Lunch & Learn: Roundtable Chat with UNAIDS Founding Director Dr. Peter Piot

“Imagine we’re all in a living room...there’s a fire...it’s cozy...we’re having a ‘fireside chat’...” Julio Frenk, Dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, set the stage for the lunchtime conversation with Dr. Peter Piot on February 28, 2013 at the Harvard Global Health Institute. The lunch was held as part of the Institute’s Forum on Global Governance for Health co-chaired by Dean Julio Frenk and Dr. Suerie Moon. Dr. Piot, currently Director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, was the founding Director of UNAIDS, the United Nations body created to address the global HIV/AIDS crisis. He led the organization from 1995 to 2008. UNAIDS is often regarded as a frontrunner for institutional innovation within the UN system, many of its novel elements established by Dr. Piot.

Surrounded by a packed audience of nearly fifty faculty, students, and researchers, Dr. Piot described how UNAIDS grew out of a general dissatisfaction with the World Health Organization (WHO) in a time of declining resources for international development and health and pressure from civil society around the HIV/AIDS crisis. One challenge he faced was the problem of accountability — should the organization be accountable to the UN member states or to the populations directly? Populations, he insisted; “Nothing for the people without the people.”

Sharing lessons learned, Dr. Piot emphasized three points. First, he pointed to the value of research and a strong evidence base for action. Second, he noted the necessity of separating functions to avoid “mission creep” at the highest level - for example, separating the roles of stewardship, financing, and delivery. And third, he emphasized the power of a passionate coalition made up of civil society to move forward a social agenda.

Piot applied friendly subversion to address the debates over intellectual property and access to medicines, an ongoing battle in the response to HIV/AIDS. How do you get essential drugs to those who can’t pay while continuing to incentivize the pharmaceutical industry to invest in research and development? Collecting evidence to support the need for — and feasibility of — providing effective HIV/AIDS treatment to poor populations, he tag-teamed with activist groups to “create chaos and destabilize” in order to put pressure on the pharmaceutical industry. He would corner CEOs at the World Economic Forum, asking, “Would you rather be like the tobacco industry or be heroes?”

AIDS, tobacco, and breast cancer offer three model campaigns, “and two of those leading voices are in this room,” he smiled, nodding to conversation partners Allan M. Brandt and Felicia Knaul. Professor Brandt, former Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Photos by Christen Reardon
Lunch & Learn: Conversation with Philosopher Thomas Pogge

Professor Thomas Pogge, Director of the Global Justice Program at Yale University, and Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs at Yale, will visit the Harvard Global Health Institute on Thursday, April 4, 2013, for an informal “Lunch & Learn” conversation with interested Harvard students, faculty and staff. Watch for further information coming soon.

While tobacco offers a model for activism and stronger global governance for health, Piot distinguished between the tobacco industry, “which we have zero need for,” and the food and pharmaceutical industries. We need to create proper incentives, he said, for industry to invest in and create policies that promote health.

The audience had plenty of tough questions for him. What would the world look like if there was a UNAIDS for every disease or social cause that needs attention? If you were Director-General of WHO tomorrow, how would you reform WHO? Pluralism, Dr. Piot replied, is something we must accept in today’s world. One solution could be a hybrid system with a few core institutions surrounded by ad-hoc coalitions that exist for 5 or 10 years to fulfill a specific mission. WHO may not lend itself to true innovation and reform due to its rigid member state structure, but it should focus its energy, he said, on the function of stewardship, build the evidence base needed to inform policy, and create global public goods that can be dispersed widely. For example, “What’s next after the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control?” he asked. Dr. Piot’s visit directly followed a two-day conference at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study on Governance of Tobacco in the 21st Century: Strengthening National and International Policy for Global Health and Development.

Dean Frenk closed the conversation by underscoring the need for stewardship and the importance of global public goods. WHO’s “International Classification of Diseases,” for example, gives us a common language for global public health. Our world, he summarized, is paradoxically more integrated and yet more fragmented; what we need is “networked pluralism at the global level.”