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Halfdan Mahler champion of health equity and social justice.

Halfdan Mahler, W.H.O. director general from 1973 to 1988 passed away on 14 December 2016 in Geneva. The history of public health will remember him as the greatest leader of public health of the twentieth century. He left a rich heritage full of teachings that would serve well to guide the W.H.O. course today. He was a charismatic leader with vision, independence and courage. “Mahler was a relentless champion of health equity and social justice, in fact, he once called ‘social justice’ a ‘holy phrase’.”[\[1\]](#)

In the first year of his mandate, 1973, Mahler issued the report “Organizational Study on Methods of Promotion the Development of Basic Health Services” report that criticized the idea of vertical approach methods of focusing on specific diseases as well as adding western approaches to developing countries.

Mahler led the transformation of WHO in 1978 with the declaration of Alma Ata, former capital of Kazakhstan, that created the concept of **primary health care**, and launched the challenge of “**health for all**” by the year 2000. This was the passage from curative medicine to preventive care. The adoption of Alma Ata declaration in September 1978 is one of the bright moments of the public health history.

“Very soon after the formal declaration at Alma-Ata, however, efforts to reshape or even nullify it were under way. Major donor nations, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, froze contributions to the WHO budget. (...) In 1979, the Rockefeller Foundation sponsored a small conference at its Bellagio conference center in Italy. The Bellagio conference included representatives of the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, and they formulated an alternative “selective primary health care” agenda, which differed sharply from the agenda and spirit of Alma-Ata.”[\[2\]](#)

In the early eighties Mahler launched the concept of **essential drugs** as one of the Alma Ata components of primary health care. The work on essential drugs is one of the biggest successes of the WHO since its creation, though it cost Mahler criticism and pressure from the pharmaceutical industry and some industrialized countries.

Mahler was outspoken on many issues. In several occasions he mentioned that the Alma Ata primary health care strategy was killed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. He pressured infant-formula manufacturers not to discourage mothers from breast-feeding. In 1982, he invited the Danish doctor Ernst Lauridsen to start the Action Programme on Essential Drugs, and when the Big Pharma complained about Lauridsen's criticisms of the pharmaceutical industry, Malher's response was: "they are not criticisms of Lauridsen, it is my criticism, when he speaks in public he does it on my behalf, on behalf of the director general of WHO".

During the emergence of AIDS, 1981, Dr. Malher valiantly recognised that "we're running scared; (...) We stand nakedly in front of a very serious pandemic as mortal as any pandemic there ever has been. I don't know of any greater killer than AIDS, not to speak of its psychological, social and economic maiming." He also admitted that he had not taken the disease seriously enough. "Everything is getting worse and worse in AIDS, and all of us have been underestimating it, and I in particular," he said.

Halfdan Mahler did not follow WHO member States, it was he who guided member States, and all those captivated by his vision of "health for all".

Germán Velásquez

[\[1\]](#) Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim and al. "Reimagining Global Health". University of California, 2013.

[\[2\]](#) Theodore M. Brown, and al." Halfdan Mahler: Architect and Defender of the World Health Organization "Health for All by 2000" Declaration of 1978"