
- Juan Healthy Lung to provide end-to-end patient journey solutions for more than 800,000 asthma patients.
- ACT NOW which aims to screen 5 million Diabetes Patients for Cardiovascular and Chronic Kidney Disease risk factors
- Partnered with Qure.ai to equip local healthcare facilities with the technology to detect abnormal findings on a chest X-ray with 3,500 patients screened, so far.
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

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- As in the other Nordic countries, in Sweden we have a universal health care system which dates back to 1955, created for the entire population and financed by the public sector through a progressive taxation system for all its citizens, a system in which the wealthier pay more and the less well to do pay less. The objective of Sweden's health policies is to create the necessary social conditions so that the population stays healthy and to guarantee that all citizens have equal access to the health and care services.
- Three principles guide the management of the universal health care system which we see as a universal human right:
  - Equality, dignity, and rights for everyone regardless of where they find themselves on the socio-economic scale, regardless of ethnicity or gender.
  - Necessity and solidarity, according to which those with the greatest medical needs are attended to first.
  - Cost-efficiency which determines the reasonable relationship between cost and results for example in the prescription of medicines, clinical studies and treatments.
- The health policies also include the gender dimension, recognizing that the needs, diagnosis, and treatment may differ between men and women. Sweden invests quite a bit in health, 11 % of its GDP and it is seen as an investment in sustainable development. With healthier – and thus happier - citizens, the employees will not be absent from work, companies will become more productive and efficient, and society becomes healthier and more prosperous, socio-economically and democratically.
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- A universal health care system accessible to everyone, cannot function without innovation and cooperation with the private and academic sectors. In Sweden today, one of every five researchers work in the life sciences and half of the scientific articles that are published in Sweden are written in the areas of health and the medical sciences. The close interaction between research and clinical studies allow more patients to participate in programs of clinical research regardless of where they live in the country.
- More than 1.500 international health companies are present in Sweden, 800 of those are dedicated to R&D, making Sweden a hub for the life sciences. The role of the science parks has been essential, they are usually built around the most prominent universities in the area - University of Uppsala, University of Lund, Institute of Karolinska in Stockholm and the University of Gothenburg -and they attract companies from all over the world, big, medium size, small and new start-ups, they also have a tradition of collaborating among themselves. Innovation is closely connected to R&D, an area in which Sweden invests 3,6% of its GDP making it the leader in this area in the European Union and one of the countries that ranks at the top in global innovation indexes. It is worth mentioning that 1 % of these 3,6% comes from the state while the rest comes from the companies themselves.

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- This way of working, the close collaboration between the private and the academic sectors, with support from the public sector and the involvement of civil society to make sure that everyone is on board and that projects are anchored democratically is usually called the quadruple helix-model and it has been crucial for the socio-economic and democratic development of my country.
- So how did it all start?
- How did Sweden which belonged to the poor corner of Europe 100 years ago develop so successfully? A country from which 1/6 of the population emigrated between 1880 and 1930 mainly due to poverty?
- Well, during the same period, industrialization took off, and it meant that Sweden started to use its scarce natural resources – forests, iron mines and hydro power – in a strategic and innovative way combined with new scientific knowledge. Alfred Nobel, the Swedish industrialist and inventor who today is principally known for having founded the Nobel prizes and invented dynamite, is a symbol of this development, not only because he combined business and innovation but also because he believed in developing society through investments in higher education and research and through the acknowledgement of accomplishments in both the sciences and in the humanities. Many of the companies we know today as large Swedish multinational companies started its operations during this period including Astra. With time and as a result of the strong organized civil society movements having a lasting effect on politics, this development was combined with a social agenda, the build-up of a democratic society based on the rule of law and the social welfare state providing universal education and health care to all and eradicating poverty.
- The Nobel Prizes in medicine/physiology and chemistry were inspirational for the development of the medical sciences and with time for the development of Sweden as a hub for the life sciences.
- Today, the Swedish National Innovation Council which is a body led by the Prime Minister and with members from all sectors of society, identifies the life sciences as one of three priority areas for Swedish innovation, the other two being the environment/climate and digitalization.
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- Moving away from the pandemic, many of the health challenges we confront in our societies today are similar regardless of level of development. I am talking about health challenges related to pollution and contamination caused by traffic, industry, and agricultural processes, much worse in countries where fossil fuels continue to be used. I am also talking about malnutrition and poor food diets, starvation and obesity being two sides of the same coin. And I am talking about the use of drugs, prescription drugs and stimulants.

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- Resistance to antibiotics has been recognized including by the WHO as one of the most dangerous global health risks and perhaps more dangerous than any pandemic. Sweden is committed to fighting this danger, through investment in research, monitoring and prevention both at the national and international levels. It is crucial that medical doctors don't prescribe antibiotics unless it is necessary to fight a bacterial infection.
- The role of non-communicable diseases that societies suffer from today also require R&D and investments in areas such as oncology, cardiovascular, metabolism and respiratory. One reason why the Swedish health care system has been successful is that expertise, early detection, medicines, and treatments for these looming illnesses are integrated into the primary care system so that they can be detected and treated early and with anticipation. This doesn't only save life but also on costs including on hospitalization.
- Supporting the timely approval of the latest innovation medicines by relevant authorities - in the Philippines, the FDA and the Philippines National Formulary - also allows medical professionals to have access to the latest in medical research.
- Besides AstraZeneca which is a result of the 1999 merger of Swedish Astra founded in 1913 and British Zeneca founded in 1993, other Swedish companies present in the Philippine market - Getinge, Chemotech, and Elekta - offer solutions in advanced cancer care management and other advanced care solutions. Team Sweden, that is the Embassy together with Business Sweden, the Swedish companies, and other actors such as NordCham, would be open to working with relevant actors in the Philippines in furthering the agenda of non-communicable diseases.
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- Let me say that I feel with the Philippines that has seen the return of some of the illnesses we thought we had eradicated such as polio and TB or illnesses that are easily preventable such as HIV/Aids. As Sweden is a large donor to the UN system, I am proud to see the work done by the WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNAIDS and the Global Fund, the ICRC and other international and UN organizations in this area here in the Philippines and I am confident that their work in cooperation with the Philippine government will render results.
- With the International Day on Human Rights being observed tomorrow the 10 of December, I also would like to thank the UN and civil society in the Philippines for the work you do in the area of sexual and reproductive health rights and the protection of children and young women in this regard. For us who consider young people as children until they have turned 18 years old, it was a step in the right direction to see that Congress adopted the new Philippine law raising the age of sexual consent from 12 to 15 years old.

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- Globally and all over the world, close to [245 million women and girls](#) were abused by an intimate partner in the past year, a figure that is bigger today due to the pandemic and due to lock-downs. We know that the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) exacerbates gender-based violence since women have a harder time breaking free from domestic abuse if they experience unwanted pregnancies, contract sexually transmitted disease, or have young children to protect. In the worst cases, women experience death. Stopping gender-based violence starts with believing survivors, transforming harmful social norms, and empowering women and girls so that they can realize their full potential and full participation in society. To be able to do so, women must have access to comprehensive and science-based sex education, access to contraception, and be able to discuss and ask questions about sex -- without judgement or discrimination. This enables them to make decisions if they want children, and if so, when, and how many.
- Providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health rights to young people promotes safer sex, reduces unwanted pregnancies, and lowers school drop-out rates. This enables them to participate in civil society, economic growth, and sustainable development.
- As long as we see these challenges world-wide, my country Sweden will continue to pursue its feminist foreign policy which aims to achieve parity between men and women, to ensure that women will enjoy the same rights, representation and resources as men do.
- Thank you very much!

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