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## Bringing Health Research to the Renewed U.S.-Myanmar Relationship

*Ronald Daniels, Pe Thet Khin, and Peter C. Agre*

THE last six months have witnessed a flurry of diplomatic activity between the United States and Myanmar. The recent bi-elections, held as part of Myanmar's transition to democracy, took place under the spotlight of global attention. They followed a series of other steps by both the United States and Myanmar to begin opening official relations between the two countries. The December 2011 visit of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. congressional leaders, along with the commitment to reestablish full diplomatic ties, speaks to a rapidly evolving government-to-government relationship.

Receiving much less attention has been the ongoing and active cooperation among researchers, academia, and civil society from Myanmar and the United States even when the political relations between our two countries have been particularly strained. As Myanmar and the United States develop closer relations, these societal connections will become even more important for bringing improved health and economic growth to this important Southeast Asian nation.

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In 2010 the American Association for the Advancement of Science (publisher of *Science & Diplomacy*) sent a high-level delegation to Myanmar to investigate potential areas of cooperation in education, forest science, and health research. More specific activities were identified in dryland forest research and laboratory capacity building in the biological sciences during a follow-up visit in 2012.

Equally significant has been the growing relationship between U.S. universities—including Johns Hopkins—and the expert community in Myanmar, especially in health sciences, public health, and higher education. This relationship was reinforced by reciprocal visits in early 2012 by the Myanmar Ministry of Health following a visit to Myanmar by a high-level Johns Hopkins delegation.

Such exchanges and interactions of experts will be central to developing long-term relationships between our two countries. Ultimately, the strength of Myanmar-U.S. relations will be determined by our ability to move beyond the geopolitical to the socially beneficial. It is in this area that greater academic and expert interactions offer the greatest potential.

Health research and policy offer an important arena to enhance cooperation. Recent questions about the outbreak of drug-resistant malaria on the Myanmar-Thai border provide an important reminder that we are linked together by issues of health. By collaborating on health research, we gain access to important data and samples that will help us better respond to potential disease outbreaks.

Myanmar is witnessing a rapid increase of interest from international aid organizations, which are becoming more engaged with Myanmar as they work with the government to improve public health and disease surveillance. And while such help is greatly needed, there is a very real concern that these well-meaning efforts could swamp Myanmar's limited technical human resources. Given this, it is imperative that Myanmar develop the expertise and systems that allow for robust, evidence-based decision making. These are areas where bilateral connections with the United States, and especially its universities and scientific organizations, could provide immediate and critical help.

Our policy makers could build on the momentum in the new relationships by identifying opportunities to increase technical exchanges. Academic exchanges provide opportunities for exposing new generations of talented Myanmar experts to some of the latest training and techniques for developing data-driven decision making in the United States.

These programs and other exchanges would benefit U.S. experts as well by giving top U.S. medical students and researchers the opportunity to study diseases and health burdens in this unique, rapidly changing region. Involvement of Myanmar's experts in programs designed to build laboratory capacity—such as the American Society for Microbiology's LabCap program—could help health researchers develop international standards for safe handling of biological samples and data collection. This could also be useful for training and human resource development.

Progress depends on taking further steps toward democracy, pursuing real and lasting peace with the country's still-marginalized ethnic nationalities, and developing Myanmar's economy in ways that more equitably distribute Myanmar's resources. This also provides an opportunity for closer cooperation between our health and university communities. Better development of public health services could improve the lives of citizens and spur economic growth, both by reducing the cost of disease and by developing and producing products that benefit not only Myanmar but also regional populations. Given the importance of working at a regional level, Myanmar can begin to look at ways that its 2014 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) chairmanship might focus on developing models for just, healthy, and prosperous societies.

While each of these activities can and would build on the rapidly changing official relationships, they would also provide critical links between the early career professionals in Myanmar and colleagues in the United States in areas of mutual interest and benefit.

There are challenges, such as distances and costs of developing sustained exchange programs, as well as rapidly developing official relationships that could experience some strains if expectations are not met on both sides. Therefore, there is an even greater need for the types of exchanges and interactions between experts that we have described. These expert-to-expert, researcher-to-researcher interactions can and should be the foundation on which to build an ongoing relationship between the two countries. Collaboration at all levels is needed.

Moving forward, policy makers on both sides should build on the relationships that already exist. The fact that the first ministerial visit from Myanmar after the opening of relations concerned health speaks to both the deep connections that our researchers have had through the years and the central role that health cooperation can play in both improving the well-being of our citizens and the relationships between our two countries. Enhancing the interactions between our technical communities, especially in health research, provides an important path to the promise and opportunity of improved relationships. **SD**