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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Telegram

Weekly overview of developments in multilateral Geneva on COVID-19 (17.4.-29.4.)

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The „Geneva Telegram“ analyses current developments in the multilateral organizations in Geneva relative to current events. During these weeks, it focuses on developments in the Geneva-based organizations related to COVID-19. The pandemic does not only have a health dimension but also substantial consequences for the future of the global economy, world trade, work, flight and migration, the humanitarian sector and human rights. It also affects the multilateral system as a whole.

In the past two weeks, there were several encouraging multilateral efforts to fight the pandemic. A global initiative, led by the World Health Organization (WHO) to accelerate the development, production and equitable distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics deserves particular attention. However, there were also various sobering examples for the limited readiness to cooperate and respect agreed-upon global norms.

WHO – Launch of an unprecedented effort of multilateral cooperation

On April 24 2020 – right on the International Day of Multilateralism – an unprecedented global, multilateral collaboration under the leadership of the WHO was launched virtually: the COVID-19 ACT Accelerator. The initiative brings together world leaders, the private sector, scientific and humanitarian actors, business leaders and other partners to accelerate the development, production and equitable distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics for COVID-19. One of the commitments is to ensure the availability of a vaccine for all countries.

This coalition brings together the world's leading health and development organizations and philanthropies: WHO in partnership with the *Vaccine Alliance Gavi*, the *Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness (CEPI)*, the *Global Fund*, *Unitaid*, the *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC)*, the *Wellcome Trust*, *International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers*

(IFPMA). The challenge this coalition is facing is huge: Dr Seth Berkeley, CEO of GAVI, made clear that in order to defeat this pandemic with a vaccine, it means ‘to devise and deliver a vaccine programme to get billions of doses out at a speed and scale never before contemplated let alone achieved. According to Berkeley, this would be the most rapid vaccine deployment in history. While a vaccine would be the best answer, there is still no vaccine against HIV, Tuberculosis or Malaria despite huge efforts. Peter Sands, the Executive Director of the *Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria* drew attention to the importance that with diagnostics, therapeutics and prophylactics massive reductions in mortality can be achieved.

The enormous undertaking of the COVID-19 ACT Accelerator becomes clear, when looking at the chain of developing new tools, to ensuring that the people in need will actually receive them, to the delivery within a respective system of care. This requires money, infrastructure and capacities. Everyone engaged in this fight and above all the leadership of the communities that are most affected will be needed.

The launch with live speeches of 15 Heads of State and Heads of Political Institutions, who will co-host the ACT Accelerator, demonstrated a remarkable degree of global leadership. Emmanuel Macron, Dr Ursula von Der Leyen, Angela Merkel and Melinda Gates together with António

Guterres and many more demonstrated their clear commitment, support, respect and commendation for the WHO and their 'excellent stewardship' in the fight against COVID-19 – a strong political signal after the heavy criticism the WHO has received particularly but not exclusively from the United States.

The European Commission equally demonstrated leadership in the framework of this initiative: a global pledging effort on May 4 to raise US\$ 8 billion, hosted by the European Commission, 'to ramp up work on prevention, diagnostics and treatment.' Commission President von der Leyen emphasized 'that more would be needed in the future because beating coronavirus would require sustained actions on many fronts'. Also with the support of the G20, about US\$ 2 billion have been pledged, which leaves a gap of about US\$ 6 billion. The G20 will continue reinforcing the global co-operation on all fronts. The German chancellor Angela Merkel announced Germany's commitment to provide a substantial contribution to the financial need of US\$ 8 billion and continue to support and promote this initiative with all its resources and power available.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres stressed that 'human health was a quintessential global public good. Guterres emphasized that a world free of COVID-19 'requires the most massive public health effort in history. Data needs to be shared, production capacity prepared, resources mobilized, communities engaged and politics set aside. For too long, countries have undervalued and underinvested in global public goods; a clean environment, cybersecurity and peace.'

In order to deal with future pandemics effectively, more investment in strengthening preparedness and response systems is needed. Going forward, the multilateral architecture needs to be strengthened and enabled to respond faster and more effectively. Several political leaders highlighted the responsibility of political leaders to promote good governance, transparency and mutual accountability - in the spirit of effective multilateralism. They underscored that the role of the UN and the central role of the WHO remain one of the strongest modalities to curb this pandemic to reach everyone everywhere in the shortest time possible. Several Heads of State

and Government emphasized the need of a collaborative approach. The magnitude of investment needed, the risks attached, the fear of regulatory and market change are all real obstacles in the quest for a vaccine. Partnerships can be the only solution.

The WHO not only mastered an enormous effort to launch the COVID-19 ACT Accelerator, but also - among many other things - published several guidelines within the last two weeks. Especially the guidance on considerations in adjusting public health and social measures¹ is worth mentioning, as especially in Western Europe most numbers of new infections are stable or declining. WHO Director-General Tedros emphasized that 'easing measures should be a gradual process; it will not be the end of the epidemic in any country. Countries should ensure they can detect, test, isolate and care for every case and trace every contact. So far, "no single country has everything in place" underlined Tedros.

One of WHO's priorities is to work with partners to increase the production and equitable distribution of diagnostics to the countries that need them most. In collaboration with the Global Fund, UNICEF and Unitaid - 30 million tests that have been validated and can be manufactured in large quantities, were ordered. The first shipments of these tests have just begun through the UN supply chain. In addition, shipments of almost 180 million surgical masks, 54 million N-95 masks and more than three million protective goggles are reaching more than 40 countries throughout April and May.

Human rights – crisis beyond the pandemic

Already at the beginning of the 43rd Session of the Human Rights Council in February in Geneva, UN Secretary-General António Guterres had pointed out that the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law as well as for refugee law demonstrably increases the resilience of societies, especially in times of crisis². His

¹ https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/covid-strategy-update-14april2020.pdf?sfvrsn=29da3ba0_6

² The Call to Action by UN Secretary-General is available [here](#)

latest report on human rights and COVID-19³ reflects the statements of numerous UN agencies and special rapporteurs in Geneva over the past few weeks, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): effective measures to protect livelihoods rank first considering that half a billion people could fall into poverty through the loss of 305 million full-time jobs (estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO)). If political changes are not taken to put basic social and economic rights at center-stage, tensions will rise and civil unrest could be provoked.

Although the virus does not discriminate, its impacts do. Hence, inclusive responses are key to protect ethnic and religious minorities, the elderly, migrants, refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers, native people, people with disabilities, prisoners or LGBTI from discrimination, physical violence or restrictions in accessing public services. States, all religious leaders and faith actors should step up to counter the new flare-up of religious intolerance, the increase in anti-Semitism, the incitement to hatred or violence online as well as offline through appropriate legislation, accurate information and the promotion of social inclusion and solidarity, not least with the help of social media companies.

In addition, the participation of those affected in open, transparent and accountable decision-making processes is essential. Special rapporteurs and independent experts repeatedly emphasized the importance to ensure women's equal representation in formulating responses to COVID-19 as pre-existing gender inequalities and deep-rooted discrimination are currently on the rise. Detailed guidance has been provided to remind governments of the importance of existing conventions⁴.

As inclusion is enabled largely with the help of accurate reporting, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has been alarmed given the rapidly growing number of currently 152 cases of media censorship, closings

of news outlets, arrests and enforced disappearances of journalists. The threat is the virus, not the people. Guterres, Bachelet and numerous special rapporteurs advocated to uphold the rule of law and demonstrate restraint. New guidelines were designed to prevent the misuse of emergency powers and to guarantee functioning and independent judicial systems⁵. If people that break curfews because they are desperately searching for food continue to be shot, detained or abused, the public health emergency risks will become a human rights disaster, with negative effects that will long outlast the pandemic itself, said Bachelet. In terms of abuse of emergency powers, South Africa, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Jordan and China, have been highlighted by Georgette Gagnon, OHCHR Director of Field Operations in a press conference on Monday.

Averting long-term damage to human and refugee rights

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, sees the fundamental norms of refugee and human rights law are at risk. Given that an estimated 167 countries have fully or partially closed their borders of which at least 57 states are making no exception for people seeking asylum, he underlined that securing public health and protecting refugees are — literally — not mutually exclusive. Among others, medical screenings at borders, health certification or temporary quarantine upon arrival are possible, said Pascale Moreau, Regional Director for Europe at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a report on good practices and recommendations⁶. Grandi stressed that measures adopted now can either increase resilience of the asylum system as a whole or undermine human rights norms and refugee law in ways that could take years to rebuild.

Famine of biblical proportions within a few months possible

On 19 April, the heads of all major UN organizations and agencies, ranging from OHCHR, UN-

³ The new UN report on COVID-19 and human rights is available [here](#)

⁴ One example is CEDAW, the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#), which has been ratified by 198 states worldwide.

⁵ The new guidelines on emergency measures are available [here](#) and on independent judicial systems [here](#)

⁶ The report is available [here](#)

HCR, WHO over the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to the IFRC, issued an urgent call for US\$ 350 million to enhance a global logistics system, which is operated by the World Food Program (WFP) that currently serves as the backbone of all humanitarian efforts worldwide. The open letter included a graphic warning that without these international hubs, the global response could stutter to a halt. A look at the numbers gives an insight into the fatal consequences: Even before COVID-19 emerged, 2020 was expected to be the year of the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II: Adding to the already existing 821 million people that are chronically hungry, 135 million more were expected to walk towards the brink of starvation⁷. COVID-19 could now double this number to a total of 265 million people at the brink of starvation with famine looming in about three dozen countries. Also, food security forecasts for 2020 are bleak, according to Qu Dongyu, director of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Humanitarian organizations are mobilized to a degree not seen since founding of the UN. However, a global ceasefire, unimpeded humanitarian access, the maintenance of supply chains and rapid financial support, which includes funding that has already been pledged and support for the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) that requested US\$ 2 billion is key. Despite the appeal one month ago, only US\$ 625 million have been pledged so far, of which US\$ 95 million were released from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to kick-start the COVID-19 response.

Trade – dangers through short- and long term economic nationalism

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is increasingly struggling against growing economic nationalism and protectionism of many of its members. Contrary to solemn declarations of many countries, export restrictions have been introduced for critical medical goods and foodstuff. At the same time, the WTO worries over growing protectionist tendencies – which had partly already been there before the crisis.

On 20 April, Dr Tedros and WTO Director-General Roberto Azevêdo issued a joint statement urging member states to ensure the normal cross-border flow of vital medical supplies. Disruptions in the trade flow of critical goods could have fatal consequences.

Every measure should therefore be targeted, proportionate, transparent and temporary⁸. Particularly the lack of transparency has become a major issue: In a report published on 23 April 2020 the WTO demonstrated that according to its information 80 countries or territories have introduced – mostly temporary – export prohibitions and restrictions, among them 72 WTO members⁹. However, only 39 of them have notified the introduction of new measures appropriately. Most of the measures target medical supplies, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, but also foodstuff and toilet paper.

In this context, an initiative by Canada, joined by roughly 50 WTO members – i.a. the EU, the US, Brazil, Australia and Ukraine – deserves attention: In a joint declaration, they pledged to resist food-related export restrictions in order to ensure well-functioning global agriculture and food supply chains¹⁰.

Two days later, WTO Director-General Robert Azevêdo together with IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva urged member states to renounce on export restrictions for critical medical supplies and foodstuff. Such measures could seriously impede the fight against the pandemic.

Regarding the mid- and long-term evolution, the WTO fears that protectionist tendencies in the member states could lead to a delayed second economic shock. In the past weeks, the WHO has regularly issued warnings of the costs which a nationalization or a regionalization of supply chains may cause. No country, as Azevêdo has argued repeatedly, is self-reliant.

Global Economy & Social Affairs

Given the loosening of some of the restrictive measures in several countries, the ILO has urged for comprehensive measures to protect employ-

⁷ See more details in the "[Global Report on Food Crises \(GRFC\)](#)"

⁸ The statement can be found [here](#).

⁹ EU members are counted separately

¹⁰ The statement can be found [here](#)

ees¹¹: This includes risk-control measures at the workplace, providing personal protective equipment, isolating suspected-cases and contract-tracing as well as providing training, education and informational material.

At the same time, the ILO's predictions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on global employment keeps getting gloomier. In the second quarter of 2020, a reduction of working hours by 10,5% has been forecasted. Furthermore, the informal sector is predicted to be hit particularly hard. The first month of the crisis has led to a dramatic decrease of 60% in income in this sector.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) equally highlights the dramatic economic costs for developing countries and demands a "global debt deal". This would include a temporary standstill of debt payments, debt relief and restructuring programmes and the creation of an "International Developing Country Debt Authority"¹². This echoes the calls by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) that has called on global leaders to relieve financial burden of developing countries.

Climate – COVID-effect likely to be merely temporary

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) expects a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 6% due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This would be the biggest yearly drop since World War II. However, the effect is expected to remain temporary; as soon as the economy recovers, emissions are expected to rise again and might even do so above average. CO₂-emissions have reached a new peak in the past five years¹³.

Commentary – Multilateralism between hope and disenchantment

There have been promising signals for multilateralism in the past two weeks: WHO in particular

can relax a bit after it faced harsh criticism over its work in the past weeks. Also, the demonstrative political backing, not least by the German Government and through a declaration launched by the Alliance for Multilateralism, was an important signal of support for its work. Particularly important for its credibility: the support not only came from autocratic countries such as China and Russia, but also from numerous heavy-weights of the Global West. The global "ACT Accelerator" initiative also deserves special attention. It is probably one of the greatest efforts to date to bring to life the often neglected goal 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), "Strengthening global partnerships". Hopefully, the initiative, which brings together leading Heads of State, organizations and experts in the struggle to ensure "health for all", will finally meet the expectations. By doing so it would breathe some life into the mantra of recent years that called for "leaving no-one behind". Positive examples of multilateral cooperation can also be found in other organizations, such as the Canadian initiative at the WTO to hold back on export restrictions for food.

However, there is little reason for excessive enthusiasm. Despite all the solemn statements made on the International Day of Multilateralism (24 April), many appeals for a stronger commitment for global public goods will remain wishful thinking: Neither the U.S. nor China took part in the global ACT Initiative. The geopolitical climate between the two countries is increasingly poisoned. A political or financial withdrawal of the U.S. from multilateral organizations can hardly be compensated for, despite all the honest efforts, i.a. by Germany, France, Great Britain, Canada or Singapore in the context of the current crisis.

Similarly, the appeals in the humanitarian and human rights fields have so far mostly gone unheard, or – like the call for a global ceasefires – have barely evoked much response. The response to the various (seemingly too ambitious) calls for donations or funding from various UN organizations, including the "Global Humanitarian Response Plan", has so far been modest at best. Given the severe economic cuts in almost every country, this is hardly surprising.

¹¹ An overview can be found [here](#).

¹²

https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/gdsinf2020d3_en.pdf

¹³

https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10251

Calls and declarations do not always translate into action, as the WTO currently learns with respect to the introduction of numerous unreported trade restrictions by its member states.

Many multilateral organizations in Geneva, such as the WHO or the WTO ultimately find themselves in a paradoxical situation: in many ways, the global crisis is a strong argument both for appropriate financial support as well as for

strengthening their mandates (including stronger rights to intervene). The general political climate and the onset of recession could, however, mean that they will at the end obtain neither one nor the other.

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