

NGOs Reject WHO DG's Proposal for a World Health Forum

"We find this proposal absolutely unacceptable, especially since WHO has given Member States no time to discuss and consider the implications" Dr Arun Gupta, Regional Coordinator for IBFAN Asia

The DG is proposing the creation of a World Health Forum (WHF) as an essential element of the global health governance system. The NGOs are urging Member States (MS) to reject the draft resolution, for the following three reasons:

1. WHO is an intergovernmental organization, which has a constitutional mandate to ensure the fundamental right of every human being without distinction to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health. WHO must protect its independence, integrity in decision making and its reputation. It must also guard against manipulation of its governing bodies by private interest actors. We believe this forum will undermine WHO's ability to fulfill its mandate. Paragraph 20 (ii) of the report A 64/4 illustrates this point. It states that the expected outcomes of the WHO reform will "Improve health outcomes, with WHO meeting the expectations of its Member States and partners". The reassurances given in paragraph 86 that "a multi-stakeholder forum [...] will not usurp the decision making prerogatives of WHO's own governance" are not credible. How can the WHF meet the expectations of commercial actors without usurping the prerogatives of WHO's own governance?
2. In paragraph 87 of the report A64/4, it is proposed that the multi-stakeholder forum will "identify future priorities in global health". This is a reason for serious concern as it is the WHA's responsibility to set health priorities, benchmarks and standards which will effectively protect health for all. Previous experience with multi-stakeholder initiatives has shown that health priorities are distorted when they have to be agreed by for-profit actors, whose duties and responsibilities are ultimately to their shareholders and employees. IBFAN's experience on baby foods illustrates how the baby food industry systematically undermines Member States' efforts to regulate marketing in line with WHA's resolutions.
3. The WHF institutionalizes conflicts of interests as the norm within WHO by extending the role of policy and decision shaping to for-profit actors that have an interest in the outcome. WHF poses an unjustifiable risk, in that it may compromise and distort international and national agreed public health priorities and policies. This is ever more worrying in the absence of a strong and clear WHO policy on conflicts of interests. Transparency, currently promoted as the answer to the problem of conflicts of interests, is an essential requirement but it is not a sufficient safeguard in itself. It helps identify conflicts of interests, but does not deal with them.

The NGOs conclude that the proposal fails to demonstrate any added value over possible alternatives to address the issue of strengthening WHO's role in global health governance.

N.B. This reform is being introduced under the name of "financing for WHO", however the report A64/4 hardly mentions finances. These are reflected only in the point 4 of the Report A64/INF.DOC./5 only in a form of a corporate resource mobilization strategy.

Report by the Director General. A64/4 (5 May 2011) and the report A64/INF.DOC./5

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