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# **The election of the Director-General of the World Health Organization**

## **Report by the Secretariat**

1. The Executive Board has been discussing the possibility of rotating the post of Director-General among WHO's regions since its 120th session in January 2007. The debates on this item showed that all the members of the Board shared the goal of ensuring that the person appointed as Director-General should meet all the requirements spelt out by the Board and, most importantly, have the personal and professional qualities required to perform fully and effectively the functions of chief technical and administrative officer of the Organization. Board members supporting regional rotation of the post of Director-General emphasized the need to ensure the equitable nature of the process of selection and a level playing field among regions. Board members in favour of maintaining the current system considered that a pattern of regional rotation would necessarily restrict the choice of candidates, and would not therefore ensure that the most qualified person was elected; further, it would fundamentally alter the nature of the office of Director-General, changing it into a function of a regional, rather than global, nature.
2. At its 122nd session in January 2008, the Board considered a report by the Secretariat reviewing six possible options in connection with the rotation of the post of Director-General among the regions.<sup>1</sup> The Board decided to submit the report to the regional committees in order to seek their views on the issue and to work towards a consensus.<sup>2</sup>
3. Five regional committees discussed the question of regional rotation of the post of Director General at their sessions in 2008. The 48th Directing Council of the Pan-American Health Organization (60th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas) did not discuss the issue. A brief summary of the deliberations in the other regional committees is provided below.
4. The Regional Committee for Africa strongly supported the principle of rotation of the post of Director-General among the regions. The Committee did not select a specific option among the six presented by the Secretariat, and expressed a preference for having the matter considered and decided upon by the Health Assembly rather than being dealt with again by the Board, in order to ensure a broader discussion among Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> Document EB122/17. The options were: (1) maintaining the status quo; (2) giving special consideration to candidates from certain regions; (3) and (4), two related options, considering geographical representation as the criterion for the establishment of the shortlist; (5) considering geographical representation as the criterion for the eligibility of candidates; and (6) using the same system of regional rotation as that applied to candidatures for elective office.

<sup>2</sup> See document EB122/2008/REC/2, summary record of the eighth meeting, section 2.

5. The Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean agreed to recommend to the Board that the principle of regional rotation be applied to selection of the Director-General, with the option for selection to be discussed by the Member States of the Region in the next session of the Board.

6. The Regional Committee for South-East Asia supported both the principle of regional rotation of the post of Director-General and continued consideration of this issue. Although option 6 (a single candidate to be submitted to the Board on the basis of regional rotation) was preferable to many members of the Committee as the best way to redress the current imbalance in the selection process, the Committee agreed that option 4 (a shortlist constituted of one candidate from each Region) would be the most viable.

7. Members of the Regional Committee for Europe considered that the personal and professional qualifications of the candidate should be the primary consideration in the selection of the Director General and therefore expressed their preference for option 1, namely, maintaining the current system of nomination. They also stressed the need for a detailed analysis of the possible political and legal implications of introducing the principle of geographical rotation, in order to give the Executive Board a clear understanding of the implications of such a decision (which would constitute a precedent) in the wider United Nations context.

8. The question of regional rotation of the post of Director-General was discussed at an informal meeting of representatives of Member States of the Western Pacific Region, the outcome of which was reported to the Regional Committee by its Chairperson. The Committee agreed that the current system worked well and should not be changed, and that regional rotation would distort the overall process and might turn the position of Director-General into a regional rather than a global one. The Committee requested the Regional Director to report the views of the Region, and its preference for maintaining the status quo, to the Executive Board.

9. At its 124th session in January 2009, the Board decided not to discuss this item again, but rather to include it in the provisional agenda of the Sixty-second World Health Assembly in order to allow for a broader and more inclusive discussion.<sup>1</sup>

10. In May 2009, the Sixty-second World Health Assembly decided to postpone consideration of the item to the present Health Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See document EB124/2009/REC/2, summary record of the first meeting, section 1.

<sup>2</sup> See document WHA62/2009/REC/3, summary record of the first meeting of the General Committee, section 1; and document WHA62/2009/REC/2, verbatim record of the second plenary meeting, section 2.