

## An argument for a common-sense global public health agenda



We live in a promising, but particularly challenging, time in the history of global public health. A change in leadership at WHO, with the election of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as Director-General, brings—as institutional leadership change should—new energy and promise of a fresh perspective on some of the challenges that have long bedevilled the world's premier public health organisations.

Can we find a way to improve the health of people around the world and guide us through the next, inevitable, global public health crisis? We propose that a commitment to a common-sense global public health agenda, one that is discerning of the priorities that matter to the promotion of health in populations, and holds itself accountable to tackling the causes of health that are foundational and without which we cannot achieve healthier populations, is the answer to this question. A common-sense public health approach would aspire to long-term engagement with the creation of a healthier world, transcending the cycles of public and political attention, and systematically and strategically contribute to the creation of the social, political, and economic structures that ultimately shape population health. This approach optimistically suggests the world is willing to be patient to become healthier, and can take a breath at the next emerging crisis.

A common-sense public health approach requires increased engagement of public health with communication of the mission and aspirations of public health. In so far as the creation of a healthier world requires the political and economic forces and structures to enable it, it falls on organised public health approaches to educate a world that is unaccustomed to hearing this message. As the global response to the Ebola virus outbreak demonstrated, countries were interested in contributing to contain the crisis well after it was too late. Far too little effort was invested in shoring up the health systems needed to protect health and limit the potential spread of Ebola virus. A health systems sell is tough, especially when such investments have been seen as outside the remit of a reactive public health agenda—one where we jump into action only when public health emergencies are declared. The remit for tackling these issues is outside the scope of organised public health, yet

it falls to organised public health approaches to convince finance ministries to invest in the housing, economic, and transportation systems that are needed to achieve and maintain a healthier world.

A common-sense public health approach suggests that the research agenda should be grounded in a systematic engagement with priority setting, with attention paid to solutions to problems that prevent long-term, sustainable social, political, and economic systems that promote health. Although it is relatively canonical that public health goals are unachievable without engagement with these non-health forces that influence health,<sup>1</sup> the supporting evidence is scarce.<sup>2</sup> A common-sense public health research agenda must focus on the forces that matter most—being unafraid to tackle, for example, foundational economic disparities, and access to quality care—providing the evidence base to bolster public health action.

We suggest that this moment of trial for global public health is an opportunity to train the next generation of public health practitioners and researchers who see a common-sense public health agenda as their core remit, and organise a framework for their engagement with public health throughout their career. This would be quite different from the generation of public health professionals who have emerged from the more traditional disease surveillance, epidemic containment, and risk factor modification model of public health research and action. It would also call for a different skillset from our public health practitioners. Although the fundamentals of public health would remain, a skillset that privileges communication and facility with cross-sector interactions, and a commitment to the interdisciplinary scholarship needed to inform a common-sense public health approach would require a rethink of how future public health professionals are taught worldwide.

A moment of uncertainty for global public health can become an opportunity to embrace a new approach to public health. We argue for a common-sense public health agenda—one that prioritises the important over the urgent, sees its role as building the conditions for a healthier world, over time and in time, and sees human rights as a moral core.

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We declare no competing interests.

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