



WHO launches crowdfund for COVID-19 response

For the first time, WHO is asking the general public and private donors for support. The project is a test run for the WHO Foundation, to be launched later this year. Ann Danaiya Usher reports.

The COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for WHO, managed by the UN Foundation and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, has been launched to raise money from individuals, the private sector, and foundations to finance WHO's response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. 10 days after its March 13 launch, it had raised US\$71 million from 170 000 individuals and organisations, including Facebook, Google, and FIFA.

The mechanism is unprecedented for WHO, says Kate Dodson at the UN Foundation. While UN agencies such as UNICEF have a long tradition of private fundraising, this has never been the case for WHO. Because of the agency's standard-setting role, it has been seen as important to keep an arm's length from private interests.

This breakthrough was possible in the midst of the current health crisis because the UN Foundation has a well established relationship with WHO, she says. "When companies give to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, their funds go to the UN Foundation in first instance. We have set up the Fund to ensure that all contributions are treated equal: donors cannot earmark their contributions, and funding from all donor sources (individuals, companies, and philanthropies) is comingled when disbursed to WHO for WHO to put to urgent use."

The new fund is designed to pool donations from those who have no historic relationship with the agency. "It will support the WHO's overall strategic response plan for COVID-19 and it is geared toward the most vulnerable, at-risk countries with the weakest health systems", Dodson says.

According to WHO, almost 30% of countries have no COVID-19 national preparedness and response plans, and only half of countries have a national infection prevention and control programme and water, sanitation, and hygiene standards in all health-care facilities.

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Governments have been slow to respond to WHO's efforts to raise money for the COVID-19 response through the usual appeal process. On Feb 4, the agency asked the international community for \$675 million to fund its plan for dealing with the outbreak during the 3-month period from February to April, 2020. By March 8, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that WHO was facing an immediate \$20 million funding gap. "To be very frank, if no new resources are received, we will run out of money before the end of the outbreak", he said.

Suerie Moon, co-director of the Global Health Centre at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, says the donors' failure to step up left WHO with little choice. "Their backs are against the wall. Ideally, governments would adequately fund WHO to do the work they have asked the agency to do", she says. "The launch of the Solidarity Response Fund is a good sign that WHO is agile and responding quickly to a rapidly changing situation. But the real question is why do they need to do so in the first

place? It reflects donors' total failure to fund the response to this outbreak at the international level."

According to Gaudenz Silberschmidt, director for health and multilateral partnerships at WHO, the origins of this new COVID-19 fund are linked to another, much larger project: the WHO Foundation, an external independent entity that will broaden WHO's funding base by raising money from the general public, private foundations, and the private sector.

Thomas Zeltner, a physician and former Swiss health minister, is set to be the first chair of the foundation. The UN Foundation and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation are both helping to set it up. WHO is in discussion with foundations outside of Europe to expand the network.

But the WHO Foundation was not yet finalised when the COVID-19 outbreak hit. "We were in the build-up phase and realised that the foundation would not be operational in time for [COVID-19]", Silberschmidt says. "We needed to set up a separate mechanism."

Although most of the \$675 million target has been funded, WHO is already working on the next, expanded phase of the appeal. Total requirements could be ten times this amount. Asked what the fund-raising target for the COVID-19 fund is, he replied: "This is totally uncharted territory. Our target is to fund the needs. And they will be growing."

Silberschmidt says the new Fund for COVID-19 was both a necessity in itself and a "test flight" for the WHO Foundation, which is to be launched later this year.

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