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World Health Assembly, United Nations Geneva,

NGOs call on Member States to STOP the World Health Forum

The **International Baby Food Action Network** and the **People's Health Movement,** two of the largest people's networks on public health issues, the Swiss advocacy NGO, **Declaration de Berne** and the medical humanitarian organisation **Médecins Sans Frontieres** are jointly opposing the report of the WHO Director General, *"The future of financing for WHO: World Health Organization: reforms for a healthy future."* [1] These organisations consider that the new proposal undermines the principles of democratic governance and the independence and effectiveness of WHO. It increases the power of the already disproportionately powerful for-profit sector. The Report from the Director General was issued only on 5th May.

The open-ended development plan was publicly available only on the evening of Friday 13th, less than 3 days before the Assembly. "*We find this proposal absolutely unacceptable, especially since WHO has given Member States no time to discuss and consider the implications*" said 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 several reasons, for example:

1. As an intergovernmental organization, WHO 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. Paragraph 20 (ii) of the report illustrate how the proposals for WHO reform risk undermining WHO's ability to fulfill its mandate, stating that the expected outcomes 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 Paragraph 87 proposes 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 how 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.

4 In A64/INF.DOC./5 the Forum (output 6) seems to be created simply to achieve output 4 which deals with financing. The other outputs 1, 2, 3 and 5, do not need a Forum. Para 4 of the same paper states that the *"oversight will be provided by the Director General and the Global Policy Group"* which includes WHO staff and no Member States.

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.

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1 *The future of financing for WHO World Health Organization: reforms for a healthy future Report by the Director-General*
http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA64/A64_ID5-en.pdf
Info Doc released on 13th May: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA64/A64_4-en.pdf
For links to supporting documents see online version http://info.babymilkaction.org/pressrelease/pressrelease16may11

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