

# IHP news 878: AI summary & some key reads

## Introduction and Featured Articles

The newsletter highlights a week of significant shifts in global health diplomacy, most notably the **extension of the Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing (PABS) negotiations**, which failed to meet their initial deadline, underscoring the complexities of modern multilateralism. As the **79th World Health Assembly** approaches, the discourse is dominated by debates on WHO reform and the future of development cooperation, exemplified by the launch of the World Bank's "**Fit to Prosper**" strategy for Western and Central Africa and the **2nd Africa Health Workforce Investment Forum** in Accra. Additionally, the global health community marked **International Day of the Midwife**, drawing attention to a critical deficit of nearly one million midwives worldwide.

In the first featured article, **Relindis Ma-gang Tapang** explores Africa's escalating **tramadol crisis**, often called the "cocaine of the poor". Unlike the fentanyl crisis in the West, tramadol use in countries like Ghana and Nigeria is driven by workers who rely on it for stamina and pain relief because they cannot afford missing work.

The second featured article by **Sophie Vusha** reflects on the **World Health Summit in Nairobi**, arguing that while progress is being made on Africa's role in global health architecture, essential themes like **nutrition and traditional medicine** deserve more explicit visibility as standalone subthemes in future health system reimagining.

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## Highlights of the Week

### PABS Negotiations Extension

WHO Member States have officially agreed to **extend negotiations on the PABS framework until May 2027**. While some progress was made during informal sessions, countries exercised pragmatism rather than rushing a consensus on foundational matters like **benefit-sharing obligations** and conditionalities on information access. Colombia has notably appealed for a new "progressive consensus" method, involving **voting once a majority is reached**, to prevent further deadlocks.

### Hantavirus Outbreak and Health Security

A hantavirus outbreak aboard the cruise ship *MV Hondius* has served as a **real-time stress test** for the amended International Health Regulations (IHR). Despite the United States' withdrawal from the WHO, technical collaboration with the CDC has remained transparent. This event highlights the vulnerability of global health governance in a fractured world, particularly as the **2026 World Cup** approaches.

### Global Health Reform and the Future of Development

**Andrew Harmer** offers a sharp critique of current WHO reform proposals, deconstructing them as efforts by an "Old Boys network" to maintain a specific narrative rather than address structural issues. Simultaneously, new concepts like "**flexi-lateralism**" are emerging—pragmatic, selective coalitions that proceed even when universal commitments are contested. Furthermore, the

"America First" doctrine is reshaping development into a transactional, interest-driven model focused on business deals.

### Run-up to the 79th World Health Assembly (WHA)

The WHO is currently facing a **funding gap of \$660 million** for the 2026-2027 period, leading to staff cuts and restructuring. A major point of contention for the upcoming WHA is the **legal and operational fallout of member state withdrawals**, specifically regarding the US and Argentina, which may establish a *de facto* withdrawal right for all states regardless of constitutional text.

### More on Global Health Governance and Financing

There is a growing movement in Africa toward **health sovereignty** and domestic resource mobilization as traditional donor aid declines. The World Bank's roadmap, "**Fit to Prosper**," prioritizes primary care and sustainable investment for economic growth. While the **G7 has proposed a Framework for Promoting Health Sovereignty**, critics argue it lacks firm financial commitments and structural reforms, such as debt suspension during health crises. Additionally, research shows that **TB costs in poor countries** now exceed those of HIV, yet TB remains significantly underfunded.

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### Tax Justice and the Debt Crisis

Global inequality continues to rise, with **CEO pay increasing 20 times faster than workers' pay** in 2025. The rising debt burden in developing countries is **disproportionately hitting women**, who face job losses in the education and care sectors and increased unpaid care duties as public spending is cut. Experts suggest that cutting borrowing costs for poorer countries could free up **\$900 billion annually** for development.

### Bilateral Health Agreements and US Global Health Policy

The **America First Global Health Strategy** is currently being operationalized through bilateral agreements, though several have stalled. **Zambia has rejected terms** that would tie health funding to access to critical minerals and has raised concerns over data privacy. In Uganda, the shift toward integrating donor-funded programs into the public system has reportedly led to the **stretching of HIV services** and the reduction of NGO-led support for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals.

### Trump 2.0

The US health secretary is introducing policies to **nudge clinicians away from psychiatric medications** like antidepressants in favor of therapy and nutrition. Concurrently, there are calls for the CDC to launch a **new peer-reviewed journal** to "elevate scientific rigor," following criticisms of the agency's existing flagship publications.

### UHC & PHC

Africa's UHC journey is hampered by **significant evidence gaps** in health financing. In Kenya, an **AI-driven health reform** has been criticized for using a flawed algorithm that systematically overcharges the poor while undercharging the wealthy. Debate also continues on whether "free care programs" should be integrated into national health insurance funds or remain within regular budget systems.

## Social and Commercial Determinants of Health

A global **housing crisis** affects nearly three billion people, with a high concentration in informal settlements. The tobacco industry is also under fire for "**engineering addiction**" through flavored nicotine products designed to appeal to youth.

## The Africa Health Workforce Investment Forum

Despite a growing number of trained health professionals, Africa faces a "**dangerous paradox**": severe shortages alongside **high unemployment** for nearly one million trained workers. Retention remains a major issue, with 46% of health workers reporting an intention to migrate due to poor conditions. A new **regional strategy for 2026–2035** aims to drive coordinated action to plan, train, and retain staff at scale.

## Planetary Health

The **Santa Marta conference** shifted climate discourse toward a fossil fuel phase-out. However, the "green transition" brings new risks; the extraction of **critical minerals** (like lithium and cobalt) in Africa is linked to severe health impacts for miners, including **toxic metal poisoning and lung disease**.

## Miscellaneous

Recent reports suggest that **screening children for lead poisoning** would be a "game-changer" in global health, as exposure remains unrecognized in many countries lacking routine testing.

## Some reads of the week

1. **AJHESP** — <https://www.africanjhesp.org/> — **African Journal of Health Economics, Systems and Policy**. This brand-new and important journal provides a dedicated platform for scholarship on African health financing and policy.
2. **Afifah Rahman-Shepherd et al** — [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(26\)00101-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(26)00101-4/fulltext) — **Lancet Global Health**. A satirical but viral read offering insights on how (not) to organise panels at global health conferences.
3. **WHO** — <https://www.who.int/news/item/01-05-2026-who-member-states-agree-to-extend-negotiations-on-pathogen-access-and-benefit-sharing-annex> — **WHO News**. Member states have agreed to extend negotiations on the PABS framework until May 2027 to ensure a more equitable pandemic response.
4. **P Patnaik** — [Geneva Health Files](#) — **Geneva Health Files**. A must-read analysis highlighting how countries exercised pragmatism by warding off pressure to rush consensus on the PABS system.
5. **UN News** — <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167458> — **UN News**. The WHO clarifies that the cruise ship hantavirus outbreak is not "another COVID" and poses a low global risk.
6. **K Kuppali** — <https://www.statnews.com/2026/05/05/hantavirus-cruise-ship-outbreak-who-world-cup/> — **Stat News**. Argues that the US withdrawal from the WHO is a dangerous position, especially ahead of the 2026 World Cup.

7. **DM Darko** — <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/the-african-medicines-agency-will-transform-global-health/> — **The Telegraph**. The DG of the African Medicines Agency outlines why the agency is the missing link for global health security.
8. **Andrew Harmer** — <https://andrewharmer.org/2026/05/05/a-who-worth-fighting-for/> — **Blog**. A hard-hitting and hilarious deconstruction of current WHO reform proposals by the "Geneva Gliterati".
9. **A Sumner et al** — <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/new-flexi-lateralism-five-building-blocks-development-cooperation-fractured-world> — **CGD Blog**. This policy paper proposes "new flexi-lateralism" as a pragmatic response for development cooperation in a fractured world.
10. **WHO** — [https://apps.who.int/gb/e/e\\_wha79.html](https://apps.who.int/gb/e/e_wha79.html) — **WHA79 Documents**. These preparatory documents, including voluntary contribution reports, are highly informative for the upcoming assembly.
11. **V Penmetsa** — [Geneva Health Files](#) — **Geneva Health Files**. A careful analysis exploring the deeply sensitive and political implications of member states withdrawing from the WHO.
12. **World Bank** — <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/05/05/western-and-central-african-leaders-launch-a-roadmap-to-tackle-health-crisis-in-the-region> — **World Bank**. Regional leaders launched "Fit to Prosper," a roadmap anchored in health sovereignty to accelerate universal health coverage.
13. **G7 Presidency** — [G7 Framework for Promoting Health Sovereignty](#) — **G7 Framework**. A must-read outcome document committing to increased mobilization of financing and domestic resources for health sovereignty.
14. **Oxfam/ITUC** — <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/top-ceo-pay-increased-20-times-faster-workers-pay-2025> — **Oxfam**. Highlights that global real worker pay fell significantly while CEO pay surged, calling for fairer taxation on extreme wealth.
15. **UNDP** — <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/may/04/women-in-developing-countries-hardest-hit-by-rising-debt-burden-un-research-finds> — **The Guardian**. UN research warns that women are hardest hit by rising debt burdens, facing job losses and increased unpaid care duties.
16. **Devex** — [America First Global Health Strategy Update](#) — **Devex**. Reports that despite stalls, the "America First" strategy remains the path for countries to secure ongoing U.S. health financing.
17. **Emily Bass** — <https://emilybass.substack.com/> — **Substack**. A detailed analysis suggesting the US State Department is setting supply chain transitions up to fail.
18. **NYT** — <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/04/science/rfk-antidepressants-ssris-hhs-maha.html> — **NYT**. Discusses new US policies aimed at helping Americans quit antidepressants in favour of therapy and nutrition.
19. **B S Kamara** — <https://www.africanjhsp.org/content/article/1/2/full/> — **AJHESP**. Argues that Africa's UHC financing failures are as much about evidence gaps as they are about resource problems.

20. **Guardian** — <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/may/04/kenya-ai-healthcare-reforms-driving-up-costs-for-poor> — **The Guardian**. An investigation revealing how a flawed AI-driven system in Kenya systematically overcharged the poor while undercharging the wealthy.
21. **UN-Habitat** — <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167452> — **UN News**. Highlights that nearly three billion people lack access to adequate housing, making it an urgent human rights challenge.
22. **H Kluge** — <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/big-tobacco-is-no-longer-selling-cigarettes-it-is-engineering-addiction/> — **Health Policy Watch**. Argues for a precise focus on the tobacco industry's "engineered architecture of addiction" via flavoured nicotine products.
23. **T Guerma** — <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/investing-in-midwives-is-essential-to-improve-sexual-and-reproductive-health/> — **Health Policy Watch**. Emphasizes that safe birth is part of a broader continuum of sexual and reproductive health and rights.
24. **WHO Afro** — [State of the Health Workforce in Africa 2026](#) — **WHO Report**. A new report highlighting a "dangerous paradox" of severe health worker shortages alongside high unemployment in Africa.
25. **M Chankseliani** — <https://www.statnews.com/2026/05/05/brain-drain-doctors-returning-home-systems/> — **Stat News**. Challenges the "brain drain" narrative by exploring the obstacles faced by health professionals returning to practice in their home countries.
26. **A O Ajagba et al** — <https://www.africanjhosp.org/> — **AJHESP Editorial**. Traces the origins and bilingual commitments of the first continent-led journal dedicated to African health systems.
27. **U M Shah** — <https://www.ipsnews.net/2026/05/how-santa-marta-finally-made-fossil-fuel-phase-out-politically-discussable/> — **IPS News**. Frames the Santa Marta conference as a defining moment that made fossil fuel phase-out a central climate conversation.
28. **TARSC/EQUINET** — <https://www.equinet africa.org/> — **EQUINET Editorial**. Argues that health is a central marker of equitable benefit-sharing from critical minerals in the green transition.
29. **Telegraph** — <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/crackdown-nigeria-counterfeit-substandard-drug-medicine/> — **The Telegraph**. Reports on Nigeria's war on the fake drug trade as a potential blueprint for other countries.
30. **Samantha Power** — <https://www.ft.com/content/927d200c-6568-450a-ac7c-d683d0c0d318> — **Financial Times**. Describes screening children for lead poisoning as a "game-changer" for identifying unrecognized exposure.