How do international negotiations about health policy work? Why is innovation and change that comes from organizations like the United Nations and the World Health Organization so slow? What skills should students develop who want to improve their negotiation skills to make a difference in the world? Four sessions in May at the Harvard Global Health Institute gave fourteen Harvard students the opportunity to address these questions firsthand.

The non-credit workshop offered a practical simulation of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) negotiations on shaping a political resolution for innovation and access to health technologies in developing countries. Steven J. Hoffman and John-Arne Røttingen — HGHI visiting scholars who teach an HSPH course entitled "Innovation, Access to Medicines & Global Governance" — launched the workshop with an overall introduction to the topic. Participants were each assigned to represent a specific country, as members of Committee A of the WHO World Health Assembly (WHA), and negotiate the development of a resolution that the WHA would adopt at an upcoming meeting. After two sessions of intense negotiations, they used the final session to debrief.

What had they learned about the psychology of negotiations? How did they experience grappling with complex problems and decision making to work toward a collective strategic outcome?

“This was a fantastic chance to learn,” wrote one student on the workshop evaluation. “Incredibly interesting and eye–opening,” said another; “I enjoyed learning more about each country's priorities and discussing where our coalitions and differences were,” added a third; “I [now] recognize the importance of forming relationships with other countries of like interest, to gain support for your position if not to organize opposition for the expediency of the process,”

“We wanted the workshop to help students understand why negotiations often result in sub–optimal results and how negotiators can work to maximize outcomes,” said Røttingen, a Visiting Professor in the Department of Global Health and Population at the Harvard School of Public Health. “Through first–hand experience, they learned how global health issues affect people across fields, not only for those in the fields of medicine and public health, but also for those in public policy, business, economics, law, politics, environmental science, basic science, and human rights.”
Participants agreed that the experience shaped their thinking about the future. As one student reflected, "it drove home the fact that I want to pursue a career in this forum (or fora like this) because reaching consensus and working for the benefit of our respective countries (and global image) is a worthwhile challenge."

Click here to view the workshop syllabus.