Whither the Good Ship WHO?

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The new more open process to elect the next director-general at the World Health Organization (WHO) is enlivening what is normally a non-event conducted behind closed doors. While the WHO and its new leader from 1 July next year will have many difficult issues to confront, and the WHO is widely seen as having lost credibility as a result of Ebola crisis, the new election procedure is proving a much-needed success for the WHO.

Ironically, it came about as a result of a member state working group established in 2011 because of concerns amongst some member states that hitherto WHO director-generals had come from only three of the WHO's six regions. But while they could have concluded that Buggins' turn was the answer, they wisely decided that more democracy was a better solution. And in addition they introduced a new code of conduct for the election process.

As part of this new process, the six candidates gathered in Geneva on 1-2 November to be interviewed by member states at a forum that was webcast. So the wider public and non-governmental stakeholders could view the proceedings but were not able to ask questions.

Chatham House and its partner, the Global Health Centre in Geneva, decided to use this opportunity to bring the candidates together at Chatham House in London on 3 November for a question and answer session which would be principally for non-state actors interested in the future of the WHO. Richard Horton, the Lancet's editor-in-chief, interrogated the candidates in a panel session where they made short statements and then questions to the candidates were put from the audience in the hall and via twitter from the large number viewing the livestream of the event.

The feedback received directly or via twitter was extremely positive. The three-hour session generated over 1900 tweets and more people watched the livestream than had watched John Kerry who was at Chatham House the preceding Monday. The candidates seemed to enjoy it – it was the first time they had appeared together on a platform – and the atmosphere was friendly and collaborative rather than competitive. The informal and more interactive format compared to the preceding Geneva event made it a better way of elucidating the candidates' position on the multitude of challenges that the WHO currently faces. The one disappointment was that Dr Tedros, the candidate from Ethiopia, had to cancel his appearance at the last minute as a result of political developments at home.

The co-chair of the event, Suerie Moon, developed an elaborate metaphor for the WHO which resonated with the candidates. The WHO was a 70-year-old ocean going liner. The director-general was captain of the liner but in the fleet were six other ships (the six regional offices) with their own captains and 150 boats (the country offices). Directing this motley crew was complex enough but was made more so because the owners of the fleet (the member states) were often at odds with one another over the direction it should take and were very reluctant to provide adequate funds for maintainance of these aging vessels. And yet they kept on loading the fleet with more and more cargo.

Moreover the fleet was in very choppy waters with numerous health challenges – dealing with health emergencies, addressing the SDGs, the health implications of climate change and the aging of the world's population – and there were many other boats in the water which were much more agile and a challenge to the WHO's authority. The captain of the WHO ship needed to find a way to navigate these difficult and uncharted waters, to re-establish WHO's credibility and authority and clarify its role in convening and coordinating the many actors in the global health waters.

Many of the questions directed at candidates and their answers – too numerous to enumerate here – revolved around these marine dilemmas for the WHO. The views of the candidates inevitably reflected their experiences and particular interests. Key themes that emerged included:

- The need to align the three levels of the WHO. Here there was a role for accountability compacts between the director-general and the regional directors and the assistant director-generals, the strengthening of the Global Policy Group (bringing together HQ and the regional management), and the development of one vision for the whole organization.
- The need to increase sustainable financing – through attracting more donors and through considering innovative financing mechanisms such as, for example, sugar taxes. But in order to attract more financing the WHO had to demonstrate results, which necessitated also more emphasis on measuring impact. Trust in the WHO had to be restored. At the same time, it was noted that the mindset in the WHO needed to change – the WHO's role was not necessarily to do more itself but to catalyse and coordinate action by others to achieve shared goals.
- In the same vein, partnerships were key for the WHO and several candidates stressed their experience and expertise in forming partnerships. Partnership with the private sector was problematic for the WHO in its standard setting role but some thought cooperation in implementing programmes was important.

- Universal health coverage was much discussed as a means by which all could get access to health care – 'let no one be left behind' was repeated several times. In that context, the importance of addressing human resource constraints in national health systems was recognized and the importance of the WHO in providing advice to governments.

Other subjects raised including the importance of the right to health as a motivator for improved performance, access to medicines, the role of the director-general in resolving disputes between member states by being proactive, and many others. Some but not all of the candidates said they would reveal their election expenses.