Pakistan honored: Dr Sania makes headlines in health once again

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The year 2016 has dawned with one woman from Pakistan -- a country that often finds a mention in the international media for all wrong reasons — making two important headlines in the field of global health. And the woman is none other than the president of Heartfile Dr. Sania Nishtar.
Only on February 10, the UN Secretary General appointed Dr. Sania as chair of the Independent Accountability Panel (IAP), which is empowered to monitor, review and act in the interest of women, children and adolescents’ health at the global level.

The names of the members of IAP, which will now be the mechanism for holding stakeholders accountable for the commitments they make towards the health of women and children globally, have been eagerly awaited for some time now in the global development circles. It is a rare proud moment for Pakistan to have a Pakistani chair this accountability panel. Other high-powered members of the IAP include Alicia Eli Yamin (Harvard University, USA) Jaime Sepulveda (Mexico), Carmen Barroso (Brazil), Pali Lehohla (South Africa), Elizabeth Mason (UK), Vinod K. Paul (India), Giorgi Pkhakadze (Ukraine), and Dakshitha Wickremarathne (Sri Lanka).

The UN secretary general has appointed nine members to Every Woman Every Child’s IAP. This structure is part of the UN Secretary General’s Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health, and was launched in September last year to help further the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda. The strategy builds on 15 years of progress under the Millennium Development Goals and is the most influential global movement today, on women, children and adolescents’ health.

Since the new framework of the SDGs now demands results and real action, “accountability” is the pulse of the any new SDGs’ linked initiative. It is here that the IAP assumes great importance as it is mandated and “empowered to command attention from the global community” and “to monitor, review and act” in the interest of women, children and adolescents’ health, globally.

The IAP will be expected to produce its first, Global report on the “State of Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health” towards the end of the year. In subsequent years, the annual report will coincide with relevant SDG follow-up and review processes, such as the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

It is a matter of great pride for Pakistan, a country mired in corruption, that its national will be heading a major international accountability process.

Pakistan has also been in the positive global health spotlight earlier this year due to another reason. Dr Sania Nishtar is the co-chair of the World Health Organisation’s Ending Childhood Obesity Commission (ECHO). She, along with her co-chair Sir Peter Gluckman, Science Advisor to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, presented the Commission’s final report to the World Health Organization in Geneva on January 25. Together, the two of them led a remarkable two-year process, which involved face-to-face consultations with over 100 countries in six continents, two open online consultations which yielded 179 submissions, hearings with non-state actors and four meetings of the Commission itself to provide a report, details of which were featured by Time, Newsweek, the Guardian and many other international news avenues in late January.

The remarkable consensus on the difficult and multi-dimensional issue of childhood obesity achieved through this report and the consultative process that preceded it, now paves the way for global action to address the alarming levels of childhood obesity and overweight globally. It is a matter of great pride that a Pakistani led the process.

The focus on accountability and obesity through these initiatives also herald changes in the directions of global health in the wake of shifts brought about by the SDGs. Rather than a narrow disease-centric focus, the SDGs have forged a consensus on the need to address complex issues such as non-communicable diseases and health systems in the health sector. As an entry point, obesity is gaining prominence. Also, the emphasis in the SDGs is now on action and results, which is why measurement, monitoring, evaluation and accountability has assumed such salience.

More than 190 countries, which are a signatory to the SDGs now need to step up capacity to deliver on the new SDG objectives. Having a Pakistani lead a new paradigm in global health is fortuitous and calls for celebration.