



SOUTH CENTRE GENERAL STATEMENT TO THE SEVENTY-FOURTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

May 2021

It is undeniable that despite solemn declarations, there has been no effective global coordinated action in the fight against COVID 19. International solidarity has been proclaimed but not practiced by all members of the international community. The inequality in the access to the tools necessary to respond to the pandemic -which should have been considered global common goods- will remain as one of the major policy and moral failures of the 21th century.

One year ago, the WHO and other partners launched the ACT Accelerator to advance global access to tests, equipment, treatments, vaccines and related technologies based on voluntary cooperation. Two of its mechanisms, the COVAX facility and the C-TAP, have so far failed to address the pervasive inequity in access to those products and technologies. On average, in high-income countries almost one in four people have received a COVID-19 vaccine. In low-income countries, it's one in more than 500. The pool set up for sharing intellectual property has been ignored by technology holders.

Reviews of the Covid-19 response were carried out at the WHO by the International Health Regulations (IHR) Review Committee (IRC) and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee (IOAC) for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme. An Independent Panel was also established on Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPR) with the mandate of impartially assessing the effectiveness of the mechanisms at WHO's disposal, the functioning of the International IHR (2005), WHO's contribution to United Nations-wide efforts and the actions of the WHO and their timelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to these three processes, a new initiative has recently been launched by 25 Heads of States, the European Council and the WHO Director General, pursuant to which a proposal has already been submitted for a decision to start negotiations on a 'pandemic treaty' in the WHO. The draft decision invokes Rules 41 and 86 of the WHA Rules of Procedure to establish an intergovernmental meeting (IGM) to prepare and negotiate a WHO framework convention on pandemic preparedness and response (to be adopted under Article 19 of the WHO Constitution).

On the other hand, at the World Trade Organization (WTO) India and South Africa with the support of more than 100 countries, have proposed a temporary waiver with regard to the obligations relating to intellectual property concerning the products needed to address the COVID 19 pandemic. Moreover, a proposal for a General Council Declaration on Trade and Health 'Covid-19 And Beyond' has been submitted to the WTO.

All the above initiatives and processes are interdependent and, in some respects, overlapping. Advancing on one of them without considering the others may result in contradictory or inconsistent outcomes.

In order for an orchestra to properly play, all performers must follow a musical score. Within the WHO a chief of the orchestra is needed: let the WHO Director General play this role under the direction of the Member States for all the instruments to play in harmony. Effective coordination is needed, in addition, to ensure consistency with the initiatives taken in other fora, notably the WTO.

This 74th WHA provides the opportunity to review the findings and recommendations of the referred to committees and panel, assess the effectiveness of the mechanisms put in place in response to the COVID 19, and consolidate the emerging proposals, including on the idea of starting the negotiation of a possible new pandemic treaty.

But time is of the essence in combatting a pandemic; negotiations should not further delay a solution to the current undersupply of vaccines.

It is vital to find global solutions as soon as possible and to prevent more suffering and losses that will make fully unrealistic the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 for many countries. It is also necessary to better prepare the world to respond to future pandemics. A multilateral coherent action, grounded on the ongoing processes and on the lessons learned in navigating the COVID 19 pandemic, should allow the Members States to strengthen the WHO's capacity in performing its core mandate guided by the global public interest.