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As member-states elect the next WHO leader

By Mohamed Abdi Jama | 19 April 2017 | 3:15 am



World Health Assembly. PHOTO: WHO.it

The health challenges in today's world, particularly for developing countries, demand bold new leadership to ensure the organization can deliver on its mandate for people across the globe. As the World Health Organization (WHO) votes for a new leader next month, the WHO member states can make a decisive impact on global health. The election comes at a time when the demand for a strong, responsive, and efficient international health agency is growing louder each day. The decision that all 194 countries will take will likely affect the health and wellbeing of millions of people around the world particularly those in the African Continent.

I have seen firsthand the qualities I believe make for a strong and effective international health agency. I recently served as the Assistant Director-General of the WHO in Geneva. At this critical time, there are five issues that will define the tenure of the next Director-General and on which their success will be measured.

Pandemic preparedness: The Ebola outbreak in West Africa was a painful reminder that being prepared to respond to epidemics is vital to the health of our people and the strength of our economies. We also learned that being prepared to respond to such epidemics requires a holistic approach that includes smart foresight (i.e., placing a priority on strong health systems before an epidemic strikes), decisive leadership, and effective communication – all characteristics that the new WHO leader will need to embody.

Non-Communicable Diseases: Rich and poor countries alike are now grappling with a growing burden of non-communicable diseases. Cancer, diabetes, and heart disease are among the leading causes of premature mortality globally. They are skyrocketing particularly in the developing world. Their rise is worrying, particularly in settings with a sizeable burden of infectious diseases – the so-called double burden of disease. How the WHO responds to this growing challenge will affect millions of lives.

South-South Cooperation and Leadership: The global political and economic landscape is changing. There are now unprecedented opportunities for countries in Africa to engage with countries in South America and Asia to share innovative and adaptable solutions to address their health and development challenges. The history of the AIDS epidemic in Africa was changed by the introduction of cheap generics from the global South and the emergence of global health partnerships. The global South must look to build local capacity to ensure medicines reach the people who need them most.

Mitigating Climate Change: Climate change is already having a devastating impact on health around the world. Five countries in Africa are now struggling to respond to one of the worst food shortages we have seen decades. Communities, many of which are already vulnerable to poor health, will also have to deal with changing water levels, extreme heat events, and infectious diseases. We need a leader who acknowledges climate change as a threat to health and will fight to mitigate and prevent it.

Organizational Reform and Transparency: WHO must undertake a number of key reforms. These include adopting new priority setting mechanisms, changing management structures, and adopting an accountability framework that can improve organizational performance. The new leader of the WHO will be tasked with reestablishing the organization's primacy as the global authority of health. These reforms will be central to this effort.

Three WHO regions, largely in the global south, have never had a representative in the top position at WHO. I agree it is time for change but this is not about regional representation, gender, or religion. It is my strong belief that the most qualified candidate to lead the WHO at this pivotal time is Dr. Sania Nishtar of Pakistan.

I have known Sania for many years and I know she is eminently qualified to face these challenges and accelerate the reforms needed within the WHO. She is a visionary leader with an impeccable reputation of transparency, effectiveness, and fair yet forceful governance. I am fully confident that she will be successful in leading change at the

headquarters, and indeed, her leadership will mark the start of a new kind of WHO for a world that has changed much since its founding.

As a public health professional from the developing world with over two decades of service in WHO across at the national, regional and global level, and with deep knowledge of the governance and functioning of this great organization, I call upon all the member states to support Dr. Sania for Director-General of WHO at the World Health Assembly in May 2017.

- Dr. Jama is the former Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Geneva, Switzerland.

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