

COSIMENA Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa**Health Cluster****“Health Measures in Germany and the MENA Region during the COVID-19 Pandemic”****Tuesday, September 22nd****LONG REPORT**

“The current global pandemic has turned the world upside down; all countries around the globe are currently confronted with the urgent necessity to find health policies to face it”. Ms. Isabell Mering, director of the DAAD regional Office Cairo, stated in the opening remarks introducing the online public lecture “Health Measures in Germany and the MENA Region during the COVID-19 Pandemic” on Tuesday, September 22nd. The event was organized by the DAAD Regional Office Cairo in the framework of COSIMENA -Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa- in order to offer a comparative overview of the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic and of the different approaches of medical systems in Germany and in the MENA region. With the participation of various experts, the lecture tackled different topics including the mental health consequences of the pandemic, the response measures taken in Morocco and Jordan and the possible evolution of the research field from an Egyptian perspective. As a result, the public lecture represented a time for analysis of major current global issues and created the space for exchange of perspectives across different countries.

The first presentation of the online public lecture focused on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. Prof. Dr. Hanna Christiansen, Child and Youth Psychotherapist, Psychologist and Supervisor at the University of Marburg took the articulated set of consequences of the global pandemic on mental health under scrutiny. Particularly, she examined how COVID-19 represents a multidimensional stressor as it caused major sources of pressure such as high insecurity, anxiety, fear for and of others and one-self, loss of beloved-ones and social isolation. Generally, global pandemics lead to an exacerbation of mental health issues as demonstrated by the recorded 37% increase in suicide rate during the previous SARS pandemic. Similarly, COVID-19 constitutes a multidimensional stressor for mental health as it has a worldwide spread and an unpredictable course. It therefore causes severe and universal consequences on different aspects of life of every individual around the world. Moreover, COVID-19 represents a toxic stressor for societies and creates barriers to resources and help, especially because of quarantine. Dr. Christiansen also presented the recent alarming data from China recording a 48% of people quarantined developing symptoms of depression and 23% clinically relevant anxiety symptoms. Among the major consequences of this global pandemic, she identified different forms of mental disorders such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, somatoform disorders, sleeping disorders combined with an increase of cases of domestic violence, an exacerbation of previous mental disorders and significant stress on the medical staff. Furthermore, Dr. Christiansen offered a variety of advices for individuals, children and families in order to cope with these dramatic consequences. Remarkably, she recommended developing a healthy routine, setting a precise time for meals, sleeping, individual and collective activities in the family. Dr. Christiansen concluded by highlighting the necessity to find a suitable accepting state of mind to avoid further frustration, anger and anxiety while actively adapting to the current new circumstances.

She also noted that a website with video guidance is created to help different age groups to deal with the mental consequences of the pandemic in a productive way: <https://psychologische-coronahilfe.de>.

The public lecture proceeded with a presentation on impact of professional arena and closed communities on the evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak in an early containment (stay-at-home orders). Prof. Dr. El-Azami El-Idrissi Mohamed, Academic Researcher at the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of Fez, explaining the measures taken from the Moroccan government and the successful containment of a major outbreak. Specifically, Morocco started repatriating its nationals from Wuhan in China on February 1st and 2nd, 2020 and then implemented a “COVID-19 National Monitoring and Response Plan” revolving around the five axes involving governance and coordination, monitoring and surveillance, infection care and control, staff awareness and skills enhancement, information and communication. After the first case of COVID-19 in Morocco on March 2nd, 2020, Moroccan authorities started making several critical sovereign decisions. Namely, on March 15th, it was imposed the closure of land, air and sea borders and it was later created a special fund dedicated to the management of the pandemic. Prof. Dr. El-Azami emphasized how these containment measures positively influenced the evolution of the pandemic in the country, avoiding a major outbreak as in other places. In particular, he explained how the implementation of an early containment with social distancing measures combined with precautious control of clusters in professional arena and closed communities allowed the country to avoid between 300,000 and 500,000 confirmed cases and 9,000 to 15,000 deaths. Therefore, he concluded that in any effective containment strategy, individual and community social distancing measures should be strengthened in order to avoid appearance of clusters and subsequently of the dissemination of the virus. During the following Q&A time, Dr. El-Azami also clarified the current situation in Morocco, with not a serious increase of cases after the opening of schools until now. Nonetheless, he acknowledged the existing risks of a second wave especially due to the refusal of compliance with social distancing measures from a considerable number of the population. In an interview following the public lecture, Dr. El-Azami further clarified the gravity of the pandemic at the global level and the necessity to develop a comprehensive response taking into consideration the health, psychological, social and economic context of each country.

Followingly, Prof. Dr. Walid Al-Zyoud, Vice Dean, School of Applied Medical Sciences, Head of Biomedical Engineering Department at the German Jordanian University (GJU) presented an overview on “The Invention Step in the Age of Coronavirus” with a focus on the Jordanian country. He firstly shared detailed information about the nature of Coronavirus and the available testing options such as the molecular diagnostic test through RT-PCR. He then explained that during the pandemic there has been a shortage of RNA extraction kits hampering efforts to ramp-up COVID-19 testing. He equally analysed the steps taken in the specific case of Jordan, highlighting the country’s contribution in the global effort to monitor, research and find solutions to the Coronavirus pandemic. In light of the context examined and the steps taken, Dr. Al-Zyoud additionally highlighted the need to continue cooperating across borders in order to efficiently cope with this pandemic at a global level. “I view the global pandemic as a chance for innovation steps and increasing collaboration,” Dr. Al-Zyoud stated in an interview following the public lecture. “My advice for governments is to keep borders open rather than closing them so that common solutions can be found,” he concluded.

The public lecture then moved to a presentation from an Egyptian perspective on the topic “Research during the COVID-19 pandemic”. In this context, Prof. Dr. Abdel Meguid Kassem, Chief of the Gastrointestinal Endoscopy Department at the Faculty of Medicine at the Cairo University and member of the Advisory Committee of the pandemic shed the light on the key challenges in the research field and the most appropriate strategies to continue developing research during Coronavirus

time. In particular, Dr. Kassem focused on some unique characteristics distinguishing the Coronavirus pandemic, which affect the research and academic fields, such as the inaccuracy of research conducted at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, he listed the specific current aspects in the research field where more efforts and more research could be of benefit in facing this global challenge. Because of this unprecedented scenario, Dr. Kassem equally underlined the necessity to share information across borders and the opportunity for regional and cross-regional collaboration. In an interview following the lecture, Dr. Kassem further emphasized the urgency of international collaboration. “The challenge of the pandemic is enormous, far beyond the capabilities of single states to face it;” he stated, “cooperation and mobility of ideas are therefore indispensable”. For example, Egypt quickly got in touch with researchers and scientists in Northern Italy, Spain and Germany in order to best develop desk research useful to face the pandemic. After agreeing that limiting the spread of infection both at the individual and community levels was the primary necessary goal in this time, the Egyptian academia started identifying specific research areas. They include working on the development and implementation of efficient screening tools limiting the spread of the infection, immunological aspects and seroepidemiology of at-risk population, epidemiological studies, modelling, nowcasting and forecasting, IT for prevention and control, vaccine development, innovation in PPE’s and disinfection. Dr. Kassem highlighted other key goals, namely the necessity to optimize diagnosis and to manage cases. In addition, the pandemic undoubtedly necessitates researchers to work on improving efficiency of the healthcare system as well as developing precise psychological, social, and economic studies on the impact of the pandemic. The presentation concluded with general advice for the development of the research field in spite of the challenging circumstances. Remarkably, there is the need for a fast and vast uninterrupted flow of information across research groups across the globe as well as across disciplines and with policy makers. Moreover, Dr. Kassem identified the need to tailor and prioritize the research agenda according to what is achievable and feasible taking into consideration the direct impact while never forgetting the importance of collaboration, exchange and cooperation. He added in a successive interview the importance of focusing on all the aspects related to the global pandemic which are not limited to the healthcare field but extend to the social, psychological and economic areas among others. In his view, researchers and policy makers should not underestimate these fields but rather prioritize them in their agenda. When asked about the current development of the pandemic in Egypt, Dr. Kassem shared his concern about the possibility of a second wave despite the current decrease of cases in the country. He thus recommended continuing taking precautionary measures in addition to keeping sharing research results on the Coronavirus in order to best face the uncertain context of this critical time in global history.

The public lecture concluded with a lively Q&A time on a variety of topics. Among others, the exchange tackled the topic of the search for a vaccine in Egypt, highlighting the promising developments in the last period. Some attendees equally questioned the speakers on the possible discrepancy between the actual number of disease cases and those tested positive in Egypt. Prof. Dr. Abdel Meguid Kassem explained the presence of the same problem worldwide as well as the margin of error connected with the testing of people. The debate later switched to the possibility of travelling in safety during Coronavirus time and the new procedures in place. Prof. Dr. Abdel Meguid Kassem clarified the requirement of the PCR test certificate to enter Egypt and the necessity to maintain social distancing, wearing masks and general disinfection as precautionary measures to lower the risk of infection. The final series of questions drove the attention to the fear of a second wave and the uncertainty the world is confronted with in the current time.

Overall, throughout the series of presentations and the Q&A time the participants of the public lecture were offered useful information on major issues connected with the global pandemic such as the consequences on mental health, the challenges for the research field, the procedures taken by governments to face the pandemic and the possible future steps. The comparison between different countries offered a complete and various perspective on the topic, which resulted in a stimulating exchange among the attendees and the speakers. “It was a great occasion for people to share experiences from different countries during this online public lecture,” Prof. Dr. El-Azami El-Idrissi Mohamed stated in a subsequent interview, emphasizing the need to continue creating these opportunities to share and grow together in spite of challenging circumstances.

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