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## Leaving the WHO? The US Just Shot Itself in the Foot

By Germán Velásquez

At the start of his second term, United States president Donald Trump has again announced that the US will formally leave the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2025. Leaving the WHO is a financial blow to the Organization, as many have pointed out, but it is much more than that. Trump's decision to abandon WHO is counterproductive and puts at risk the capacity of the organization to perform its role as the global health agency. The WHO has been central to responding to global health emergencies for more than seven decades. Its work in the fight against diseases such as smallpox, polio, Ebola and HIV/AIDS, or the binding international convention against tobacco use, has saved millions of lives.

The US' withdrawal from WHO will have a serious impact on various aspects of global health, and the US will itself be directly affected. WHO members should unite to strengthen the WHO and counteract this decision by the current US Administration.

*Au début de son deuxième mandat, le président américain Donald Trump a de nouveau annoncé que les États-Unis quitteraient officiellement l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) en 2025. Comme beaucoup l'ont souligné, le départ des États-Unis de l'OMS est un coup dur pour l'organisation sur le plan financier, mais cela va bien au-delà. La décision de Donald Trump d'abandonner l'OMS est contre-productive et compromet la capacité de l'organisation à remplir son rôle d'agence mondiale de la santé. L'OMS joue un rôle central dans la réponse aux urgences sanitaires mondiales depuis plus de sept décennies. Son travail dans la lutte contre des maladies telles que la variole, la polio, Ebola et le VIH/sida, ou la convention internationale contraignante contre le tabagisme, a sauvé des millions de vies.*

*Le départ des États-Unis de l'OMS aura de graves répercussions sur divers aspects de la santé mondiale, et les États-Unis eux-mêmes en seront directement affectés. Les membres de l'OMS doivent s'unir pour renforcer l'organisation et contrer cette décision de l'actuelle administration américaine.*



*Al inicio de su segundo mandato, el presidente de Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, ha vuelto a anunciar que Estados Unidos abandonará formalmente la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) en 2025. Abandonar la OMS es un golpe financiero para la Organización, como muchos han señalado, pero es mucho más que eso. La decisión de Trump de abandonar la OMS es contraproducente y pone en riesgo la capacidad de la organización para desempeñar su papel como agencia sanitaria mundial. La OMS ha sido fundamental para responder a las emergencias sanitarias mundiales durante más de siete décadas. Su labor en la lucha contra enfermedades como la viruela, la poliomielitis, el ébola y el VIH/sida, o el convenio internacional vinculante contra el tabaquismo, ha salvado millones de vidas.*

*La retirada de EE.UU. de la OMS tendrá graves repercusiones en diversos aspectos de la salud mundial, y el propio país se verá directamente afectado. Los miembros de la OMS deben unirse para fortalecerla y contrarrestar esta decisión de la actual Administración estadounidense.*

## 1. Introduction

In July 2020, President Donald Trump made one of the most controversial announcements of his first presidency: the United States would withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO). This decision came in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis that highlighted the need for international cooperation. By signalling his intention to leave WHO, Trump not only distanced the US from a crucial institution, but also undermined global efforts to combat pandemics, protect public health and safeguard the health of the most vulnerable populations around the world.

Fortunately, what he announced in 2020 did not materialize because the administrative process could not be completed before the end of his term. When Democrat Joe Biden became President, he reversed the decision before the process initiated by his predecessor was completed.

Now, at the start of his second term, President Trump has again announced that the US will formally leave the WHO in 2025. Leaving the WHO is a financial blow to the Organization, as many have pointed out, but it is much more than that.

## 2. US Presence in the WHO

The United States has been the largest financial contributor to the WHO for 30 years and its contribution represents today about 15 percent of the total WHO budget (6.8 billion US dollars by 2024-2025) (EURACTIV, 2025). In the late 1990s, a resolution of the World Health Assembly, led by the United States, approved the freezing of the budget of the WHO with a "zero real growth" policy, which lasted for 30 years (Velasquez, 2024).

The original rule for the WHO budget was that each country gave a financial contribution according to certain parameters such as gross domestic product (GDP) and number of inhabitants, and that each country participated equally in the decisions. This is the general policy of the United Nations - "one country one vote" (United Nations, 2018).

The decision to freeze the WHO budget more than 30 years ago prompted some industrialized countries to increase their contributions with so-called "voluntary contributions", generally earmarked for specific programmes selected by these countries. Voluntary contributions from a small group of industrialized countries and the private sector now account for 84 percent of the total WHO budget (Velásquez, 2024). In the case of the United States, their overall contribution for 2024-2025 was US\$ 958 million, of which about US\$ 260 million is the contribution mandatory to the regular budget (Statista, 2025).

The exaggerated financial weight of the voluntary contributions of the United States, as well as of other industrialized countries, complicates the democratic functioning of the organization, because the large donor countries (of voluntary contributions) have a strong control over the programmes and priorities of the organization, and the policy of the United Nations – "one country one vote" – is thus almost impossible to apply. There are many global public health issues on which the United States is constantly threatening to use its power of veto. Thus, in many cases, its presence translates into excessive control of one member State within an organization that has 194 members.

As French historians Jean-Paul Gaudillière and Christophe Gradmann put it in an article for *Le Monde*, "Donald Trump's attacks on the World Health Organization are not simply a strategy to deconstruct multilateralism. They are linked to differences of opinion about the organisation's governance, mission and practices" (Le Monde, 2025).

### 3. A Blow to the Multilateral System

The US withdrawal from the WHO undermines the very principles of multilateralism and cooperation that have been fundamental to the post-World War II international order. Global health challenges demand collective action and, by distancing itself from the WHO, the US is signalling that it is unwilling to collaborate with other countries to solve common problems. This is a dangerous precedent that could have far-reaching consequences, not only for cooperation in public health, but also for the prevention and management of future health crises.

While multilateralism is a fundamental principle of international cooperation, the WHO has witnessed how the US Government, in recent years, has been constantly pursuing its own interests within this multilateral body.

The multilateral system of cooperation seeks to solve global problems through consensus among member States, avoiding the hegemony of dominant actors and promoting greater equity in decision-making. The multilateral forum provided by the WHO is supposed to give countries, regardless of their size or power, the opportunity to influence the global agenda and participate in the creation of international norms that protect all. This unfortunately has not been always the case. We can take the example of the negotiations on a binding international treaty for the prevention of future pandemics over the past three years, where the US Government has systematically opposed anything that may affect its commercial interests such as those of the pharmaceutical or food industry, even if the proposals in the treaty were in the interest of safeguarding the health of everyone in the world.

Seen from this perspective, the US recent decision to withdraw from the WHO is somewhat strange, as it deprives them of a way of defending their own interests.

Indeed, one might also wonder, even in financial terms, which of the two stands to lose more, the WHO or the United States – or to be more precise, the US pharmaceutical industry? In 2021, Pfizer reported \$36 billion in revenue from the sale of the COVID-19 vaccines alone, making it the world's best-selling pharmaceutical product that year. Was it not the WHO that facilitated the sharing of data that enabled the development of COVID-19 vaccines? Was it not the WHO that facilitated and promoted the mass use of vaccines?

### 4. A Wrong Justification, and a Reckless Decision for Global Health

President Trump's justification for withdrawing from the WHO was based on the wrong argument that the organization is ineffective and overly influenced by China. He frequently claimed that the WHO had failed to act swiftly and transparently at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that it had become "China-centric" (The White House, 2025).

While it is "healthy" to question the actions of any international organization, including the WHO, the decision to abandon the WHO is counterproductive and puts at risk the capacity of the organization to perform its role as the global health agency. The WHO has been central to responding to global health emergencies for more than seven decades. Its work in the fight against diseases such as smallpox, polio, Ebola and HIV/AIDS, or the binding international convention against tobacco use, has saved millions of lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example of why global health cooperation is vital. In an interconnected world, no country is an island when it comes to infectious diseases. A virus that spreads in one country can quickly become a global threat, as we experienced with COVID-19. WHO has provided essential guidance on testing, treatment, vaccine development and public health strategies. Its global health expertise is irreplaceable, and its leadership is needed now more than ever. With the United States' withdrawal from the WHO, the US administration is sending the message that the United States is not willing to contribute to collective efforts to protect humanity from pandemics, setting back global health initiatives by years, if not decades.

The WHO also provides technical assistance to countries that lack the infrastructure or resources to mount effective responses to health crises. By withdrawing, the US would be abandoning those who depend on international cooperation and support. This decision demonstrates a worrying indifference to the health and well-being of millions of people around the world, especially in developing countries that depend in some way on WHO collaboration for critical health interventions.

The United States' withdrawal from the WHO will have a serious impact on various aspects of global health, but the United States will itself be directly affected. Indeed, a key issue is the impact that withdrawal will have on health research. There are currently 72 WHO Collaborating Centres in the United States which draw on information collected by the WHO in its 194 member States (WHO, 2025a). Depriving these collaborating centres of global information would affect health research activities and the development of technologies, medicines and vaccines by the US industry.

*The Lancet*, the renown medical journal, strongly criticized the move, warning that US withdrawal, by reducing scientific cooperation with collaborating centres, will negatively affect medical research, international cooperation and access to essential health services. *The Lancet* noted that the US exit represents "sweeping and damaging attack on the health of the American people and those dependent on US foreign assistance" (The Lancet, 2025).

## 5. Final Remarks

Donald Trump's announcement to withdraw from the WHO in 2025 is a decision with far-reaching consequences. It represents a short-sighted and self-defeating approach to global health that puts both the United States and the world at risk. In an era of interconnected challenges, the United States cannot afford to disengage from the global health system. Abandoning this organization at a time when the world faces numerous current and emerging health threats is a grave mistake, where the American president may be "shooting himself in the foot" as the saying goes.

The other 193 WHO member countries should be vigilant to ensure that this announcement does not become a means to demand changes and reforms that only protect the interests of the United States and its industry instead of common global health issues.

It is to be expected, as it was already the case during Trump's first term, that the international community will mobilize to compensate for the financial shortfall that this decision may entail. As Michel Kazatchkine says: "The time has come for Europe to distance itself and offer new leadership in place of that abandoned by a former ally that has become unpredictable, if not hostile" (Flahault, Calmy and Kazatchkine, 2025).

Why not propose a tax on soft drinks, Flahault, Calmy and Kazatchkine ask: "Europe could try to finance the loss of the US contribution to the WHO by introducing a special tax on certain American services and goods, such as soft drinks and ultra-processed foods. A response that would be useful for the health of the public" (Flahault, Calmy and Kazatchkine, 2025).

Some of the reflections and decisions that will fall to the WHO Secretariat in Geneva and to the member countries to offset this very serious financial decision will include the need to redefine priorities, reduce non-essential operational costs (the Director proposed, for example, drastically reducing travel), and even reviewing the quota of US personnel in the Organization. This quota is based on the financial contribution of each country to the Organization's budget. Perhaps this crisis would also be an opportunity to reflect on the number of WHO staff at the Secretariat in Geneva (2,400 people) (WHO, 2025b), while in comparison, the World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretariat in Geneva, to give just one example, employs 620 people (WTO, 2025).

There is no doubt that there is a need to strengthen the multilateral agency in the health sector for the sake of global health, and thus it is essential that member States unite and find ways of maintaining a strong WHO and counteract this decision by the current US Administration.

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