

African students debate health care with Flemish politicians

25 master's students debated with Flemish politicians about social protection in health.

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On 20 March, twenty-five primarily African master's students debated about social protection in health with Flemish politicians Dirk Avonts (Groen!), Yasmine Kherbache (sp.a), Nahima Lanjri (CD&V), Peter Persyn (N-VA) and Lieve Wierinck (Open VLD).

The debate

Master student Sany Sayadi from Niger kicked off the discussion with a question on the lack of political commitment the African students often encounter in their homelands: "Why is it in Belgium possible to translate political into concrete action?" The Flemish politicians referred among other things to the presence of a basic solidarity and the pressure from social movements to guarantee a system of solidarity insurance for all.

"Chronic diseases are a relatively recent phenomenon in Africa. How do you see the future of health care with an aging population and the need for more chronic care?", asked Tina Songo-Tokofai from Togo. In her explanation, Yasmine Kherbache from sp.a warned not to reduce care to a purely economic issue.

Fodé Cisse from Guinea, a country that was hit hard by the recent Ebola crisis, gauged the opinions on the role of the health insurance services. Peter Persyn (N-VA) stressed the need to reduce administrative costs, while Nahima Lanjiri (CD&V) highlighted the opportunities of digitalisation and the role of health insurance services as major voice of the patients.

Finally, Adalbert Tchetchia from Cameroon asked whether Belgium has sufficient support to continue development cooperation with Africa. According to Lieve Wierinck (Open VLD) the solidarity is indisputable and tropical diseases in globalised world matters to everyone. Dirk Avonts (Groen!) added that even among countries within the European Union a lack of solidarity exists.

ITM Prof. Bart Criel organised the debate: "We don't expect a copy-paste from Belgium to Africa, but we do hope that our students got inspired by the debate which they can use in their work back home."

The Master in Public Health at ITM

The Master in Public Health (MPH) at the ITM is offered alternately in French and English. This year the course was held in French. Most of the students come from francophone Africa, but there are also several from Madagascar and Haiti. The vast majority are physicians who hold *middle management* positions in the public health sector in their country, in national disease control programmes or in international NGOs.

During the MPH, students acquire theoretical insights, factual knowledge and methodological tools to better manage their national health systems. Students' own experiences and international exchange in the class itself (with 15 nationalities this year) play a central role.

The MPH, which has been around for 50 years now, was assessed in 2016 as excellent across the board by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO), which is a rather exceptional honour.

The debate on 20 March was part of three-week curriculum which deals extensively with social protection in health. The students visited the National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance (RIZIV), the Ministry of Social Affairs, a health insurance fund and civil society organisations involved in the fight against poverty and social marginalisation. In addition, students formed small groups to examine the social protection situation in their home country.

The MPH module strongly stresses the role of politics and the importance of political choices in the expansion of adequate social protection. The debate between politicians and students therefore offered the opportunity to discuss the broad social framework within which social protection can be developed, as well as the limits of our social model and the many challenges it faces today.