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World Health Organization needs new leadership for a changing world



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Watching the nightly news, it's easy to forget that alongside the major shifts in the political, economic, and social landscape there have also been improved health and livelihoods in many countries. However, several factors threaten to undermine this progress. Those include disease outbreaks, climatic catastrophes and income inequities.

Representatives from all countries will gather in Geneva this month for the World Health Assembly, where they will choose a new leader for the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO). The new director-

general will have to drive serious structural reforms to enable the organization to regain its position as the preeminent global authority on health.

One major change in the last several years has been the rise of emerging markets. These countries include Brazil, China, India, Russia, South Africa (known as the BRICS), and several other countries around the world. What is particularly interesting in the context of global health is their shared challenges and their potential to reshape the development landscape.

First and foremost, emerging market countries are incredibly diverse. However, they also share many of the same attributes. In general, they each have sound financial institutions, energetic private sectors, liberalized economies, and strong prospects for sustainable growth.

This is good news for expanding health services in these countries. But as they continue to grow, they will transition from being "policy takers" and will likely adjust how they interact with multilateral agencies like the WHO. The next director-general will need to understand these changing dynamics while also being politically savvy and diplomatic.

Economic growth has resulted in increasing healthcare spending in many emerging markets. Unfortunately, growth has not kept pace with increasing health costs. To address this issue, new health financing models will be needed. This is particularly true as many emerging markets seek to provide universal healthcare. Here is another area where multilateral agencies like WHO are essential. Since 2014, WHO has provided countries with technical guidance on financing for universal health coverage. These efforts must be sustained and expanded to meet the needs of emerging market and poorer countries.

Common health challenges in these countries create many opportunities for sharing experiences and technologies. For example, many emerging markets are currently dealing with the so-called double burden of disease. They continue to struggle with providing basic primary health services while also addressing the infectious diseases. At the same time, they are also struggling with an increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases largely driven by aging populations and unhealthy lifestyles.

Experiences with interventions aimed at addressing infectious and noncommunicable diseases concurrently will help countries with program planning and implementation. Global partners, including civil society organization and multilateral agencies, can play a role by facilitating knowledge sharing and providing technical guidance in many emerging market countries.

To support emerging market countries, indeed all countries, in attaining the highest level of health possible, dramatic reforms at WHO are both necessary and urgent. The recent outbreak of Ebola in West Africa underscored the organization's structural limitations and called into question its capacity to deliver results.

Director-General Margaret Chan quickly put into place a set of much-needed reforms in the emergency response program. This decision deserves praise. However, the new director-general will need to focus on accelerating these reforms and expand them to other programs. The ability of the organization to deliver in all areas will depend on the speed with which these reforms are implemented.

As I consider the emerging market countries and their role in global health, I am reminded of the significance of the decision facing all countries on their choice of a new leader for the WHO. I urge all countries to consider selecting Dr. Sania Nishtar of Pakistan for this incredibly important position.

I have worked closely with Dr. Nishtar for many years at the Emerging Markets Symposium at the University of Oxford and believe she has the vision to drive WHO towards even greater achievements as she has already done in civil society, government and through international agencies. Her honesty, integrity, and passion would help accelerate the reforms the organization desperately needs.

Emerging markets will become even more significant to global health and development in the years ahead regardless of the outcome of the election. The role WHO must play in helping these countries achieve their full potential will depend on its next leader. Dr. Nishtar would do a superb job.

Ian Scott is the executive director of the [Emerging Markets Symposium](#) at the University of Oxford.

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