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Equitable access to global health internships: a documentary short

WHO operates at the centre of the international health system. Its mandate, to promote the health of people worldwide, requires it to build technical and operational skills within the health systems of its 193 member states. For many of these states, particularly those of low income that face growing disease burdens, developing skills in the next generation of public health professionals is imperative.

WHO's Internship Programme exists to support this goal. Each year, about 1000 young professionals from across the world join the programme, of whom the majority (61%) work at WHO's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. However, less than 20% of interns come from developing countries.¹⁻³ This imbalance in member state participation has two principal causes: an absence of financial support for interns, which precludes the participation of many from low-income and middle-income countries; and an ad-hoc recruitment process that favours candidates with connections in well-established academic institutions, typically in high-income countries. The result is a missed opportunity for WHO and inadvertently undermines its own objectives on human resources for health.

Accordingly, a group of former WHO interns supported by a group of non-governmental organisations ran a public fundraising campaign to financially support two young public health professionals from low-income and middle-income countries to intern at WHO's headquarters. Selected for scholarships by an independent panel of global health experts, these two interns travelled from Uganda and Tunisia for 3-month internships in Geneva. Filmmakers in Uganda, Tunisia,

Switzerland, and the UK produced a short film to document the interns' experiences and explore the wider implications of their journey. In both cases, the internship served as a launch pad for their careers in public health.

These issues have been discussed at meetings of WHO's governing bodies, including the 2016 and 2017 Executive Board meetings and World Health Assemblies,^{1,4} but with little progress to date. With the election of a new WHO Director-General, the next phase of WHO reform beckons and with it a chance to bring equity to its internship programme. We applaud his recognition that talent is universal and urge the Director-General to seize this opportunity, together with member states, to lead comprehensive and lasting reform. In this documentary, we move beyond statistics and follow the journey of two interns, whose stories speak for a generation full of potential and whom WHO has both a responsibility and direct interest in nurturing.⁵

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