



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

**The School of Nursing  
and Midwifery**

Queen's University Belfast  
Medical Biology Centre  
97 Lisburn Road  
BELFAST BT9 7BL  
Northern Ireland  
Tel: 028 9097 2233/2061  
Fax: 028 9097 5878  
nursing@qub.ac.uk  
www.qub.ac.uk/nur

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Director General  
World Health Organization  
Geneva  
Switzerland

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Dear Dr Ghebreyesus,

We are very aware of the financial crisis that WHO is facing following the withdrawal of the USA and its funding from the Organization. Most of us have contributed time and effort to the work of WHO over the years and some are even former staff. We are believers in, and are fully committed to, the work of WHO to provide leadership to the health community and Member States and protect public health, especially in the most vulnerable in our societies. We appreciate you are facing exceedingly difficult decisions in balancing financial resources with the work that WHO will continue to prioritise and the staff needed to support these technical areas. It is with this understanding that we write to express our extreme concern that one major area of cross-cutting work may be entirely lost.

In 2024, WHO reported that four commercially driven industries — tobacco, alcohol, processed foods and fossil fuels — were responsible for 2.7 million deaths per year in the European region alone; nearly 7500 deaths per day. Globally, these four products alone are estimated to account for between a third and two thirds of global deaths. Over the past three years, WHO has synthesised data and other evidence, identified drivers and conceptualised solutions to address these commercial determinants and, in so doing, to prioritise public health — the health of those who do not have power and influence — rather than the interest of multinational industries and their shareholders. This work is currently detailed in the draft Global Report on the Commercial Determinants of Health which is not yet launched and disseminated; one to which many of us have contributed our time and expertise freely in recognition of the importance of the topic and the urgent need for evidence-informed action to address the commercial determinants of health globally.

The 2008 WHO report *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health* represented a landmark moment for global health. It recognised the impact of social inequalities and determinants on health access, service provision, mortality and the future health and well-being of children. The WHO Global report on Commercial Determinants of Health is of the same importance for global health as that report. While a Lancet Series can make the same arguments and suggestions, it will never carry the same influence as a WHO report. Member States do not feel obliged to reflect and make decisions regarding the conclusions and recommendations of a publication prepared

by academics; but they do for a WHO report, particularly when it relates to a complex issue that is so obviously and majorly relevant to all populations in all income settings.

We greatly fear that for apparent financial reasons, the launch of the report will be cancelled and WHO leadership in the area dropped. This would have multiple consequences. It will signal to community and academic partners that the large amounts of time and work they have willingly contributed is of no value to WHO. It will convey a blind spot in WHO or disregard for the entire area of work and a dismissive attitude to the deaths and disability due to commercial determinants. It will raise concern that WHO is more concerned about economically rich and powerful industries that stand to gain if the report and technical area are axed, than its mandate to foster the highest attainable standard of health without distinction of economic or social condition. It may undermine confidence in WHO's independence, integrity and trustworthiness and its ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate and core functions. It will suggest that WHO is no longer willing to demonstrate both technical and moral leadership in a world that is increasingly governed by economic interests than democratically elected leaders. It will communicate that you personally are ready to roll back on the words in your editorial for the Lancet Series on the Commercial Determinants of Health. Finally, and perhaps most important, it will be a significant loss for the children and young people and the future generations who bear a significant burden of unchecked commercial activities, their destruction of the planet and harms associated with emerging commercial determinants.

The importance of taking an upstream and cross-sectoral approach to understanding and addressing commercial interests and the explicit challenge of conflicts of interest lies at the heart of the Global report on Commercial Determinants of Health. The need for such an approach is illustrated by the stagnation in the field of tobacco control — long-standing declines in global cigarette sales and smoking prevalence have stalled and policy implementation has slowed because of a failure to address the system nature of the problem that underpins the commercial determinants of health.

We believe in and want to stand with WHO and realise the enormous complexity of this moment for the Organization. However, this time will pass. We earnestly call on you to demonstrate the personal leadership and Organizational integrity to protect the work on Commercial Determinants of Health, to publish the report, maintain visibility of the technical area and some staff with specific responsibility – even in the face of economic tensions and even if compromised in the near term.

Yours sincerely,



**Nigel Rollins**  
**Professor, Maternal and Child Health**  
**Queen's University Belfast**

**And**

**Philip Baker**  
Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Australia

**Lisa Bero**  
Professor of Medicine and Public Health, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, USA

**Robert Boyle**  
Clinical Reader, Mohn Centre for Children's Health and Wellbeing, Imperial School of Public Health, London, UK

**Jeff Collin**  
Professor of Global Health Policy, Global Health Policy Unit, University of Edinburgh, UK

**Alice Fabbri**  
Lecturer, Department for Health, University of Bath, UK

**Amandine Garde**  
Professor, Law & Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, University of Liverpool, UK

**Anna Gilmore**  
Professor, co-Director of the Centre for 21st Century Public Health and Founder of the Tobacco Control Research Group, University of Bath, UK

**Tim Lang**  
Professor Emeritus of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London, UK

**Margaret McCartney**  
Senior lecturer in General Practice, University of St Andrews, Scotland

**David McCoy**  
Professor of Global Health, International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH), United Nations University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**Carlos A Monteiro**  
Emeritus Professor, University of Sao Paulo, Brasil

**Mark Petticrew**  
Professor, Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Public Health, London, UK

**Patti Rundall, OBE**  
IBFAN Global Council Member, UK

**May van Schalkwyk**  
Research Fellow, Public Health Doctor, Global Health Policy Unit, Edinburgh University, UK

**Chris van Tulleken**  
Professor, Global Health and Infection, University College London, UK