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Dr. Margaret Chan  
Director General  
World Health Organization

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May 5, 2010

Dear Dr. Chan,

It has come to our attention that the World Health Organization plans to strictly limit and constrain the time and space available for NGO side events during the annual World Health Assembly in Geneva, May 17-22, 2010. We understand WHO initially proposed allowing no time or space whatsoever for side events,<sup>1</sup> and has recently revised this policy to provide instead one room for only two hours each night, for which all NGOs will compete.<sup>2</sup>

This retrograde policy harks back to an era of secretive and exclusive international gatherings. It is completely out of step with prevailing norms at multilateral international organizations. The WHO should be a leader in openness and transparency, not a laggard behind institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Consider practice and policy at other international organizations and recent meetings:

At the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP 15, December 2009) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the secretariat scheduled space for 135 side events, to take place during the evenings. When demand exceeded available space, the secretariat gave permission to schedule side events during the days as well. This helped COP 15 host more than 240 side events.<sup>3</sup>

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1 WHA/10.3, 15 March 2010.

2 WHO REF GBS W3/87/1(63).

3 [http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop\\_15/side\\_events\\_exhibits/items/5095.php](http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/side_events_exhibits/items/5095.php). COP 15 also provided space for 190 exhibit booths and the “inSide Climate Change” studio, which records interviews with observers and Parties alike, and broadcasts them on the internet-based Climate Change TV.

At their 2010 Spring Meetings, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank<sup>4</sup> hosted a Civil Society Policy Forum featuring side events occupying two main conference rooms and spanning four full days.<sup>5</sup> The packed schedule included a number of joint Bank/Fund-civil society dialogues, as well as many NGO briefings. The Bank and Fund also provided civil society groups with a press room and live feed from press conferences, and two smaller meeting rooms adjacent to the conference rooms.

The World Intellectual Property Organization,<sup>6</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development<sup>7</sup>, and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development,<sup>8</sup> among many others, provide for robust side event schedules at their major meetings, allocating much more space and time than WHO proposes for this year's World Health Assembly.<sup>9</sup>

Even the World Trade Organization, which has long attracted intense protests by NGOs as well as widespread criticism for failing to adequately provide for civil society participation, facilitates ample space for side events at its Ministerials. This dates back to the 1996 Singapore Ministerial Conference, where the WTO provided NGOs with "a large number of meeting rooms, computer facilities and documentation from the official event."<sup>10</sup>

And, of course, WHO has been much more open to NGOs at prior World Health Assemblies and other meetings, including the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

WHO's plan to provide only one room for one NGO side event per night seriously limits formal channels for substantive civil society contributions to WHA. Rather than maximizing efficiency, the policy places considerable pressure on stakeholders to exchange analysis through alternate means, which could take time from the proceedings, and reduces opportunities for adequate and coherent exploration of new policy proposals.

Common international practice provides for much more open hosting of side events than WHO has proposed. Your proposed arrangement is bad governance and, ultimately, bad for public health. We urge you to reconsider.

Sincerely,

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4 <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:22491141~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>

5 <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:22491074~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>

6 *E.g.*, [http://www.wipo.int/meetings/en/doc\\_details.jsp?doc\\_id=45309](http://www.wipo.int/meetings/en/doc_details.jsp?doc_id=45309).

7 *E.g.*, <http://www.unctad.org/Templates/Meeting.asp?m=13044&intlItemID=1942&lang=1>.

8 *E.g.*, [http://www.oecdministerialseoul2008.org/en/programmce/sideevent\\_related.html](http://www.oecdministerialseoul2008.org/en/programmce/sideevent_related.html).

9 *See also* Knowledge Ecology International, "Participation by the Public in Selected Negotiations," July 2009, *available at*: <http://keionline.org/content/view/246/1>.

10 [http://www.wto.org/english/forums\\_e/ngo\\_e/intro\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/forums_e/ngo_e/intro_e.htm)

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