

PHM Condemns US Halt on Funding to WHO

The COVID-19 pandemic, as on April 20, has infected more than 2.3 million individuals and led to over 160,000 deaths across the globe. These are indeed trying times for the entire global community.

The People's Health Movement unequivocally denounces this move by the US Trump Administration to defund World Health Organisation (WHO) and calls for building global solidarity to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences and to support the WHO as the leading global health institution in this fight.

In such difficult times, the direct attack by the US Trump Administration against the WHO, the leading United Nations global health authority, is to be condemned. After weeks of threatening, on April 15, the Trump Administration formally announced halt of funding to WHO. This announcement happened while the pandemic is still accelerating and the world needs a global co-ordinating body to encourage co-operation and information sharing related to notification of cases and deaths, vaccine development and safe antibody tests.

President Trump's decision to kill funding from the US for the WHO will cripple life-saving anti-COVID-19 work globally. Through attempting to deflect criticism of his own month's-long dilly-dallying initial response to COVID-19, Trump has chosen an action destined to cost lives and provoke resentment and rage against the United States of America. As former U.S. President Jimmy Carter puts it: "I am distressed by the decision to withhold critically needed U.S. funding for the World Health Organization, especially during an international pandemic. WHO is the only international organization capable of leading the effort to control this virus" (<https://wgxa.tv/news/connect-to-congress/jimmy-carter-speaks-out-on-president-trumps-action-to-withhold-funds-from-who>)

PHM calls for strong global solidarity to address the pandemic and its consequences and for support to the WHO as the leading global health institution in this fight.

We hope that democratic opinion within the USA and pressures from citizens and the scientific and public health community will pressure the Trump administration to reverse their decision to remove funding from the WHO at a time when it is needed most.

We also call on all other nations, especially those in the industrialised world and emerging economies to express solidarity with the WHO and to quickly increase their contributions and support to close the gap in funding that will arise because of the US government's actions.

WHO performance on the COVID-19 Pandemic:

With respect to the pandemic, the WHO issued an advisory on January 30 declaring the COVID-19 epidemic a "public health emergency of international concern", which is the highest possible level of alert. It called on governments to pursue containment and testing efforts. It also provided advice about the high infectivity rate and the adverse potential this virus had. In line with international diplomacy protocols, it highlighted what China was doing right and what more it needed to be doing. At this stage it did not point out any flaws in the response from China.

WHO has also been instrumental in distribution of personal protective equipment, ventilators and other lifesaving medical supplies to various countries across the globe. Public health leaders have

noted that WHO has responded more effectively to this pandemic than it did in the early stages of the Ebola crisis in Africa. WHO has initiated work on developing vaccines and clinical trials. It has also launched "Solidarity trial" - an international clinical trial to help find an effective treatment for COVID-19. It has also developed multilingual online course in 13 countries about COVID-19 with 1.2 million enrolments (<http://openwho.org>).

Anti-UN rhetoric and action under the Trump Administration

The systematic weakening of WHO, particularly by the USA, is not new, nor is it sparked by the COVID-19 crisis. We note that the Trump Administration has been making unjustified adverse remarks about WHO and other UN agencies that it perceives does not support the US's foreign policy. In February, the Trump administration reportedly requested for reduction of the US contribution to the WHO. The assessed US contribution for this year is \$400 million, which for the US is a paltry amount. The US assessed contributions are currently about \$200 million in arrears.

This is part of the reason why WHO is chronically under-funded. WHO's budget for the two years 2020-21 is about \$4.84 billion, which is close to the annual budget of a large US hospital and about \$2 billion less than the annual budget of the US Centre for Disease Control – and yet it has a global mandate.

It is also worth noting that responding to the coronavirus emergency appeal by the WHO, while Kuwait has donated \$60 million, Japan \$47.5 million, the European Commission \$33 million and China and UK about \$20 million each, the US has given less than \$15 million.

Systematic Weakening of WHO: Old Tactics of US and neo-liberalism

It must be noted that there has been a systematic weakening of the WHO as a global health authority through financial constrictions and political re-definitions of its role. Until the early 1980s most of WHO's budget came from assessed contributions which are set amounts that member states are required to pay based on their income and population size. In 1983, with the rise of neo-liberalism and as expression of its opposition to both the Health for All Declaration and the List of Essential Medicines, the US voted for a freeze in assessed contributions to the WHO. It is also true that other countries contribution to the WHO has not grown in light of their increasing wealth. For example, China's assessed contribution accounts for less than 1% of WHO funding because of an outdated apportionment.

As a consequence, over the years, the composition of the WHO budget has shifted to voluntary contributions much of which are tied to specific programmes, thereby reducing the flexibility in using these funds. In recent years over 2/3 of US funding to WHO has been tied to specific projects that bypass the organisation's priority-setting processes. Many of these contributions are now from corporate philanthropies, most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). Voluntary contributions come as part of bilateral agreements: most of them promote technocratic vertical solutions, and are not devoted to strengthening public health and system-wide approaches but rather marginalise them. The dependence on such tied-donor contributions substantially compromised the independence and integrity of WHO as a global health authority and weakened its mandate to protect and promote global health.

The US also has a history of hard bargaining to dilute many key resolutions and treaties and then finally refusing to sign on. They have regularly tried to dilute provisions on sexual and reproductive health rights. They have been major promoters of a corporate presence in decision making bodies within WHO. The US has also supported new global health institutions linked to trans-national

corporations that finance WHO for specific projects and weakened the global leadership of WHO. This has already weakened the voice and effectiveness of WHO on a wide number of issues. This is at a time when WHO is facing complex global challenges from the threats of infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, antimicrobial resistance, the underlying social and commercial determinants of these diseases and climate change.

PHM has been critical of the corporate infiltration of WHO through its WHO Watch initiative and through its publication Global Health Watch. Our criticism largely stems from the position WHO finds itself in because of the under-funding and the other ways the US encouraged its undermining.

We also note that the US Trump Administration has worked to undermine UN agencies more generally.

Way Forward

The People's Health Movement, its partner organisations and affiliates condemn the autocratic and arrogant behaviour of the US Trump administration against WHO at the very moment when WHO is needed the most. Our hope is that member states will move to strengthen the WHO, and press the US government to redraw its approach to the UN agency. We recognise that there are organisational weaknesses in WHO that need to be addressed in the longer term so that it stays free of corporate interests and is able to give free and frank advice to countries. Now is the time to increase financial support to WHO and equip and strengthen it to become a strong, democratic inter-governmental agency which retains its professional and political autonomy and which can effectively discharge its constitutional mandate.

Most WHO Member States require the continued flow of technical advice and guidance and many low-income countries are dependent on WHO for supplies of medical products to combat COVID-19. We urge the global public health community to rally behind WHO as the most important directing and co-ordinating authority on international response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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