

Public must follow world affairs

Written by Chiang Kuan-yu 蔣寬宇
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During this year's World Health Assembly (WHA) last month, a non-governmental team organized an exhibition called "Hospital Without Borders" to showcase Taiwan's public health achievements at a venue near the WHO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

I delivered speeches in New York City, promoted the exhibition and guided visitors inside the exhibition in Geneva, and watched from the public gallery the discussion over proposals to invite Taiwan to participate in the WHA.

Drawing key lessons from these experiences could help Taiwanese understand how to ensure Taiwan's participation in formal international organizations and upgrade the nation's international status.

It would also emphasize the need for a change in public attitude toward international affairs, which would greatly benefit Taiwan and make it more widely known and recognized by other nations.

First, Taiwanese should more actively promote and participate in international non-governmental exchanges. If they want other nations to talk about Taiwan, they must first introduce themselves.

The "Hospital Without Borders" exhibition attracted quite a few foreign opinion leaders and intellectuals, as well as many international experts attending the WHA who can influence people around them by highlighting Taiwan and discussing it.

In contrast to traditional health diplomacy, which only provides medical resources in unequal measures, the use of exhibitions, public events and other campaigns to attract international opinion leaders is the best and most effective way to allow the younger generation to showcase their creativity and interdisciplinary capacity.

Second, participating in and establishing international non-governmental organizations with

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friends from other nations could provide an opportunity to apply for inclusion in the list of organizations qualified to participate in formal international conferences.

This would boost the chances of exerting pressure on some major international organizations and help the enhancement of Taiwan's status.

In events where Taiwanese political organizations and government officials tend to be suppressed, people holding a professional title, or people who serve as administrative staff in non-profit organizations might face fewer challenges when applying to participate in meetings held by formal international organizations.

Third, public opinion should try to make a difference on an everyday basis. The issue of Taiwan's status relies largely on the support of overseas Taiwanese, who persistently make an effort in lobbying foreign governments on Taiwan's behalf, cultivating local grassroots political figures and helping them be elected to office in their country.

However, the Taiwanese public tend to be influenced by local news and political disputes and it lacks direction.

To influence international organizations, public opinion should concentrate its efforts months in advance. Once an international conference begins, it is already too late, as many things have already been discussed long before.

Fourth, Taiwan must maintain its professional standards and adopt a proactive attitude toward international humanitarian obligations.

Admittedly, international realities play a role in international relations, but it is worth noting that each official international organization, regardless of its nature, must acknowledge that its operations must be based on its original pledges of integrity and friendly cooperation lest it lose its legitimacy.

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The debate over the proposal for Taiwan's participation in the WHA serves as an example. While the pro-China side has been making very little progress and continues to stick to the "one China" principle, Taiwan's allies have exposed security holes in the International Health Regulations (IHR).

A case in point was the filing of a report of a tuberculosis carrier entering Taiwan in China instead of Taiwan; it was not until five months later that the Chinese authorities transferred the report to the Centers for Disease Control in Taipei.

This series of substantial mistakes provoked discussion among various expert organizations in Europe and the US, as they cannot tolerate a partner that uses its power to interfere politically around the world, while ignoring its obligations to collaborate on the maintenance of global hygiene conditions.

In 2016, Taiwan's reporting capacity with regard to infectious diseases passed the IHR Joint External Evaluation, making Taiwan the eighth nation to do so.

International organizations in many nations have seen the level of Taiwan's expertise. Apart from the support expressed by nations, such as the Marshall Islands, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and others during this year's WHA, Canada and Honduras — speaking immediately afterward — also frowned upon China's misbehavior.

China is big, but uncooperative, and as long as Taiwan keeps up the existing foundation, its advantage will grow over the years.

Young people used to consider the cross-strait issue an old issue and took a pessimistic view of it.

However, such issues are in constant flux due to the dynamics and changes at work in different fields. Sometimes, these changes are quite interesting and thought-provoking, offering a turning point and resulting in breakthroughs.

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The new diplomatic thinking will be collaboration between the government and the public. Taiwanese must be more confident, actively participate in international affairs and gain a better understanding of current global affairs for the purpose of finding a breakthrough point to help enhance the nation's status and facilitate its return to the international community.

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Translated by Chang Ho-ming

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