

Candidate for UN health chief eyes global tax to help WHO

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French diplomat competing to be the world's top health official, Philippe Douste-Blazy, addresses the media during a press conference held in Paris, France, Wednesday, May 18, 2016. Philippe Douste-Blazy, says a global tax can help fill the World Health Organization's coffers. (AP Photo/Michel Euler)

A French diplomat competing to be the world's top health official says a tiny international tax can help fill the World Health Organization's

coffers, a proposal aimed at bringing order to the U.N. agency's fragmented budget.

Dr. Philippe Douste-Blazy told journalists at the Foreign Ministry in Paris that "micropayments" tacked on to as-yet-undetermined international business operations could support WHO's budget.

"I'm persuaded that innovative financing can play a role in the support of WHO," he said.

Douste-Blazy's proposal may sound unusual but it isn't unprecedented. UNITAID, a group Douste-Blazy chairs, is partly funded through an air ticket levy imposed in 10 countries, including South Korea and France. The organization uses the money to champion the development of cheaper drugs for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

WHO could use an outside source of cash. The U.N. health agency faces chronic funding problems even as viruses spread faster in an ever-more-connected world. Because three-quarters of its budget can only be spent according to its donors' dictates, academics and health experts say the organization lacks the financial flexibility it needs to set its own priorities.

Douste-Blazy, a cardiologist who once served as France's foreign minister, declined to be drawn Wednesday as to what exactly would be taxed.

WHO's director-general will be chosen at the group's World Health Assembly next May. Douste-Blazy is one of several candidates in the running to replace Dr. Margaret Chan, who has led the agency since 2006.

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