

Defend the World Health Organization from corporate takeover

May 23, 2015

At the forthcoming World Health Assembly (WHA), two key deliberations have the potential to fundamentally influence the future of the World Health Organization (WHO). The Assembly will consider the latest draft of the 'framework for engagement with non-state actors'. It will also finalize proposals for the financing of WHO for the next two years. The latter includes a critical proposal by the Director General for a 5% increase in assessed (mandatory) contributions.

We, the undersigned civil society organizations and social movements urge the Member States of the WHO to intervene in these deliberations to strengthen WHO and protect its integrity and independence.

We are concerned that rich member-state donors have been deliberately undermining the WHO and weakening its capacity to promote global health by underfunding, tight earmarking of donor funding and opening spaces for corporate influence. Partly as a response to this situation a number of Member States are driving an initiative directed at protecting WHO from improper influence through regulating WHO's engagement with the private sector entities, philanthropic foundations, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations. However, this initiative may be blocked at the WHA.

The funding crisis

Donor funds account for 80% of WHO's budget and 93% of donor funds is tightly earmarked to programs that the donors support. This prevents WHO from implementing programs that rich countries do not support, even when they are decided by the World Health Assembly. Threats of further funding cuts are held out if attempts are made to implement such programs.

The compromised ability of the WHO to intervene effectively during the 2014 Ebola crisis is a tragic illustration of the impact of the budgetary crisis on WHO's capacity to fulfill its mandate. Over the last four years WHO has been through a far reaching reform program driven in part by arguments that the freeze on assessed (mandatory) contributions should remain in place until the Organization addresses its inefficiencies. Such arguments fly in the face of clear evidence that these inefficiencies are largely a function of WHO's financial crisis brought on by the freeze on assessed contributions.

The Director-General has now proposed a 5% increase in assessed contributions..While 5% is a relatively small increment, much less than the big donors contribute as voluntary contributions, it is of huge symbolic value and a crucial step towards breaking the logjam of freeze on

assessed contributions. Predictably, certain large donor countries are gearing up to oppose the increase and refuse to adopt the budget.

WHO's relationship with global corporations lies at the heart of the crisis

Threats to health and barriers to affordable health care arise due to the commercial interests of big corporations. The increasing incidence of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and stroke due to intensively marketed cheap ultra-processed foods is a stark example. Pharmaceutical corporations clearly value shareholders' demand for profits over affordable access to essential medicines and vaccines. For WHO to fulfill its mandate it must be able to name such threats and barriers and develop and implement policies and programs to manage them.

However, rich member states, the USA and UK in particular, have repeatedly opposed WHO taking any action which might run counter to the interests of transnational corporations. Furthermore certain rich member states are seeking to force WHO to open up its policy making and decision making spaces to the transnational corporations.

Proposals for 'multi-stakeholder partnerships' would designate junk food manufacturers as partners in the task of addressing obesity, heart disease and stroke. Over the last two years WHO and its Member States have been locked in a contentious debate around the rules governing corporate influence over decision making in WHO. Rich countries are seeking to use these rules to clear the way for transnational corporations to buy influence and insert corporate staff into strategic positions within the WHO Secretariat.

The present draft of the 'framework for engagement with non-state actors' is contested and problematic. It is more important to get a good outcome than rush to adopt a document that might further legitimize corporate influence of decision making in the WHO..

A recently leaked document from the International Food and Beverage Alliance (see accompanying document) illustrates the lengths that the corporations will go to ensure that the 'framework for engagement' increases their access to policy-making in the agency and the degree to which member states can be 'persuaded' (if such persuasion is needed) to support them.

We call upon the delegates to the 68th World Health Assembly to defend the integrity, independence and democratic accountability of the World Health Organization by

- **supporting the increase in assessed contributions;**
- **taking such time as is necessary to achieve a robust framework for engagement with non-state actors, to protect the Organization from improper influence.**

Aliança de Combate do Tabagismo/Brasil
 (ACT/Br)
 Alianza LAC - Global por el Acceso a
 Medicamentos
 All India Drug Action Network
 Alliance de la Societé Civile Malienne
 contre la Maladie à Virus d'Ebola
 Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinar de
 Aids (ABIA)
 Baby Milk Action
 Berne Declaration
 Breastfeeding Association of Trinidad and
 Tobago
 BUKO Pharma-Kampagne
 Colombian Episcopal Conference
 Colombian Medical Federation
 Corporate Accountability International
 Centro Studi e Ricerche in Salute
 Internazionale e Interculturale (CSI)
 University of Bologna
 Diverse Women for Diversity
 Drug Action Forum - Karnataka
 European Mutual-help Network for
 Alcohol related problems
 First Steps Nutrition Trust
 Fundacion Ifarma
 Health Action International (HAI)
 Health Innovation in Practice (HIP,
 Geneva)
 Health Poverty Action
 HealthWrights (Workgroup for People's
 Health and Rights)
 Hesperian Health Guides
 INFACT Canada / IBFAN North America
 Initiative for Health and Equity in Society
 International Association of Consumer
 Food Organizations – Europe (IACFO-
 Europe)
 International Association of Health Policy
 in Europe (IAHPE)

International Baby Food Action Network
 (IBFAN)
 International-Lawyers.Org
 Knowledge Ecology International (KEI)
 Medact
 Medicines Information Center from the National
 University of Colombia (CIMUN)
 Medico International
 Medicus Mundi International Network
 MEZIS e.V. - Mein Essen zahl ich selbst
 Initiative unbestechlicher Ärztinnen und
 Ärzte
 National Alliance of People's Movements
 (NAPM)
 NGO Forum for Health
 NGO Misión Salud (Colombia)
 O Fórum da Amazônia Oriental - FAOR
 Osservatorio Italiano sulla Salute Globale
 (OISG)
 People's Health Movement (PHM)
 Policies for Equitable Access to Health (PEAH)
 Public Services International
 REDES (Friends of the Earth Uruguay)
 Salud y Farmacos -EE UU
 SOCHARA (Society for Community Health
 Awareness, Research and Action)
 Society for International Development (SID)
 Third World Health Aid (TWHa)
 Third World Network (TWN)
 Treatment Action Campaign
 Universities Allied for Essential Medicines
 VBBBvzw / IBFAN Belgium
 Wemos
 World Action on Salt and Health
 World Social Forum on Health and Social
 Security
 Young Professionals Chronic Disease Network
 ZimbabweLGBTQ