



# PERSPECTIVES

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## It's Time to Reform the World Health Organization

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The World Health Organization (WHO) performed exceptionally poorly during the COVID-19 crisis, which was one of the greatest threats to global public health since the organization's founding in 1946. It is high time that the WHO was reformed from the ground up. President Donald Trump is taking the first steps by threatening to pull all US funding from the organization, which has become beholden to China to such an extent that it either cannot or will not make independent decisions.

The US is the [most significant single contributor](#) to the World Health Organization (WHO). US taxpayer-funded contributions total approximately \$2 billion—on roughly half—of the WHO's budget.

On May 18, 2020, President Donald Trump launched a campaign in which he [threatened](#) to pull all US funding from the WHO. On May 29, he [delivered a blistering attack](#) on China, stating, "The world needs answers from China on COVID-19 virus. We must have transparency" and reiterating that the US would terminate its relationship with the WHO and halt its funding. "Chinese officials ignored their reporting obligations to the World Health Organization and pressured the World Health Organization to mislead the world when Chinese authorities first discovered the virus," Trump said.

President Trump [expressed his decision](#) in a letter he sent to WHO Director-General (D-G) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. The letter said, "It is clear the repeated missteps by you and your organization in responding to the pandemic have been extremely costly for the world. The only way forward for the World Health Organization is if it can demonstrate independence from China."

Trump charges not only that the WHO is in China's sway but that it ignored credible reports of the COVID-19 virus spreading in Wuhan in early December 2019 or even earlier. He objects to the WHO's persistent wasteful [spending](#), utter disregard for

transparency, pervasive incompetence, and failure to adhere to basic democratic standards. He has also [said](#) that if the WHO had acted appropriately, he could have instituted a travel ban on people coming into the US from China sooner.

The WHO [Constitution](#) came into force on April 7, 1948. It states the organization's primary objective as "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health." The WHO's broad mandate includes advocating for universal healthcare, monitoring public health risks, coordinating responses to health emergencies, and promoting human health and wellbeing. The organization grossly failed to uphold its mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wasteful spending at the WHO did not start in 2019. According to internal [documents](#) obtained by AP, the UN health agency routinely spends about \$200 million a year on travel expenses—more than what it doles out to fight some of the biggest problems facing public health, including AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined. In 2018, WHO spent about \$71 million on AIDS and hepatitis, \$61 million on malaria, and \$59 million on tuberculosis. The previous D-G of the WHO, Dr. Margaret Chan, preferred to fly first class and spent a night in the top-tier presidential suite at the beachside Palm Camayenne hotel, all on the WHO account. The suite, equipped with marble bathrooms and a private dining room that seats eight, costs 900 euros (\$1,008) per night. "When you spend the kind of money WHO is spending on travel, you have to be able to justify it," Dr. Ashish Jha, director of the Global Health Institute at Harvard University, said. "I can't think of any justification for ever flying first class."

Reform is not going to come from within WHO itself. The [latest evidence](#) of this was the election of an unqualified non-physician to hold the D-G position: Ethiopian politician Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (PhD). Tedros was selected over an eminently qualified British candidate, David Nabbaro, MD.

Tedros is a leader of Ethiopia's brutal minority party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, a wing of the ruling Marxist-rooted Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. He served the violently repressive regime as minister of foreign affairs from 2012 to 2016, after a stint as health minister. Tedros, who is now in charge of making life or death decisions on a global scale, has been [accused](#) of covering up three cholera epidemics in Ethiopia, supporting a terrorist organization, and inflating his resume with the false claim that he conquered malaria and HIV.

Tedros was [FM](#) of one of the world's most [repressive regimes](#), one that holds many thousands of political prisoners. That part of his record was suppressed by China, which highlighted his alleged health credentials in an effort to make him appear suitable for the D-G position at the WHO. Beijing leveraged its investments across Africa to force the African Union to back Tedros.

WHO [needs a new D-G](#) to lead discussions on the organization's role in a world that has changed dramatically since the 1940s. Global health is now the business of many NGOs, private foundations, corporations, and academic groups. Reforming WHO requires a D-G who can work with diverse players and governments to tackle norms and standards. Wherever possible, operational functions should be spun off to other organizations within the UN or to NGOs that are better qualified than the WHO to execute them.

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