

IHP 881: AI summary & key reads – WHA79: part two: Global Health reform & more

Introduction

The 79th World Health Assembly (WHA79), themed "**Reshaping Global Health: A Shared Responsibility**," takes place against a backdrop of "polycrisis" and an increasingly interdependent world. Editor Kristof Decoster notes that while discussions on "**global health reform**" are prominent, they often overlook vital existential threats, such as the **financialization of the global economic system**, the credibility crisis of multilateralism, and environmental tipping points. He argues that the envisioned reforms are not yet "fit for purpose" as they treat these crises as mere constraints rather than challenges to be directly tackled. Instead, he supports the drive toward **health sovereignty**—particularly for African nations—and advocates for a more ambitious, less "incremental" global health architecture.

Featured articles

In the Featured Articles, **Valérie Vermeersch** provides a "first-timer" perspective of the WHA, describing an atmosphere charged with energy and (some) optimism, particularly regarding the "Accra Reset" initiative pushed by the Ghanaian delegation. However, she contrasts the hopeful side events with the stark geopolitical realities visible within the WHO committee rooms.

Complementing this is a Q&A with *BMJ* editor Jocalyn Clark, which explores the qualities needed for the **next WHO Director-General** amidst a world characterized by geopolitical disorder, strained finances, and shifting planetary health challenges.

Highlights of the Week

WHA79 – Chronological Overview of Highlights & Key Debates The week was dominated by a worrisome **Ebola outbreak (Bundibugyo strain)** in the DRC and Uganda, which WHO chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described as alarming in its "scale and speed". While not declared a global pandemic emergency, it remains a high regional threat. Financial constraints were a recurring theme; the WHO Health Emergency Programme faces a **\$553 million funding gap**, leaving systems weakened just as outbreaks accelerate. Geopolitics also seeped into proceedings, with votes on the impact of conflict on healthcare in Lebanon passing while a similar Iranian initiative regarding its own facilities failed. Furthermore, member states agreed to **suspend the USA's voting rights** by May 2027 if its outstanding \$280 million in dues remain unpaid.

WHA79 – WHO DG Race The campaign for the next Director-General is gaining momentum. Indonesian Health Minister **Budi Sadikin** is a prominent potential contender, pitching a need for more power in the hands of the **Global South** and greater political pragmatism. Analysts argue the next leader must defend scientific integrity and universal principles like solidarity while redesigning the WHO to function effectively amid geopolitical disorder and "variable geometry" coalitions.

WHA79 – Global Health Reform A central pillar of the reform debate is the "**Accra Reset**," which proposes a High-Level Panel on Reform to independently assess institutions, a **Reform Interlock and Observatory** to reduce duplication among major health funds (Gavi, Global Fund, WHO), and a **Health Investment National Gateway (HING)** to channel political pledges into bankable investments for local pharmaceutical production. Meanwhile, Gavi has introduced its "**Gavi Leap**" agenda, aimed at increasing country sovereignty by simplifying funding levers and digitizing grant processes. However, civil society groups warned that current reform proposals risk prioritizing "multistakeholderism" over democratic governance.

WHA79 – More on Global Health Governance & Finance/Funding The **African Medicines Agency (AMA)** remains a focal point for continental health sovereignty, though ratification by major economic powers like South Africa is still pending. Discussions also highlighted a growing gap between the rhetoric of self-reliance and the reality of **declining health prioritization** in many lower-middle-income country budgets. To counter these trends, the Global Fund and Africa CDC signed a new MoU to strengthen regional procurement and sustainable health markets. Additionally, analysts noted that while some low-income countries have narrowed service gaps, they remain significantly behind in **financial protection and workforce availability**.

WHA79 – More on PPPR & GHS Negotiations on the **Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing (PABS)** Annex to the Pandemic Agreement have been extended for another year, with developing countries insisting that access to pathogen data must be interlinked with legally binding benefit-sharing. Experts also criticized the "miserable failure" of the mpox response, where vaccines arrived in endemic areas too late to curb the pandemic, underscoring that **trust and local capacity** are operational preconditions for any global agreement to work.

WHA79: Some More Side Events The **Belém Health Action Plan**, endorsed by 33 countries, set out a roadmap for adapting health systems to the climate crisis. Industry-led events, such as those by IFPMA, called for medical innovation to be treated as a **strategic investment** rather than a healthcare cost, suggesting that a healthy population could boost global GDP by 7% by 2050. Conversely, side events at the Geneva Health Forum addressed the "shadow" healthcare crisis of **undocumented migrants** in Europe, who frequently fall through administrative cracks.

WHA79: Key Reports, Analysis, Advocacy, ... The *CHH-Lancet* Commission on **Health, Conflict, and Forced Displacement** issued a manifesto for a radical transformation of the humanitarian system, which currently cannot cope with the 239 million people in need of assistance. A landmark Africa CDC report argued that achieving AU targets for **health R&D investment** could generate \$668 billion for African economies over two decades. Furthermore, **Habib Benzian** offered a cynical but insightful take on the WHA as a "**consensus machine**," where disagreement is processed into "softened verbs" and resolutions that often represent the managed residue of political compromise rather than true agreement.

More on UHC & PHC The UHC Accelerator argues that the current polycrisis should not be a reason to delay reforms; rather, investing in **Universal Health Coverage** is a winning strategy that provides social protection and builds systemic resilience during times of hardship. The George Institute for Global Health emphasizes that the best time to launch UHC reform is before or during a crisis.

Trump 2.0 & US GH Strategy/Bilateral Health Agreements The Trump administration's "America First" strategy has sparked debate over its preference for **bilateral health deals** over multilateral coordination. Concerns were raised about the extraction of **health data** from partner countries and the potential for these agreements to disrupt global pandemic responses. Additionally, health

experts criticized the administration's "strict quarantine measures" for Ebola and hantavirus as exceeding what is scientifically necessary.

Global Partnerships Forum (UK, 19-20 May) & Future of Development The London conference signaled a major shift toward an **"investor-oriented" approach** to international development. The newly launched **Global Partnerships Compact** aims to move away from 1990s-style donor-recipient models toward country-led economic investments. However, some critics warned that aid is being increasingly redefined around the **self-interest** of rich countries rather than poverty reduction.

Mental Health Findings from the **Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2023** study revealed that nearly **1.2 billion people** are living with mental disorders, with anxiety and depression showing the largest increases. Experts emphasized that this persistent gap between disease burden and treatment coverage can no longer be justified and requires a systematic alignment of implementation and monitoring.

13th Urban World Forum (Baku) A new UN-Habitat report highlighted that easing the global housing crisis—affecting **3.4 billion people**—is possible through long-term solutions rooted in human rights and climate resilience. Examples include upgrading favelas in Brazil and implementing rent controls in Germany.

Planetary Health The UN General Assembly backed a historic **World Court ruling**, affirming that tackling the climate crisis is a legal duty under international law. Meanwhile, the *Lancet Planetary Health* editorial warned that policymakers are being naive by not explicitly considering their proximity to **environmental tipping points**, which are no longer distant risks but credible mid-term scenarios.

(Announcing) Lancet Commissions New commissions were announced to investigate **activism and health**, aiming to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and social mobilization, and **schizophrenia and psychotic disorders**.

Access to Medicines, Vaccines & Other Health Technologies Research into "strategic solidarity" during the pandemic showed how Nordic states combined global equity leadership with decisive measures to prioritize their own populations. Additionally, experts expressed regret over a controversial change to the **SDG indicator for access to medicines**, which they fear will weaken the monitoring of essential medicine availability.

Miscellaneous The summary concludes with Richard Horton's reflection on the **"future of war,"** describing a shift toward "chaos-creating wars" in places like Gaza, Sudan, and Yemen, where the state disintegrates and conflict is waged to "maximise the profits of catastrophe".

Some key reads of the week

1. **WHO** – [Seventy-ninth World Health Assembly – Daily updates](#): Essential daily summaries of the formal assembly proceedings, debates, and official highlights.
2. **Health Policy Watch** – [WHO is Alarmed at 'Scale and Speed' of Ebola Outbreak](#): Reports on the accelerating Bundibugyo Ebola strain in the DRC and Uganda, which has triggered deep concern from Dr. Tedros.
3. **Science Insider** – [Vaccine experts debate options to combat outbreak of unusual Ebola strain](#): A **must-read** on the urgent expert deliberations regarding clinical trials for candidate vaccines against the Bundibugyo strain.

4. **Ebere Okereke** – [The World Health Assembly Reacts to the Bundibugyo Ebola Outbreak](#) (Think Global Health): Analyzes how the current Ebola emergency is driving conversations about actionable health system reform.
5. **Devex Pro** – [Budi Sadikin 'will confirm' bid for top WHO job](#): Discusses the potential candidacy of Indonesia's health minister for the WHO Director-General role.
6. **M. McKee & K. Buse** – [How should the next WHO director general confront the new world order?](#) (BMJ Opinion): Calls for candidates to defend universal principles while adapting to a landscape of geopolitical rivalry and coercion.
7. **John Mahama** – [Mahama unveils 3-pillar "Accra Reset" initiative](#) (Modern Ghana): Proposes three major institutional reforms to improve the efficiency and coherence of global health governance.
8. **People's Dispatch** – [Democratizing global health governance: mission impossible?](#): A **must-read** analysis urging that architectural changes to the WHO be guided by the Alma-Ata vision and democratic principles.
9. **Devex** – [Why some countries aren't ratifying the African Medicines Agency treaty](#): Examines the bureaucratic roadblocks and regulatory fears stalling the ratification of the continent's new medicine agency.
10. **Global Fund** – [The Global Fund and Africa CDC Join Forces](#): Details a new MoU to strengthen regional procurement, manufacturing, and self-reliant health systems across Africa.
11. **R. Rodrigues & N. Ramakrishnan** – [WHA79: PABS negotiations extended](#) (TWN): Reports on the decision to extend Pandemic Agreement negotiations regarding pathogen benefit-sharing for an additional year.
12. **Health Policy Watch** – [Stopping Outbreaks at Source: Pandemic Preparedness Stumbles at Local Level](#): Argues that perfect global rules are meaningless without strengthened local capacity and risk awareness.
13. **WHO** – [Belem Health Action Plan High Level Side Event](#): Outlines a roadmap for adapting health systems to the climate crisis, now endorsed by 33 countries.
14. **Health Policy Watch** – [Undocumented Migrants Fall Through Europe's Healthcare Cracks](#): Dissects the public health crisis of undocumented immigrants navigating administrative barriers in European health systems.
15. **P. Spiegel et al.** – [Health, conflict, and forced displacement](#) (Lancet Commission): A manifesto demanding radical structural transformation of the humanitarian system to better protect health in conflict zones.
16. **Africa CDC** – [Investing in Health R&D: Africa's Next Economic Growth Frontier](#): Models the massive potential GDP growth for African economies through increased domestic investment in health research.
17. **Habib Benzian** – [Geneva Rules \(4\): The Consensus Machine](#) (Substack): An incisive look at how the World Health Assembly processes political disagreement into "softened" resolutions and mandates.
18. **Rob Yates et al.** – [World in crisis should accelerate universal health reforms](#) (BMJ Public Health): Argues that investing in UHC during polycrises is a winning strategy for economic resilience and social protection.
19. **Devex** – [Democrats demand answers on USAID closeout process](#): Reports on the mismanagement and delays surrounding the Trump administration's dismantling of USAID.
20. **Lawrence Gostin** – ['America First' health strategy sparks debate over who benefits most](#) (Devex Pro): Critiques the U.S. shift toward bilateral health deals as disruptive to coordinated global pandemic responses.
21. **UK Gov** – [Global Partnerships Compact](#): Introduces a new framework aimed at shifting development power and resources closer to local leaders and national governments.
22. **M. Simonds** – [Aid is being redefined around self-interest](#) (Eurodad): Warns that European aid is increasingly reframed to serve the economic and security interests of rich donor countries.

23. **M. Nordentoft et al.** – [Measuring mental disorder burden for action](#) (Lancet Comment): Emphasizes that persistent treatment gaps for mental health can no longer be justified by a lack of evidence.
24. **GBD 2023 Mental Disorder Collaborators** – [Updated trends in the global prevalence and burden of mental disorders](#): A comprehensive study revealing that nearly 1.2 billion people worldwide live with mental disorders.
25. **UN News** – [Housing solutions that work](#): Discusses a new UN report pointing toward long-term housing solutions rooted in human rights and climate resilience.
26. **UN News** – [General Assembly backs historic World Court climate crisis ruling](#): Affirms that member states have a legal duty under international law to protect their people from climate damage.
27. **The Lancet** – [Closer to the edge](#) (Planetary Health Editorial): Warns policymakers against naively ignoring proximity to environmental tipping points in their decision-making.
28. **R. Burgess et al.** – [Lancet Commission on activism & health](#): Argues that health activism is an indispensable tool for medical communities seeking to improve global health conditions.
29. **K. T. Storeng et al.** – [Strategic solidarity](#) (Globalization & Health): Proposes a new concept to analyze how Nordic states combined global equity leadership with national self-interest during COVID-19.
30. **R. Horton** – [The future of war](#) (Lancet Offline): Reflects on the rise of "chaos-creating wars" that maximize catastrophe and cause states to disintegrate.