

IHP News 868: “Human rights are not a spectator sport” – AI summary & some key reads of the week

Introduction

The weekly newsletter begins with a reflection on the mounting complexity of the global health landscape, suggesting that providing a brief overview has become nearly impossible given the volume of publishing and geopolitical activity. A central theme this week is that **“human rights are not a spectator sport,”** a sentiment echoed by UN General Assembly President Annalena Baerbock, who warned that silence in the face of eroding rights is a choice with dire consequences.

The introduction flags the emergence of a **“transactional era”** in global health, highlighted by Zimbabwe walking away from a \$350 million health funding agreement with the US due to sovereignty concerns. This shift is further illustrated by “Project Vault,” a Trump administration strategy linking global health deals to US access to **critical minerals** in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the newsletter addresses the ongoing controversy regarding **Bill Gates’ ties to Jeffrey Epstein**, with investigative journalist Tim Schwab arguing that the Gates Foundation’s leadership requires a total overhaul to restore legitimacy.

Featured article

The **Featured Article** focuses on **World Wildlife Day 2026**, specifically its significance for Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa. The 2026 theme, “Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods,” underscores the critical role of wild plants, as 80% of the African population relies on traditional medicine for primary healthcare.

Highlights of the Week

Epstein Files & (Global) Health

Bill Gates recently “took responsibility” for his past ties to Jeffrey Epstein during a staff town hall, admitting to past affairs but denying any illicit involvement. Despite this, experts and critics like Tim Schwab argue that the foundation’s relationship with Epstein provided the sex offender with “credibility and legitimacy,” and they are calling for the **removal of the entire governing board**, including Gates himself. Others highlight how the focus on high-profile depravity often overshadows the rights and justice needed for survivors.

Global Health Reform & Reimagining (& Post-2030 Thinking)

Recent scholarship argues that current frameworks like the SDGs act as a **“neocolonial placebo,”** soothing global consciences without addressing the root causes of injustice such as colonial history and extractive finance. A post-2030 Global Social Contract should instead focus on **reparative justice**, imposing enforceable obligations on former colonial powers and democratising health governance. Meanwhile, the UK is co-hosting a Global Partnerships Conference to build new international coalitions based on local leadership and diverse finance.

More on Global Health Governance & Financing/Funding

The Global Fund is at a crossroads, with shrinking aid and US pressure forcing an acceleration of "prioritization and transition" that risks shifting the burden onto African countries and weakening community responses. At the WHO, the withdrawal of the United States—its largest funder—is viewed as an **existential threat**. The Africa CDC is responding by shifting toward an "**Africa Health Security and Sovereignty**" (AHSS) agenda to ensure continental self-reliance. Additionally, the IMF is reviewing its "policy conditionality," a move that will shape economic infrastructure in the global South for years to come.

Global Tax Justice & Reform

Discussions continue regarding the **UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation**, with recent intergovernmental meetings in New York addressing unresolved structural questions and controversy over cross-border services and dispute resolution.

UHC & PHC

A "Health Systems 2050" roundtable in South Africa recently explored how global trends are reshaping future health outcomes and equity. In Botswana, the president has outlined a plan to rebuild the country's "beleaguered" health system through public capacity and regional pharmaceutical manufacturing. Research into 63 post-COVID initiatives shows that while there is an emphasis on health security, focus on **primary health care** and health promotion remains less pronounced.

US Global Health Strategy & Bilateral Health Agreements

The "America First Global Health Strategy" is driving a series of **bilateral health agreements (BGHAs)** that some critics label "digital colonialism". **Zimbabwe** rejected a \$350 million deal because it required US access to national health data and critical mineral resources. **Zambia** is reportedly considering a deal with even more mandatory data-sharing targets. These deals are increasingly viewed as a means of "**strategic synchronization**," where clinical continuity for populations is traded for regional alignment and resource access.

Impact Aid Cuts & Ongoing Transition

The closure of USAID in parts of Kenya has led to a plunge in access to HIV and maternal medicines. Data suggests that **PEPFAR supported 17 million fewer people** for testing and counselling in 2025 compared to 2024 due to funding disruptions. Furthermore, a new study models that ending USAID funding for tuberculosis could result in \$7.5 billion in additional patient costs and push 4 million more households into catastrophic debt.

Trump 2.0

The Trump administration is ending humanitarian aid in seven African nations, including Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe, stating there is "**no strong nexus**" between the response and U.S. national interests. In his State of the Union address, President Trump touted lower drug costs but omitted discussion of major cuts to health and science funding. The "MAHA" movement has also seen internal friction following executive orders related to pesticide production.

PPPR (Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response)

The EU is being accused of backtracking on commitments to the Pandemic Agreement, specifically regarding **Pathogen Access Benefit Sharing (PABS)**. Discussions are underway to establish a "Network of Networks" (WCLN) to support this system. Experts emphasize that unless crowded living conditions and poverty are addressed, the most vulnerable will suffer most in the next crisis.

Covid Origins

Members of the Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO) have summarized the first comprehensive investigation into COVID-19's origins. They seek to clarify the **scientific plausibility** of various hypotheses amidst ongoing politicization of the issue.

HIV

A new phase 3 clinical trial (ARTISTRY-1) has demonstrated that a **single-pill daily therapy** (bictegravir–lenacapavir) is as effective as complex multi-tablet regimens. This offers a major advance for long-term survivors who struggle with treatment fatigue or resistance.

SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights)

The organization **Ipas** has secured significant funding to expand access to safe abortion and contraception in high-need countries, despite various local restrictions. There is also a renewed call to eliminate **female genital mutilation** by 2030 through locally driven, grassroots achievements.

Commercial Determinants of Health & NCDs

Experts argue that the **colonial design of African cities**—built for resource extraction rather than human well-being—is fueling the current NCD crisis by limiting physical activity and healthy food access. Additionally, there are warnings regarding the explosion of **online gambling** in Africa, which is leading to addiction and financial distress among youth.

AI & Digital Health

Critics warn against "techno-optimist depoliticisation," where global health institutions portray digitalization as an inevitable wave, often overlooking government capacity gaps and the **asymmetric power** of technology providers.

Planetary Health (& Financing)

Brazil's Ministry of Finance is defending its **Tropical Forest Forever Facility**, a fund designed to use bank profits to preserve forests. There is also an urgent call for an internationally mandated **global assessment of climate-change risks** to inform policy priorities. Meanwhile, the UN warns of a surge in the lucrative, illegal trade of **toxic waste**.

Access to Medicines, Vaccines & Other Health Technologies

Civil society organizations are rallying against US trade tactics that threaten drug access, specifically the use of **tariffs to pressure countries** into Big Pharma-friendly agreements. Conversely, **Kenya** has officially joined a WHO program to manufacture its own mRNA vaccines. Other major issues include the global rise of weight loss drugs (GLP-1s) and the "morally unacceptable" lack of **controlled medicines for children** in pain.

WASH & Health

African Union leaders have declared 2026 the "**Year of Ensuring Sustainable Water Supply**," calling for an integrated strategy to end polio and waterborne diseases. Experts note that up to 80% of neglected tropical diseases could be prevented through clean water and reliable sanitation.

Conflict/War/Genocide & Health

Less than 1% of development aid is allocated to **mental health**, leaving children in conflict settings without psychosocial support. The newsletter also highlights the normalisation of **internet shutdowns** (such as in Iran) as a violation of the right to health, as they impede emergency medical responses.

Some More Reports, Collections & Publications of the Week

The *American Journal of International Law* has published a symposium on "**Global Health at a Crossroads**," examining multilateral reforms and the potential for decolonization. Another UN report warns that over **a billion people** fear losing their homes or land rights within five years.

Miscellaneous

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) have re-emerged with **Gates Foundation funding** following previous US cuts, though the program must now move toward a leaner, more technology-driven structure. Finally, climate change is now viewed as **foundational to all health planning**, requiring systems to prepare for chronic environmental stress rather than just episodic emergencies.

Some key reads of the week

Epstein Files & (Global) Health

1. **Tim Schwab**, [Substack](#), **Substack**. The author argues that Bill Gates and the entire governing board must be removed to restore the foundation's legitimacy after failing to address Epstein ties for years.
2. **Jocalyn Clark**, [BMJ](#), **BMJ**. This article highlights how the public spectacle regarding Jeffrey Epstein's depravity is overshadowing the necessary rights and justice for survivors.

Global Health Reform & Reimagining

3. **M Mulumba**, [International Journal for Equity in Health](#), **International Journal for Equity in Health**. The authors call for a post-2030 Global Social Contract that embeds reparative justice and enforceable obligations for former colonial powers.

Global Health Governance & Financing

4. [GFO](#), **GFO**. This **recommended** editorial warns that shrinking aid and US pressure are forcing the Global Fund toward prioritization that risks weakening community responses.
5. **M Kavanagh**, [Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law](#), **Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law**. This analysis explores whether the US withdrawal from the WHO constitutes an existential threat to the organisation.

Global Tax Justice & Reform

6. **M E Mamberti**, [CESR](#), **CESR**. This **worth-a-read** article details controversial structural questions regarding the future UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation.

UHC & PHC

7. **Duma Gideon Boko**, [The Guardian](#), **The Guardian**. The President of Botswana outlines his plan to rebuild the nation's health system through public capacity and regional pharmaceutical manufacturing.

US Global Health Strategy & Bilateral Agreements

8. **Nelson Aghogho Evaborhene**, [Global Policy](#), **Global Policy**. This **must-read** analysis argues that health security in a post-hegemonic era requires "structural decoupling" to protect sovereign rights.
9. **Emily Bass**, (URL link unavailable), **Substack**. A **must-read** investigation into "Project Vault," which links US global health deals to strategic access to critical minerals in Africa.

Impact Aid Cuts & Transition

10. **C Kenny**, [CGD blog](#), **CGD blog**. Data suggests millions of people lost access to PEPFAR-supported testing and counselling during the recent US foreign assistance pause.
11. **Allison Portnoy**, [Plos Med](#), **Plos Med**. This modeling study estimates that ending USAID funding for tuberculosis could result in \$7.5 billion in additional costs for patients.

Trump 2.0

12. [The Atlantic](#), **The Atlantic**. Internal emails reveal the US is ending humanitarian aid in seven African nations due to a lack of "strong nexus" with national interests.
13. (URL link unavailable), **Stat**. This report covers President Trump's State of the Union address, where he touted drug price reductions while omitting major science funding cuts.

PPPR

14. **N Ramakrishnan**, [TWN](#), **TWN**. The article accuses the EU of backtracking on Pandemic Agreement commitments regarding pathogen access and benefit-sharing.
15. **Joseph E. Stiglitz**, [Project Syndicate](#), **Project Syndicate**. This piece warns that the next pandemic will be far worse unless structural inequalities like poverty and crowded living are addressed.

Covid Origins

16. **SAGO Members**, [Nature Comment](#), **Nature Comment**. Former SAGO members clarify the scientific plausibility of various origin hypotheses to combat ongoing politicisation of the pandemic's start.

HIV

17. **Jirair Ratevosian**, [Lancet Comment](#), **The Lancet**. This **must-read** warns that current PEPFAR reforms risk a period of structural vulnerability for the global HIV response.

18. **Chloe Orkin**, (URL link unavailable), **The Lancet**. A randomized trial demonstrates that a new single-pill daily therapy is as effective as complex multi-tablet regimens for long-term survivors.

SRHR

19. [Health Policy Watch](#), **Health Policy Watch**. Ipas has secured a major grant to prevent millions of unsafe abortions and unintended pregnancies in high-need countries.
20. **W Ahmed**, [BMJ Editorial](#), **BMJ**. This editorial emphasizes that eliminating female genital mutilation by 2030 must be built on locally driven, grassroots achievements.

Commercial Determinants of Health & NCDs

21. **P Ngassa Piotie**, [LinkedIn](#), **LinkedIn**. The author argues that the colonial design of African cities—built for extraction—is fueling the modern NCD crisis.
22. [The Telegraph](#), **The Telegraph**. This read explores the addiction and financial distress caused by the explosion of online gambling across Africa.

AI & Digital Health

23. **T Z Sen**, (URL link unavailable), **Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy**. This paper critiques "techno-optimist depoliticisation" in digital health discourses for overlooking power asymmetries.

Planetary Health

24. **Peter A Stott**, [Nature](#), **Nature**. The author calls for an internationally mandated global assessment of climate-change risks to inform emission reduction priorities.

Access to Medicines & Vaccines

25. **K Raja**, [TWN](#), **TWN**. More than 100 civil society organizations are rallying against US trade tactics that threaten drug affordability.
26. **Maria-Belen Tarrafeta-Sayas**, [The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health](#), **The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health**. This policy piece addresses the "morally unacceptable" lack of access to pain relief for 2.5 million children.

WASH & Health

27. (URL link unavailable), **Capital Ethiopia**. AU leaders have declared 2026 the "Year of Ensuring Sustainable Water Supply" to help permanently eradicate polio and waterborne diseases.

Conflict & Health

28. **Mohammad Karamouzian**, [The Lancet Comment](#), **The Lancet**. This comment argues that internet shutdowns during health emergencies should be classified as violations of the right to health.

Reports & Collections of the Week

29. **Matiangai Sirleaf**, [American Journal of International Law](#), **American Journal of International Law**. This symposium introduction examines global health law at a crossroads, exploring potential for regionalism and decolonization.

Miscellaneous

30. [Devex Pro](#), **Devex Pro**. The Demographic and Health Surveys are re-emerging with Gates funding but must now adopt a leaner, technology-driven structure.