Why my former boss is the right pick to reform the World Health Organization

Next month at the Seventieth World Health Assembly, the world will decide the path that global health will take in the next five years. This comes at a time when the World Health Organization (WHO) has been heavily critiqued for its sluggish response to the Ebola outbreak, which highlighted some systemic challenges within the structure and leadership of the WHO.

The three candidates vying for the Director-General role are undeniably competitive. To make a final decision, it is important to consider the candidates' priorities, values and leadership in present and past roles to determine who is best placed to tackle the challenges within the WHO.

What the WHO really needs now is a leader who has viewed health from multiple positions and can bring together a diverse constituency of stakeholders to take on global health challenges together. A visionary with on-the-ground experience that can improve disaster
preparedness in a financial squeeze, and a reformer committed to transparency so that the world response quickly future disease outbreaks.

One such candidate that’s uniquely qualified for this role is Dr. Sania Nishtar. She has a plethora of experience looking at health from all angles. She’s got a background in clinical health as a cardiologist, she’s a global champion for non-communicable disease, a renowned voice in health policy, an advocate for health system strengthening and the founder of an innovative health financing system in Pakistan. But she was also my boss and so I got to see her action.

**Doctor of the Poor**

As the first female cardiologist in Pakistan’s history, Sania got to know her patients and learnt from them about the barriers to health that ordinary people faced when trying to access health. When I met her, Sania was frustrated at catastrophic health expenses ruining families lives and was in the midst of setting up the Heartfile Health Financing unit, a uniquely tailored mobile health financing platform that enables financial support to the poor within 48 hours in the lowest resource areas. As well as saving lives of the poorest and most marginalized, the innovative financing system is both scalable and replicable and has the potential to save lives across the world.

At the international level, Sania was on the board of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and continued her work to ensure that the poorest could access lifesaving vaccines.
Reformer

Working in Pakistan, Sania has gained both country-wide and global respect while also fulfilling her responsibility of being a mother, a wife and a daughter. I had the good fortune to work under her wing when she held three Federal Ministries in Pakistan including the Minister for Science and Technology, Education and Trainings and Information Technology and Telecoms.

Perhaps her biggest achievement in this time was restoring the Federal Ministry of Health in the country within a month of taking office and restoring the Prime Minister’s Polio Cell, a critical component of the global quest towards the end of polio. Sania played a key role in the development of the Pakistan Series of the Lancet, and left the unprecedented Handover Papers, her account of each decision while in office, the justifications, and her recommendations for the future of the three ministries and the reinstated ministry of health. All while maintaining her calm under pressure approach in the most male-dominant environment possible at the time.

Unifier

In the years I have worked for her, I was constantly amazed by her sense of calm, her passion for global health, health safety and wellbeing. These traits were in display when she chaired the Health Committee of the immense India-Pakistan peace effort, Aman Ki Asha,
a campaign that was organized to bridge the differences between India and Pakistan with health as an entry point. That was the test of her faith in collaborative, dynamic partnerships and her ability to mediate tough conflicts and negotiating declarations in a polarized environment.

What WHO needs is an operational and normative rebuilding, a revamp that requires innovation, accountability, charisma and knowledge. And she is the best qualified to do it. When the world comes together next month to vote on the state of the future of global, I have my fingers crossed that they will learn from the past and vote for reform. They'll vote for my former boss, my lifelong mentor and the change-maker that is badly needed.

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