

Unlock China's Potential as a Provider of Global Public Goods in Health



Steve Davis

It's inspiring to know that so many of you from government, academia, business, and philanthropy are assembling to focus on the shared vision of strengthening South-South cooperation and development for a better and fairer world.

Since opening our China office in 2007, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has supported China in addressing major domestic health and development challenges and is working with Chinese partners to apply their expertise, experience, and resources for the benefit of the world's poorest people, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa.

Given that China has a proven track record for developing and manufacturing world-class and affordable health products—from vaccines to drugs to contraceptives—we believe China has even greater potential for becoming an influential provider of global public goods. Over the past decade, our foundation has worked with the government, research institutes, regulatory bodies, private sector, and global health partners, including the World Health Organization, to support the development and distribution of many Chinese health products, including helping them obtain WHO Pre-Qualification for use in developing countries, and support the most vulnerable communities in addressing public health challenges. These experiences re-affirm our belief in this opportunity, especially as we see the expanding reach of Chinese public health goods through more robust engagement with international organizations and multilateral mechanisms.

Today, I would like to offer two ideas on how China could leverage its unique position to further its global efforts in supplying affordable, quality health products.

Steve Davis, Former Executive Strategy Adviser and Interim China Country Office Director, Bill & Melinda Gates foundation.

This article is based on Steve Davis's remarks at PKU Global Health and Development Forum 2021.

S. Davis (✉)
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Beijing, China
e-mail: zhaoxinpup@163.com

First, to maximize the impact and minimize the cost of global goods, it is imperative that we think holistically about whole journey of these products—across the entire value chain from the beginning to end, what activities should be done and what resources must be mobilized in different stages?

Too often, we think only one part of this work—for instance, the research stage or the regulatory stage—and later find challenges or delays because we didn't consider early enough how to address all the critical issues—from testing to prequalification to export commitments to marketing to scaling through partnerships. We encourage our partners to assess and plan for the entire journey, and we support many efforts in the whole value chain.

- Take our work in eliminating malaria as an example. Over the past 60 years, China has reduced malaria cases within its borders from 30 million a year to zero—an incredible achievement that underlines the depth of experience China can bring to this issue. At the Gates Foundation, we work with Chinese and African partners on a wide range of matters across the entire value chain.
 - On the vector control side, we are assisting China to bring high quality, affordable mosquito nets to the global market and tapping into China's Research and Development (R&D) capability to explore the potential of an innovative insecticide from natural compounds.
 - On the treatment side, we support China's becoming one of the primary sources of global procurement of anti-malaria drugs. Its research in the biosynthesis of artemisinin may contribute to the continuous supply of anti-malaria commodities.
 - To increase the quantity and quality of Chinese anti-malaria health products, we are working with Chinese regulatory agencies and the private sector to improve the quality of Chinese antimalarial products and support them in obtaining the WHO pre-qualification to maximize their global impact, or navigate registration, export or procurement policies.
 - On the strategy side, we are supporting Chinese partners' efforts in capacity building of Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDD) through pilot projects and further integrating China's innovative, proven methods to strengthen malaria control programs and health systems in African countries.
 - On the implementation side, we are also supporting China in collaborating with other multilateral donors and international platforms such as the Global Fund to sustain effective interventions and scale the impact of such contributions.
- From early-stage R&D and demand-side analysis to manufacturing and policy integration, there is a wide range of stakeholders within the value chain. Applying end-to-end thinking helps us identify partners early for functional solutions at different stages. While the value chain of the global health market is complex, we must use a holistic approach to maximize value at the lowest total cost for our final beneficiaries.

Second, we must accelerate the drive for affordable digital public goods in global health.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has forced healthcare systems worldwide to significantly accelerate the transformation or broader adoption of the digitalization of health care delivery. As co-chair of the World Health Organization's Digital Health Technical Advisory Group, I believe that many future global public goods will be presented in digital products. Technologies such as virtual care, remote monitoring, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, smart wearables, platforms, and tools enabling remote data across the health ecosystem, creating a continuum of care have proven potential to enhance health outcomes. The global health markets need more digital tools and services in those areas.
- And China is well-positioned to be a leader in providing digital global public goods at an affordable cost. Again, to do this effectively, we need to ensure we adopt a holistic approach to the entire digital ecosystem, mainly starting from the demand side, that is from the point of view of what the consumers and communities in the lower and lower middle-income countries need and are asking for, not just pushing products and solutions from the outside.

China has the potential and commitment to becoming an even more critical provider of global public goods in health. This will require increasing investment, innovating new technologies, and improving capabilities across every stage of the products' journeys. And importantly, we need more innovative models for cooperation involving bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral partnerships. This is why I look forward to discussions from this Forum on your collaborative efforts in solution-building and establishing sustainable models of public-private-academic partnerships—and underscore the Gates Foundation's ongoing commitment to work with you on these critical issues.