In this book, Chelsea Clinton and Devi Sridhar map out the tensions in public health provision in many parts of the world. They use a novel version of principal-agent theory casing governments as the principals that seek to direct agents such as NGOs and other actors. Given the current debates around healthcare in the United States and the general awareness around issues of public health globally – the words Ebola and cholera and Zika say a lot – this book is a timely read.

The data they have marshalled in Governing Global Health is quite impressive both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective and they offer a good theoretical base to understand the arguments made. They point out rightly that public health issues are global in scope and increasingly go beyond national borders. Addressing the consequences for effective prevention and control means that there has recently been an increased involvement of NGOs, foundations and the private sector.

Philanthropy, in the form of support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – a behemoth in this field – and from other funders is also part of the focus of this book. This particular angle makes it especially interesting. The authors offer a compelling case for examining the governance mechanisms involved. As they point out “To really understand institutions means delving into how they are governed, how they make decisions and how they are financed.” They follow this observation by examining four large institutions that govern, and also ‘manage,’ public health globally: the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS. These global organizations are subject to a close scrutiny in terms of how they interact with each other, with national governments, and with non-governmental funders.

Critical theorists may find this book particularly interesting given its close examination of how financing sets agendas, affects priorities, and shapes decisions. It also points to evidence that increased funding for certain programs may bring about a reduction in governmental funding in the receiving jurisdictions. A focus on North-South relations is also a key component at present; while not discussed in a lot of depth, they note there has been an increased focus on global collaborative networks and this book adds to that literature.

With the increased focus on pandemics such as Zika and interconnectedness of public health issues, American audiences are likely to read and hear more about public health governance. This book makes a good, solid contribution not only to debating the key issues from an academic perspective, but also to providing a lay reader a good research-based framework to understand the theoretical and practical issues at hand.

Citation by Sabith Khan