

# Coronavirus Disinformation to Defund the World Health Organization

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On March 11, 2020, they declared the COVID-19 virus a pandemic. One month later, on April 14<sup>th</sup>, President Donald Trump announced a 60-day suspension of funding to the WHO. Trump said he wants his administration to review the organization's oversight of the coronavirus, given his belief that the WHO is beholden to China, and that it is mismanaging the pandemic response. Yet before the review period was even half completed, on May 18<sup>th</sup>, Trump sent the WHO Director General a letter threatening to not only permanently end WHO funding, but to pull out of the organization all together.

Since 1946, the WHO has been responsible for providing global guidance and technical assistance to countries on preserving and improving health, and strengthening their health systems. WHO coordinates implementation of the International Health Regulations, an agreement reached by 196 countries—including the United States—to work together for global health security and to respond to epidemics. This role is vital during health emergencies.

The United States contributes approximately 16% of the agency's total budget. The potential loss of this funding, during an unprecedented pandemic, will create a vacuum in global monitoring and response, and will hasten and increase the number of preventable deaths from the virus and other causes. As of this writing there were over 320,000 deaths worldwide; the United States accounts for over 90,000 of those deaths.

The current US government review of the WHO is the latest effort by the Trump Administration to undermine multilateral bodies and agreements. President Trump has repeatedly attempted to rollback global commitments on sexual and reproductive health and rights, taking particular aim at the United Nations, WHO, UN agencies, and other global entities. Since 2017, the US has withdrawn from the Paris

Agreement, the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO; and it has defunded UNFPA and reduced funding for the Organization of American States.

*The US government review of WHO is not a serious effort to address the challenges the organization faces. The Trump Administration has been signaling its intent to defund the World Health Organization for several years. The pandemic provides a flimsy cover for doing so. In advance of the release of its investigation, there is reason to question the government's findings.*

President Trump said that during the suspension, money designated to the WHO will be redirected to NGOs. This raises significant concern for both the public health and human rights communities. While NGOs can play a key role in delivering medical services, they cannot substitute for multilateral entities like WHO in coordinating a global health response during a pandemic. There is further concern that some humanitarian NGOs named by the Trump Administration, particularly those with a religious mission, have used the cover of humanitarian work to proselytize, and some have troubling histories of anti-Muslim, anti-abortion, and anti-LGBTQ biases.

This factsheet provides information on the work and scope of the WHO. It also includes details on efforts by the Trump Administration to defund the agency prior to the coronavirus outbreak, with support from anti-rights activists and non-governmental organizations. Finally, we offer recommendations for Congress as we collectively anticipate a loss of funding that will have profound impacts on the world, and particularly on women and girls and marginalized communities.

## The World Health Organization

### Mandate and scope:

- The WHO's broad mandate is enshrined in its constitution and centered on "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health." Its constitution lists many responsibilities; foremost, the mandate to "act as the directing and coordinating authority on international health work," and to "establish and maintain effective collaboration" within the international system.
- The WHO is made up of 194 member states and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. It is led by a Director-General, who is elected by member states to a five-year term. The post is currently held by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, formerly Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Health of Ethiopia.
- The WHO's primary decision-making body is the World Health Assembly (WHA), which is comprised of the WHO's member states. Meeting annually, the WHA defines the WHO's priorities, budgets, and activities.

### Role during health emergencies:

- Infectious diseases are not contained by country borders and can have a global impact, as evidenced by COVID-19, Zika, and Ebola. The WHO plays a critical **role** during health emergencies, ensuring swift global coordination.
- The WHO issues recommendations to countries when a Public Health Emergency of International Concern requires a coordinated international response. This done under the International Health Regulations (IHR), an agreement between 196 countries, including the United States, about how to collaborate against the international spread of disease.
- The WHO also coordinates the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), helping countries conduct risk assessments, gathering and analyzing global data 365 days a year, helping countries develop laboratory capacity, distributing equipment and supporting other logistical operations during epidemics, and issuing guidance to countries on preparedness.

### Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health Research:

- The WHO plays a key role in promoting global sexual and reproductive health through the Department of

Sexual and Reproductive Health. The department develops high-impact research, provides evidence-based guidelines for health systems, and articulates an ethical and human-rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health care. The Department includes the Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction (HRP), a joint initiative of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank. The HRP brings together experts and stakeholders to identify and advance research priorities within the field of sexual and reproductive health.

- The WHO recently issued updated **guidance** on addressing sexual and reproductive health issues within the context of a COVID-19 response. The guidance underscores that "[w]omen's choices and rights to sexual and reproductive health care, however, should be respected regardless of COVID-19 status."

## Attacks by anti-rights activists and organizations

- The WHO has long been in the crosshairs of anti-rights groups. A catalyst was WHO's 2003 publication of the *Safe Abortion Technical and Policy Guidance*. Groups like C-Fam and Population Research Institute claimed the resource proved that the WHO, and by extension other UN bodies such as UNFPA, UNICEF and UNESCO, were deviating from their public health mandates. In 2010, C-Fam produced a white paper, *The World Health Organization's Abortion Agenda*, arguing that the WHO was complicit in an abortion-driven agenda promoted by liberal NGOs with support from progressive foundations.<sup>1</sup> Following Trump's announcement to suspend WHO funding, C-Fam immediately reissued their white paper, now called *World Health Organization's Abortion Overreach*, and revised to reflect Trump and the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup>
- C-Fam's updated report argues that the WHO undermines norms set by sovereign states, arguments echoed by Trump during the 74th UN General Assembly where **he said** the UN has "no business attacking the sovereignty of nations that wish to protect innocent life." This ideology is also clearly reflected in recent congressional legislation, including the **American Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2017**, presented by Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL), which aims to defund the UN in its entirety. This in turn built on a **similar bill first presented by Senator Rand Paul (R-TX) in 2003**.

1. <https://c-fam.org/wp-content/uploads/WHO-FINAL.pdf>

2. <https://c-fam.org/wp-content/uploads/The-World-Health-Organization%E2%80%99s-Abortion-Overreach2.pdf>

- The drumbeat against the WHO has been embraced by anti-abortion allies in the US and other countries, including Italy<sup>3</sup> and Poland.<sup>4</sup> International conservative activist networks are encouraging the Trump Administration's defunding efforts, and further calling for the WHO's secretary-general to resign, as are Republican lawmakers.

## Trump Administration legacy at the WHO

The Trump Administration's participation at the WHO has been marked by hostility and obstructionism. This includes various attempts to weaken or block references to sexual and reproductive health in World Health Assembly resolutions and in WHO's Programme of Work, and even at the May 2020 WHA, where the COVID-19 Response resolution was being debated. While the Administration endorsed the resolution, it issued a lengthy explanation that US "dissociates" itself from the only two paragraphs that address sexual and reproductive rights.

For key positions that require working directly with the WHO, the administration has appointed or nominated staff with no experience in foreign relations or public health, and with clear biases against reproductive rights.

- The US seat on the WHO Executive Board remained empty for two years over controversy surrounding Trump's nominee. Despite being first nominated in November 2018, Brett Giroir, Assistant Secretary for Health, was only confirmed in May 2020. Giroir, who is also the Administration's coronavirus testing czar, first raised concerns about his record on sexual and reproductive health during his Senate confirmation hearing for Assistant Secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). These concerns were borne out when immediately after his confirmation, Giroir wrote to House Freedom Caucus members informing them that under President Trump, the HHS was "pro-life" and committed to moving away from fetal tissue research. In 2019, the HHS banned NIH scientists from using fetal tissue donated from abortions for research. Today, the ban has devastating consequences, and is severely curtailing the government's ability to develop a vaccine against COVID-19.
- Andrew Bremberg, the current US Ambassador to the Office of the United Nations and Other International Organizations, has no foreign policy expertise, yet an extensive history of anti-abortion extremism. In an exchange with Senator Robert Menendez during his confirmation hearing, Bremberg refused to support abortion

in cases of rape. This position is out of line with US law and public opinion. In his previous role at the Domestic Policy Council, Bremberg was a chief architect of President Trump's expanded version of the Global Gag Rule, which is leveling catastrophic impacts on reproductive health and rights worldwide. Bremberg is now responsible for representing the United States in over 20 multilateral organizations in Geneva, including the World Health Organization.

- The Trump Administration is actively undermining best public health practices, and imposing its biases on other countries. At the May 2018 WHA, the US attempted to block passage of a resolution in support of breastfeeding by threatening Ecuador, the resolution's original sponsor, with retaliatory trade measures and loss of military aid. The resolution was ultimately introduced by Russia and passed the Assembly. At the same Assembly, the US pushed unsuccessfully to remove references to sexual and reproductive health in WHO's Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023.
- In October 2018, the US unsuccessfully threatened consensus at the Global Conference on Primary Health Care in Astana, Kazakhstan, over the inclusion of language on sexual and reproductive health as part of primary health care. Instead, it agreed to a footnote, noting that the US opposes abortion as a method of family planning.
- At a January 2019 WHO meeting on pandemic influenza, US delegates Garret Grigsby and Valerie Huber emphasized that opposing sexual and reproductive rights was a top priority for the Trump Administration. They met with other government delegates in an attempt to build a coalition of likeminded countries.
- At the January 2019 WHO Executive Board meeting, the US unsuccessfully opposed references to "sexual and reproductive health" in a resolution on Universal Health Coverage, claiming the "meaning of the paragraph has evolved to include abortion, encouraging countries to change their laws on abortion, leaving the normalization of sexual activities as an expectation for teenagers."
- A further attempt to use the pandemic to undermine the WHO, and its work on sexual and reproductive health specifically, came on May 18, 2020. The Administration wrote to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, demanding the removal of references to "sexual and reproductive health" from the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan (Global HRP).

3. <https://citizengo.org/it/ot/179244-tagliamo-i-fondi-allorganizzazione-mondiale-della-sanita>

4. <https://agendaeurope.wordpress.com/united-nations-un/un-institutions/un-economic-and-social-council/> Agenda Europe, a conservative European network, makes the claim that the WHO deliberately spreads false information. "It pretends that "emergency contraceptive" do not cause abortion."

- At the World Health Assembly in May 2020, amidst the ongoing pandemic, the Trump Administration **disassociated** from several paragraphs in a resolution on COVID-19 over the inclusion of the term “sexual and reproductive health,” again citing the Administration’s opposition to abortion.

## Administration efforts to defund the WHO

- The US is a key partner to the WHO. US funding is critical: it is the single largest contributor, providing 16% of WHO’s total revenue in 2019, or about \$419 million. Of this total, \$119 million is from assessed contributions, and the rest in voluntary contributions, funding specific activities. In 2019, US funding made up about 20% of WHO’s programmatic budget.
  - o US funding for WHO supports critical global health initiative including polio eradication, increasing access to health and nutrition services, vaccines, and tuberculosis programs.
- This Administration has sought to weaken US funding for the WHO and other UN agencies from the start. A **leaked** 2017 Domestic Policy Council memo of White House priorities included the unfounded assessment that “WHO funding needs to be cut dramatically and we should directly fund the public health capacity of countries... WHO is a corrupt, hostile bureaucracy that achieves no actual capacity in countries.” The White House requested the FY 2021 budget reduce the Contributions to International Organizations (CIO) account by about a third, and they zeroed out the International Organizations and Programs (IO&P) account.
  - o While Congress has, thus far, refused to endorse the extreme funding cuts proposed by the Trump Administration, there is some support within congressional ranks for slashing US funding, and even ending US participation in the WHO and other multilateral organizations. All of which raises serious concerns about US commitment to improving WHO capacity and advancing shared global goals.
- In 2018, Kevin Moley, then-Assistant Secretary of State for International organizations, announced that the **US would be reevaluating its support to the WHO** given concerns around abortion, its privileging of its relationship with groups like IPPF, and concerns about WHO’s executive director. Moley’s **short tenure with the State Department was defined** by a strategy to curtail Chinese influence at the UN, while simultaneously overseeing the US withdrawal from the HRC, UNESCO, and defunding of the UN Relief and Works Agency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGRESS

- » Fully fund US assessed and voluntary contributions to the World Health Organization and other international organizations.
- » Resist any attempts to cut funding, or to condition funding on the policies and outcomes of the WHO and WHA.
- » Promote the ongoing ability of the WHO to do evidence-based, human –rights-centered work on all areas of health, including sexual and reproductive health, and reject any efforts by the Trump Administration to impose an ideologically-driven agenda on the organization.
- » Ensure a complete accounting of the total amount of funds suspended, withheld and or redirected during the funding suspension period.
- » Seek public disclosure of a complete list of all the organizations or individuals who received the redirected funds, including the bidding process that was used, and the amount that was allocated.
- » Call for public release of the Trump Administration’s review of the WHO’s COVID-19 response, including authorship and details of how the review was conducted.