

Open letter to the candidates for WHO DG: accountability and independence in health policy development

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In May, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Member States will meet in Geneva for the 70th World Health Assembly (WHA) and a new WHO Director-General (DG) will be elected. As public-interest NGOs involved in global health governance and the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases, we believe that a fundamental consideration for Member States when electing the DG will be how the new leadership will ensure appropriate interactions with alcohol, food, pharmaceutical and medical technology industries. We invite the three candidates to describe what steps they commit themselves to take to ensure greater transparency, rigor and public scrutiny of WHO's policy, regulatory and norm setting activities so that they are adequately protected from undue commercial interests.

In May 2016 WHA adopted the Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors (FENSA), a policy due to be fully operational by May 2018. While FENSA envisages that WHO will *"exercise particular caution...when engaging with private sector entities ...whose policies or activities are negatively affecting human health..¹"*, the rhetoric and direction of WHO's reform process as well as WHO's chronic funding challenges have left us deeply concerned rather than reassured. We fear that instead of protecting WHO's mandate FENSA risks relegating WHO to a limited role, unable to stand up for peoples' human rights and democratic decision-making.

We draw attention to the Conflict of Interest Statement signed by more than 175 NGOs and networks representing more than 2,000 groups and first launched at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Non-communicable Diseases in 2011²: *"The policy development stage should be free from industry involvement to ensure a 'health in all policies' approach, which is not compromised by the obvious conflicts of interests associated with food, alcohol, beverage and other industries, that are primarily answerable to shareholders."*

Alcohol, food, pharmaceutical and medical technology industries should comply with policies developed by WHO and its Member States. Their role is not in public health policy formulation, risk assessments, risk management or priority-setting, nor in determining normative quality standards and legally binding regulations to protect and promote public health. These processes must be undertaken in an environment free of commercial influence.

We believe that only a WHO that protects its independence and integrity of decision-making will have the ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate, and look forward to your response to our request.

¹ World Health Assembly, Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors, final text:

http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69/A69_R10-en.pdf?ua=1

² Conflict of Interest Coalition – Statement of Concern:

http://info.babymilkaction.org/sites/info.babymilkaction.org/files/COIC%20161.16.4.12_0.pdf

Yours sincerely,

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Signatories to 'Ensuring integrity, independence and credibility: Open letter to the candidates for WHO DG'

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