



## WHO structural overhaul draws mixed initial response

The reform was intended to be a “new mission”, but many are still perplexed at what it means in practice. John Zarocostas reports.

On March 6, WHO unveiled a major structural overhaul of their 70-year agency. The initial responses have varied from praise for some timely and innovative changes to concerns that some reforms are top-heavy and that some sensitive policy areas appear to have been downgraded. “We have articulated a new mission to reflect what the world needs of us to do now...It’s about changing the DNA of the organisation to deliver impact”, declared Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General.

The new blueprint includes an acceleration of the General Programme of Work (2019–23), the WHO strategic plan, at the core of which are the so-called triple billion targets. The reforms, which are 20 months in the making, started to be effected on March 15 and will continue to be fine-tuned over the coming months at headquarters, regional offices, and country offices.

The surprise appointment of the WHO Regional Director for Europe, Zsuzsanna Jakab, as the new sole WHO deputy Director-General has been broadly welcomed. “She is very competent and will [help] boost the management of the agency”, a delegate from a WHO member state told *The Lancet*. The incumbent three Deputy Director-Generals have been appointed to new posts. Soumya Swaminathan has been appointed as the chief scientist, and is considered “a good fit” by many; Peter Salama moves from health emergencies to the post of executive director of the so-called UHC and Life Course division; and Jane Ellison, formerly Deputy Director-General for corporate operations, has been appointed to a new post: Executive Director for external relations and governance, which includes resource mobilisation and health and multilateral partnerships. In an internal memo to staff

sent on March 6, seen by *The Lancet*, Dr Tedros stressed that he was looking forward “to the strong blend of skills and experience that the new senior team will bring”. These moves have been viewed by some WHO officials and diplomats as “a move sideways” or, as put by one official, “clearly a demotion”.

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WHO sources familiar with the senior management changes told *The Lancet* “this was definitely not the case”.

The creation of the post of chief scientist, an iHub tasked with fostering a culture of innovation in the agency, and a new WHO division for Data, Analytics, and Delivery was received positively. The strengthening of emergency preparedness and international health regulations and response and the creation of a new division to address the threat of antimicrobial resistance are also considered positive steps.

The establishment of new divisions to address universal health coverage and the creation of a Lyon-based WHO academy tasked with professional development of staff and training of member state officials on implementation of WHO norms and standards are also viewed by many as forward-looking.

Some senior WHO health diplomats assess that the office of the Director-General has amassed “too much power” and has taken responsibility for too many functions reporting directly to him, such as Polio Eradication, data analytics and delivery, and transformation implementation.

Similarly, health access advocacy groups have raised concerns over the changes introduced in the politically sensitive access to medicines area.

“WHO’s medicines, vaccines, and pharmaceuticals cluster has been broken asunder. This Solomonic judgment tears apart WHO’s prequalification and regulatory work from WHO’s essential medicines team...Hopefully, the transformation will not defang the important role WHO plays in providing member states guidance on the use of WTO TRIPS [World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights] flexibilities, including compulsory licensing”, Thiru Balasubramaniam, Geneva representative at Knowledge Ecology International, told *The Lancet*.

Mariângela Batista Galvão Simão, the Assistant Director-General who led the medicines, vaccines, and pharmaceuticals, has been moved to head a standalone entity, titled Prequalification and Technology Assessment. In a bid to lower costs, the entity, which will oversee about 90–100 posts, is expected to be relocated from Geneva to another city by the summer of 2020; Barcelona, Berlin, Budapest, Dubai, and Kuala Lumpur have been mentioned as potential contenders, sources said.

Balasubramaniam also critically remarked that the consultancy firms “BCG [Boston Consulting Group], McKinsey, and Seek Development had an outsized influence in WHO’s root and branch shake-up of the organisation. The member states might want to ask Dr Tedros ‘How much were these companies paid for their policy prescriptions?’”. However, WHO sources told *The Lancet* that all decision-making related to the reforms was made by the WHO chief, his staff, and the six WHO Regional Directors.

John Zarocostas



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