WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

“Irrelevant” WHO outpaced by younger rivals

The World Health Organization’s critics accuse it of being bogged down in red tape and internal politics. However, attempts at reform are raising concerns over conflicts of interest. Nigel Hawkes reports

Nigel Hawkes freelance journalist

For as long as many can remember, the World Health Organization has been facing a crisis. From decade to decade, the nature of that crisis might change, but it never quite goes away.

Despite its past accomplishments, WHO fits increasingly uneasily into a world with a growing number of international players who seem fleet of foot and deeper of pocket. Set up as an agency to provide advice to governments at a time when government health departments were the prime movers in health policy and delivery, it seems passé beside such upstarts as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the GAVI Alliance (formerly known as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization), and private philanthropies such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Setting the agenda of global health?

The existence of such organisations is a reproach to WHO, whose bureaucracy and politicisation have been increasingly bypassed by governments in the interests of getting something done. Jack C Chow, a former assistant director general of WHO, claimed last year that the organisation was becoming irrelevant. It was outmoded, underfunded, and overly politicised, he said. “WHO is no longer setting the agenda of global health; it’s struggling to keep up.” His theme was echoed this year by Barry R Bloom, professor of public health at Harvard, who pointed out that of WHO’s budget of $3.9bn (£2.4bn; €2.7bn) in 2008-9, less than $1bn came from member states’ mandatory contributions. The rest were earmarked funds provided by countries or foundations for specific projects, indicating a lack of confidence in WHO’s ability to set the right priorities if left to itself.

Financing

But as if to prove that whatever WHO does will alienate some of its stakeholders, a reform package announced in May to deal with these concerns caused outrage to several international non-governmental organisations. A report by the director general, Margaret Chan, called The future of financing for WHO (64th World Health Assembly, Agenda item 11, paper A64/4) admitted many of the criticisms were true. WHO was overcommitted, overextended, and in need of specific reforms, she said. “Priority setting is neither sufficiently selective nor strategically focussed. Given the large number of agencies now active in health, duplication of effort and fragmented responses abound, creating an unprecedented need for greater coherence and more effective coordination.”

New ways were needed of working with other global actors, her report added. They needed to participate and have their voices heard in the shaping and making of health policy. While less than a quarter of WHO’s budget came from predictable and flexible funds (national contributions) it would not be free to determine its own priorities, so member states were urged to increase their contributions. But at a time when government budgets were under pressure, WHO would also need to attract new donors and explore new avenues of funding, including “foundations and the private and commercial sector.”

The first World Health Forum

To help involve such people, she said, WHO would organise the first World Health Forum, to be held in Geneva in November 2012. Along with member states, this would include representatives of non-governmental organisations, the private sector, academia, and other international organisations. To purists who believe WHO should not sup with the devil, this caused huge anxiety. To them it looked like an attempt to subvert WHO’s principles of governance and cosy up to private industry. Their suspicions were heightened by the late appearance of the plan, just days before the World Health Assembly—WHO’s governing body—met for its 64th meeting.

A wide range of non-governmental organisations were unhappy, and launched a protest at the assembly. Patrick Durisch, speaking on behalf of Health Action International, Knowledge Ecology International, the Third World Network, the Berne Declaration, the People’s Health Movement and International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) said that the new policy
raised conflicts of interest for WHO. Dr Chan’s plan presented
“an unrealistic and empirically unsupported assumption that all
stakeholders will coalesce to advance the public interest.”
Any changes in governance structures should deal with those
conflicts of interest in a realistic manner, he said, and members
of WHO should guard against initiatives that would give private
interests and donors a greater role in its governance.

“Nobody was being very clear” says Patti Rundall of Baby Milk
Action, a long term opponent of food giant Nestlé. “Margaret
Chan said, in effect, ‘we want your money’ and that if it was
forthcoming, WHO would meet its partners’ expectations, You
can’t do that and also meet the expectations of the member
states.

“We depend on WHO being a health advocate that puts health
first. Without that, we wouldn’t now have 60 countries banning
advertising of formula milk for babies. Involving private
companies in setting priorities creates an unsurmountable
conflict of interest. Margaret Chan says that she’ll only deal
with the ‘good’ companies, but how will she know?”

The proposed World Health Forum provided a target around
which the non-governmental organisations circled. “We find
this proposal absolutely unacceptable, especially since WHO
has given member states no time to discuss and consider the
implications,” said Arun Gupta, regional coordinator for IBFAN
Asia. Médecins Sans Frontières joined him and others in
condemning the claim that the forum would not usurp the
decision making prerogatives of WHO’s own governance as
“not credible.” A joint statement asked: how can the World
Health Forum meet the expectations of commercial actors
without usurping the prerogatives of WHO’s own governance?

Dr Chan’s plan survived the World Health Assembly, but came
in for further criticism at the WHO executive board that
followed. She was instructed to produce three papers, on the
governance of WHO, the independent evaluation of WHO, and
the World Health Forum, by the end of June and to convene a
special session of the executive board in November to discuss
them. Although open to all, only the 34 members of the board
will have a vote. Anxieties were expressed at the meeting at the
WHO Secretariat’s plan that the development of the reform
programme be partly funded by the Gates Foundation. Germany
raised the issue of WHO’s financing, a key to the reforms but
not one of the issues Dr Chan is required to report on. It
proposed that financing be added to the governance paper, but
Dr Chan responded by arguing that there was too little time to
include it and Germany withdrew its amendment.

Andrew Cassels, director of the office of the director general
of WHO, says that the critics of the plan are wrong to argue
that it will subvert WHO’s traditional governance, or dilute the voice
of developing countries. The reform plan started, he said, as a
means of achieving a better alignment of WHO’s income and
its work. “Some parts of the work are underfunded, and with
greater flexibility of funding we could do a better job. Member
states responded to the suggestion they should increase assessed
contribution by saying yes, but only when we’re clear what
WHO’s priorities are.

“It would be nice to increase the proportion of voluntary
contributions that are less closely specified. But the key thing
is not to be too concerned about total resources, but to make
them predictable.”

WHO’s priorities

From this, he says, followed the need to discover what other
global players believed WHO’s priorities should be. “The
director general is keen to bring greater coherence to WHO’s
activities. If we are going to achieve that, we need some forum
to discuss the issue that isn’t just governments.” That would
be the World Health Forum. So far, the forum has yet to gain the
formal approval of the executive board, which will discuss it at
its November meeting and again next January.

“The concern that some people have is that it will change
WHO’s decision making process, but it’s not about that,” says
Dr Cassels. “Its conclusions would speak to all global health
organisations, not just WHO. The purpose is not to influence
WHO’s own governance procedures, which would remain
unchanged.”

The three papers Dr Chan was mandated to produce are
complete, but not publicly available, and are being discussed
by WHO’s regional committees. Different views have been
expressed about the need for an independent evaluation of WHO,
one of the key changes called for by Professor Bloom, who
argues that the World Bank, the Global Fund, and GAVI all
have extensive external review procedures, but WHO does not.
However, Dr Cassels says that in the discussions so far, some
have questioned whether the timing is right, some whether an
independent evaluation is even necessary.

In the background, financial pressures are rising. WHO ran
a deficit last year, and Dr Chan found it necessary to assert in her
speech to the World Health Assembly that “we are most
definitely not bankrupt.” The executive board meeting was
picked by staff members protesting at cuts. To balance its
books, it needs to persuade governments and others to contribute
more by persuading them that it is on the right track—or to cut
costs. Neither is easy.

A former staff member says: “WHO as usual tries to do too
much, its priorities aren’t very clear, and its power to make real
executive decisions that would cut some programmes is limited,
and always has been. Individual departments compete with each
other for funding so there’s little sense of a united front and
unwillingness to make sacrifices for the common good. Staff
morale is low and some people are actually losing their jobs.”

**Funding for global health initiatives**

Yet funding for global health initiatives is not lacking. The
money devoted to global health related activities by donors,
including governments and foundations, has risen from $5.6bn
in 1990 to $26.8bn in 2010,1 and the third replenishment meeting
of the Global Fund in 2010 raised $11.7bn for 2011-13. This is
less than the fund had asked for but is still very substantial.
That WHO should be facing budget cuts is an eloquent
commentary on how its performance is perceived. The urgent
need is to win back trust, Professor Bloom argues. But with so
many stakeholders to satisfy that remains a very tall order.

Competing interests The author has completed the ICJME unified
disclosure form at www.icijme.org/coi_disclosure.pdf (available on
request from him) and declares no support from any organisation
for the submitted work; no financial relationships with any organisation
that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous three
years; and no other relationships or activities that could appear to
have influenced the submitted work.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer
reviewed.

---

1 Chow JC. Is the WHO becoming irrelevant? Foreign Policy, 2010.