Redefining Access Goals in Today's Global Health Environment

Roundtable discussion hosted by Rabin Martin during the 79th World Health Assembly

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Introduction

Rabin Martin, a leading global health consulting firm, convened major health care companies during the 79th World Health Assembly (WHA) to discuss the complex considerations in setting goals to increase access to their products during a period of evolving market and stakeholder dynamics.

This roundtable was timely. Pharmaceutical companies are reviewing or renewing access goals that are approaching expiration against the backdrop of a global health environment that has changed considerably over the last 18 months.

At the same time, portfolios are shifting, with many companies focused increasingly on more specialized products – such as treatments for non-communicable diseases. Broad access planning for these medicines, vaccines and diagnostics can be challenging in low- and middle-income countries where health systems, financing mechanisms and delivery infrastructure may be less prepared to introduce newer and more complex innovations. Recent significant reductions in donor funding and dismantling of key health infrastructure compound these difficulties.

Our session at WHA, **Redefining Access Goals in Today's Global Health Environment**, provided a timely opportunity to explore how companies may need to adapt their access ambitions to today's realities, while navigating the global health ecosystem's uncertain future.

Tensions in Setting Access Goals

In the lead-up to the roundtable, Rabin Martin spoke with leading pharmaceutical companies to understand the factors influencing their approach to shaping access goals. The conversations revealed three key tensions companies are experiencing that set the foundation for the discussion.

1

Ambition vs. Operational Reality

Companies are balancing the desire to set bold access goals with concerns about increased financial, policy, and implementation constraints.

2

Leadership vs. Public Commitments

Companies want to communicate their leadership in access but are questioning the value of public commitments, targets, and the audience for these statements.

3

Investment in Health Systems vs. Defined Metrics

Companies are increasingly investing in health system strengthening yet recognize that measuring impact is challenging and not standardized.

Key Themes

The roundtable discussion surfaced themes related to different dimensions of access, including setting goals, communicating commitments, making the case for investing in health, strengthening health systems and securing financing.

Companies' access goals and initiatives should reflect the health outcomes that matter most to countries and patients

As a guiding principle, participants agreed that companies must follow countries' lead and align their access efforts with government and community health priorities. Doing so requires understanding which health gaps countries and communities believe are most critical to fill and what outcomes they are seeking.

Now that countries are taking greater ownership of their health budgets and health priorities – a result of the decline in global funding – there is a growing opportunity to identify shared interests and jointly determine how health care companies can become true partners to government and communities. This type of relationship dynamic is more successful in building trust, strengthening public-private partnerships and, ultimately, achieving sustainable health gains.

Some companies are questioning the value of making public announcements about their access goals

While many companies continue to make – and fulfill – ambitious commitments to expand access to their medicines, vaccines and diagnostics, the fanfare around public announcements has become less popular in recent years.

Participants expressed differing views on the value of major public statements about access goals. Some questioned their purpose, audience and whether attention should focus more on demonstrating results. Others commented that these announcements are important to hold companies accountable and show external stakeholders that industry has a stake in improving health globally.

Communicating the economic benefits of investing in health is critical to influence financing decisions

Companies usually communicate about their access initiatives with narratives that resonate with the public health community and ministries of health. However, too often this language is not compelling to finance leaders who are the ones making decisions about allocating limited budget resources.

Participants noted that their companies – and possibly ministries of health as well – need to reorient their messaging to make a stronger business case for investing in health. Examples include highlighting how improving health in a country contributes to job creation, productivity, workforce participation, economic growth and health system resilience. It is also crucial to emphasize that multinational health companies are often major employers that generate tax revenue to support government services.

Health system strengthening is a broad concept – and it can be difficult to measure ROI – but is an area of opportunity for collaboration across companies

Companies are increasingly undertaking efforts to strengthen health systems, recognizing that a well-functioning health system is foundational to ensuring that people have access to the medicines, vaccines and diagnostics that they need. Unlike disease-focused interventions, which often have clear KPIs, investments in health system strengthening are multi-faceted as well as interdependent, contributing collectively to improvements in how a health system operates.

Participants agreed that it is difficult to both measure the impact of health system strengthening efforts and attribute impact to any single company's investment – a challenge when making the internal case for resources.

For this very reason, health system strengthening is an area of opportunity for collaboration across health care companies. Shared investment produces shared benefits – and can reduce individual companies' investment risk. Participants expressed a willingness to partner with industry peers, acknowledging that collective and coordinated action can accelerate broad system improvements that are good for every company's business.

Although global health funding has declined, capital is available and there is greater urgency to explore less traditional financing mechanisms

Despite the huge drop in donor funding, money for health is available through other channels – but is often difficult to attract. Global financial institutions, such as the World Bank, are potential sources for major health investments – in partnership with industry – but, historically, have been less inclined to provide funding for health than for other areas more directly linked to economic development.

Participants were enthusiastic about the potential to collaborate and jointly pursue funding opportunities with development banks, especially to support health system strengthening. Of particular interest were financing mechanisms that de-risk private investment in health systems, such as outcomes-based financing.

A Path Forward

Although companies are navigating a period of continued flux in the global health environment, the roundtable discussion focused on maintaining – and even expanding – commitments to access in low- and middle-income countries; reinforcing good practices in collaborating with governments and communities; communicating more effectively about the value of health investments; and highlighting opportunities for new partnerships.

Ensure that country health priorities, gaps and opportunities guide company investments

Health care companies should have a clear understanding of the health outcomes that matter to countries and communities and design their initiatives accordingly.

Speak the language of finance, not only health

Company narratives must communicate the economic value of investing in health, framing health as an engine of economic development, productivity and job creation.

Collaborate with peers to strengthen health systems

Coordinating investments in health system strengthening – aligned with government priorities – increases collective impact, reduces duplication of effort, targets resources more strategically, and lowers individual companies' investment risk – benefiting companies, countries and communities.

Partner with global and regional financial institutions to mobilize greater investment in health

New public-private partnership models for health financing are challenging to build but hold promise in attracting more capital to improve health outcomes and promote economic development for the long term.

Conclusion

Regardless of the rapidly changing dynamics in global health policy and funding, companies are determined to fulfil their commitments to increase access to their products and advance health equity. The current environment is challenging and requires a stepped-up focus on building and strengthening partnerships across the health ecosystem. Today's opportunity to achieve sustainable health impact depends on closer collaboration – with countries and communities to support their priorities, with peer companies to deliver measurable results, and with financing institutions to secure greater investment in health.

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