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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Barometer

Developments in the Geneva International Organisations mid-July – mid-October

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The “Geneva Barometer” takes an occasional look at selected developments in the international organisations based in Geneva.

The fight against COVID-19 has remained the most important – but by no means the only – issue in multilateral Geneva in recent months. At the WTO, much of the last few months has revolved around the selection process for a successor to resigned WTO Director-General Azevêdo. In the Human Rights Council, Germany and its allies have chalked up some significant successes, although the composition of the body from next year onwards promises a harsher climate.

Efforts to ensure global access to a COVID-19 vaccine

In recent months, efforts to provide global access to a future vaccine have started to take shape: The COVAX facility, led by the Gavi Vaccine Alliance, WHO and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness (CEPI), in which over 170 countries are involved, aims to contribute to the production and equitable distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine worldwide. It aims to provide access to vaccine doses primarily to the 92 lower-income nations, while the 80 higher-income, self-financing countries will also benefit from guaranteed vaccine doses. Eight economies that are not UN members, including Taiwan, are also supporting the initiative¹. Germany has joined COVAX via the EU. The USA and Russia are not participating as yet. However, China joined last week after all, despite a long period of indecision. More than half of the US\$1.8 billion budget is being borne by six nations alone (United Kingdom, Canada, Germany,

Italy, Japan and Sweden). The declared aim is to distribute two billion doses of vaccine by the end of 2021. The distribution mechanism is divided into two basic phases. In the first phase, each state will first receive vaccine doses to cover 3% of its population – including, for instance, people working in the healthcare system. In the next step, further doses of vaccine are distributed so that states can protect a total of 20% of their population, and thereby high-risk groups. Thus, in Phase 1, all states will be considered on an equal footing. In Phase 2, however, countries exposed to a higher risk will be given priority for additional doses of vaccine. In addition to this distribution mechanism among states, there is a “humanitarian buffer”, i.e. 5% of the vaccine doses are to be hoarded and used for acute outbreaks and for humanitarian organisations to treat particularly vulnerable groups (e.g. refugees)².

WHO: Reform debate begins

Increasingly, the lessons to be learned from the pandemic are coming to the fore for the WHO and the crisis response of its member states. Already in August, Germany and France had presented a reform paper with far-reaching reform proposals aimed at strengthening the WHO, its mandate and its crisis response capacity – but also its financial basis. Among other things, the paper calls for an increase in the fixed contributions of the member states to the WHO, a graduated alert mechanism for international health emergencies, stronger monitoring rights and

¹ WHO: Fair allocation mechanism for COVID-19 vaccines through the COVAX Facility. 09/09/2020, More over [here](#).

² A list of these countries can be found [here](#).

better access to information for the WHO. Other countries as well, including the UK, Chile, Korea and the US, had also made proposals for reform. A discussion of the lessons learnt from the crisis was also on the agenda of the special session of the WHO Executive Board (which includes Germany) on 5–6 October. Several papers and initiatives came up for discussion right away. The report of the WHO's Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Emergency Response Programme (IOAC) warned, among other things, that the "politicisation" of the virus had made the crisis response considerably more difficult³. A so-called Independent Panel (IPPR) established in July is to draw lessons from the COVID crisis as well as derive consequences for future global health crises. The high-level panel is being chaired by former Prime Ministers Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) and Helen Clark (New Zealand). A first meeting was held in September and a progress report is due in November, with the final report to be presented at the next World Health Assembly (24 May – 1 June). A third committee (Review Committee on the Functioning of the International Health Regulations) chaired by the President of the Robert Koch Institute, Lothar Wieler, will review the role and enforcement of the International Health Regulations (IHR) in the context of the crisis and will likewise present its report in May 2021.

The discussions at the WHO Executive Board meeting were business-like. Particularly noteworthy: the US representative spoke constructively and cautiously praised the steps taken so far in dealing with the crisis. This stood in sharp contrast to the harsh criticism that came out of the White House in the summer towards the WHO, ultimately culminating in the US administration's initiation of a withdrawal process.

Basically there's hardly a single member state that questions the need for WHO reform, particularly its crisis response mechanisms. However, opinions differ widely as to how far this should go: demands to strengthen WHO sanctioning or monitoring mechanisms and to increase the compulsory contributions of the member states aren't proving particularly popular. On the other hand, the idea of a traffic light system for the

crisis alert system is getting support, as is the so-called peer review of member states proposed by the African Union. Many of these reform proposals are well known. According to observers, the real challenge is to mobilise the political will among the member states.

In September, the WHO confirmed the first rapid test that can detect an acute COVID-19 infection within 15–30 minutes. Such a test could allow lower-income countries without developed laboratory infrastructures to increase their testing capacity. With the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among others, 120 million such tests will be available in the next six months at a maximum cost of five US dollars⁴.

The WHO also published various recommendations, including on measures in schools. Opening up schools is a priority in terms of children's long-term health. School closures should only be considered as a last resort.

On 12 October, the WHO also reiterated its scepticism about the concept of herd immunity as a strategy against COVID-19. It said this was scientifically and ethically problematic – herd immunity could only be achieved in combination with protective vaccinations. Moreover, immunity and the long-term effects of COVID-19 have not yet been sufficiently researched.

An additional challenge for the WHO since June is the eleventh Ebola outbreak: in Equateur Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was only on 25 June that the tenth outbreak – in the eastern regions of North Kivu and Ituri – could be halted. It had been ongoing since 2018 and was the largest in the country and the second largest in the world, with over 2000 deaths. On 1 September, the WHO classified the region as a high risk area. Based on the experience of previous outbreaks, the WHO is counting on the increased involvement of the local population. Creating concern is the sometimes difficult accessibility of the isolated areas and the risk of the virus spreading to neighbouring countries. It's also questionable to what extent the health system can absorb a new Ebola outbreak parallel to the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

⁴ Further information can be found [here](#).

WTO – The race over the succession enters its final phase

The position of WTO Director General has been vacant since 31 August, following Director-General Roberto Azevêdo announcing his resignation in May. In several stages, the process, which has been ongoing since the beginning of June, has reduced the number of candidates from the initial eight to just two⁵: Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Nigeria) and Yoo Myung-hee (Republic of Korea). This means that a woman will probably take over the leadership of the WTO for the first time.

It had been generally expected that neither of the two remaining male candidates, Liam Fox (UK) and Mohammad Maziad Al-Tuwaijri (Saudi Arabia), would make it to the final round. It seemed more open, however, as to which of the three candidates (in addition to the two above, Amina Mohamed from Kenya) would make it to the final selection round. In the run-up, expert observers had assumed that the final round would not result in a confrontation between the two African candidates. The two finalists are considered strong candidates, albeit with very different profiles. Okonjo-Iweala has no WTO background, but as a minister she has earned a reputation as a bold reformer. This was apparently well-received by many member states, who are hoping for fundamental reforms of the struggling WTO. At the same time, the current chairperson of the Gavi Vaccination Alliance stresses that she is the candidate with the strongest expertise at the interface between business and health. Yoo Myung-hee, on the other hand, emphasises above all her experience as a mediator; she herself had led the talks on several important trade agreements for her country.

The duo had also been preferred by the EU; some EU countries are known to favour Okonjo-Iweala. At the beginning of the selection process, the US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer postulated that the future Director-General would have to advocate, among other things, for a fundamental reform of the WTO and not display a “whiff of anti-Americanism”. Both candidates seem to fulfil

these criteria. Neither Okonjo-Iweala nor Myung-hee is probably a dream appointment from China’s point of view, but they are at least acceptable. From Beijing’s perspective, one argument against the Korean candidate could be that she would probably not be able to hold the important position of Deputy Director-General. It also remains to be seen whether Japanese-Korean discord in the trade sector, which has recently become apparent, will have an impact on the appointment of a candidate. Forecasts regarding the prospects of the two candidates should nevertheless be treated with caution: ultimately, observers believe that the complex selection process is a combination of the papal election and the Eurovision Song Contest⁶.

The final week-long phase of the consultation process is scheduled to start on 19 October and last until the 27th, with the aim of finding a consensus by early November. Whether an agreement can be reached by then remains to be seen, not least because of the US elections. In theory, in the absence of unanimity, there would be the possibility of a majority vote. However, this would be a first – and the biggest headache imaginable for the new leadership as well. Finally, even after a successful start in office, the future Director-General will continue to depend on the willingness of all member states to cooperate. The main challenges: reform of the currently dysfunctional dispute settlement system, revitalising the negotiating function and preparing key negotiation dossiers for the important WTO Ministerial Conference in 2021.

Away from international attention, progress has been made in establishing an interim appeal arbitration arrangement (MPIA). This was agreed by 19 WTO members, including the EU and China, in view of the stalemate regarding the actual WTO Appellate Body since December 2019. At the end of July, 10 members were appointed to the new mechanism. However, the body isn’t expected to deal with specific cases until next year.

Meanwhile, discussions on limiting fisheries subsidies and other negotiation dossiers are progressing, if only slowly. They are being held back

⁵ Some background on the candidate race and developments up till the end of September can be found [here](#).

⁶ Find out more [here](#).

by the attitude of some member states that talking virtually or in a hybrid fashion is possible, but negotiating isn't. Controversial discussions in the TRIPS Council (responsible for intellectual property issues) were, on the other hand, sparked by a very far-reaching initiative by India and South Africa aimed at removing copyright protection for a very-wide ranging list of health products needed in the fight against COVID-19.

The WTO arbitration ruling on the Boeing case on 13 October equally received attention: because of illegal subsidies to the US aircraft manufacturer, the EU can now impose punitive duties on US imports of €3.4 billion a year. With that said, the arbitrator's ruling fell short of the EU side's demands.

Human Rights Council

After COVID-19 was used by some member states at the beginning of the year as a pretext to limit the Human Rights Council's ability to act – for instance by cleverly playing with the rules of procedure – hardly anyone questioned the hybrid meeting form in September. Numerous resolutions were adopted and mandates for Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Investigative Mechanisms, such as on Burundi, Yemen or Venezuela, were extended. However, the practical implementation of some of these mandates is likely to drag on for quite some time. While the UN has been in a liquidity crisis for some time now, many member states are either taking a long time to make payments this year, or aren't making any payments at all – partly because of COVID. So far, only 60% of the normal budget has been received. Above all, this is a bitter blow for the Special Procedures, repeatedly referred to as the “eyes and ears” of the Human Rights Council, which sought to make a contribution to human rights-based policies with their guidelines and recommendations. In addition, there have been increasing attempts to block their work, for example by accusing them of not complying with the existing code of conduct. In view of her work on the cases of Jamal Khashoggi and the poisoned Kremlin critic Alexej Nawalny, Agnès Callamard, Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, is currently

caught in a crossfire of criticism, especially from authoritarian states.

The September Council focused on a number of country situations that would hardly have made it onto the Council's agenda just a few years ago, even though observers continue to criticise the lack of focus on, e.g. China, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. On the situation in Belarus, despite numerous attempts by Russia and Venezuela, among others, to change the agenda, an urgent debate could be held with the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, among others. The resolution tabled by Germany on behalf of the EU was successful⁷; 17 (!) Russian amendments were all rejected. Long unimaginable, the situation in Venezuela was also the focus of attention after the relatively young Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) presented its latest report and denounced crimes against humanity⁸. Saudi Arabia and Iran were also subjects of discussion through joint statements⁹. And – surprisingly – China withdrew its own resolution after a majority didn't seem assured.

However, the election of 15 new Council members¹⁰ for the period 2021–2023 indicates a shift in the balance of power in favour of authoritarian states, even if the election at the UN General Assembly in New York on 13 October held surprises in store. In the Asia-Pacific group, for example, China won the day, but only with a poor result, whilst Saudi Arabia missed out on a seat in the Council with only 90 votes. In the Eastern European group, however, Russia succeeds EU member Slovakia, and in the group of Latin American and Caribbean countries Cuba succeeds countries such as Chile or Peru. The candidates are determined by the respective regional groups, often without allowing for any other voting choices. However, the number of votes candidates ultimately receive also depends on the voting behaviour of the members of the General

⁷ The urgent debate on Belarus can be followed [here](#), the resolution can be found [here](#).

⁸ The report of the fact-finding mission on Venezuela can be found [here](#), the resolution under Item 4 [here](#).

⁹ The joint statement on Saudi Arabia and its supporters can be found [here](#), on Iran [here](#).

¹⁰ An overview of the Council's new composition can be found in the photo gallery.

Assembly. The most abstentions were recorded in the Western European group, for which France and the United Kingdom were admitted to the Council. A year with a relatively favourable composition of the council for the global West is thus drawing to a close.

No all-clear for humanitarian workers

In view of needs continuing to rise whilst financial resources are decreasing – so far only 28% of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 (GHRP)'s needs have been met – Mark Lowcock, Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), warned of overburdening. While just a few months ago the World Food Programme (WFP), recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, estimated that 135 million people were at risk of starvation, i.e. are suffering acute malnutrition, the latest figures show that, at 270 million people, twice as many people are being affected, particularly in Southern Sudan, Yemen, DR Congo, North-East Nigeria and the Sahel region. This is where the toxic link between wars, climate change, trade disruptions and COVID-19 has become particularly evident. Extreme poverty is thus rising again for the first time in three decades. At the same time, the first effects of the critical financial situation are also becoming apparent in Geneva: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is currently facing a wave of redundancies.

Small steps in mediation efforts with Syria, Libya and Yemen

The temporary easing of the epidemiological situation during the summer months allowed numerous delegates to enter Switzerland in order to continue negotiations that had already commenced. After an interruption of a good nine months, the Syrian Constitutional Committee met for the third time in Geneva at the end of August at the invitation of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen. However, after four delegates tested positive for COVID-19, all delegates were sent into quarantine and the talks were interrupted. According to Pedersen, in spite of “strong differences”, “substantial discussions” took place in a “respectful tone” after they resumed, which is

why he was cautiously positive about the round of negotiations. However, agreement on an agenda and a new date for continuing the talks has yet to be reached. Accordingly, observers are rating more sceptically the August talks and the chances of success of the process as such.

On the other hand, the progress of the intra-Libyan talks in Montreux in early September, which the UNSMIL sent out invitations to and which were held in parallel with talks in Bouznika (Morocco), was viewed more positively. Delegates of the internationally recognised government in Tripoli and representatives of the counter-government around General Khalifa Haftar reached a “comprehensive agreement on criteria and mechanisms” for reforming the executive (new Presidential Council and new government). Presidential and parliamentary elections are also to be held in 18 months at the latest. The resumption of direct talks between the conflicting parties was announced for early November.

According to the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffith, the conflicting parties in the Yemeni government around Mansour Hadi and Ansar Allah (Houthi Movement) also reached a “very important milestone” after two weeks of talks near Montreux. The parties agreed on a list of 1,081 prisoners, including Saudi nationals, to be released in a prisoner exchange mediated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. They also renewed their commitment to the gradual release of the remaining 16,000 prisoners. As a confidence-building measure, the parties had already agreed on this in the Stockholm Agreement at the end of 2018. This is the largest prisoner exchange since the beginning of the conflict.

Labour and social affairs

As the crisis continues, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is also revising its forecasts upwards: The loss of working hours in the second quarter reached 17.3%, the equivalent of 495 million full-time jobs, 100 million more than even in June this year. But the massive fiscal stimulus is also making itself felt, without which the loss would currently be 28%. Nevertheless, incomes worldwide fell by a total of US\$ 3.5 trillion. At the same time, best practices in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic for the world of work

are also crystallising and can be viewed in a specially created database per country¹¹.

UNDRR: Natural disasters doubled in the last 20 years

In the period 2000–2019, the number of natural disasters has almost doubled compared to the previous 20 years – a steep increase. This is the conclusion of the latest report by the Geneva-based UN Office for Disaster Reduction¹² (UNDRR), which identifies climate change as the main culprit. The total of 7,348 disasters cost 1.23 million lives and affected more than 4.2 billion people. Floods and storms particularly, but also droughts and wildfires cost the global economy almost US\$3 trillion. In the face of more frequent and increasingly interwoven disasters, UN Secretary-General Guterres and WHO Director-General Tedros called for strong international cooperation for more climate protection and risk management.

Flight and migration: Reactions to the new EU Commission package

In recent months, the two Geneva-based organisations, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have already approached the European Commission with recommendations for a new pact on migration and asylum¹³. According to IOM Secretary-General Vitorino, the package that has now been presented is a “remarkable start” and reflects the complexity of the issue. But questions of implementation in particular remain open. With regard to partnerships with third countries, he stressed the central role of human rights and the expansion of legal channels for migration. Although IOM and UNHCR repeatedly welcomed the position of EU Commission President von der Leyen that search and rescue at sea was not an option but a duty for the EU, there was an urgent need for action to enlarge the EU’s own capacities. Too little distinction has been made between channels for legal

labour migration and channels for international protection. However, the recognition of the reality that Europe needs migrants was welcome. Not least COVID-19 had shown that they were part of the solution, according to UN High Commissioner Filippo Grandi.

Comment: Urgent reforms and tight budgets

The crisis is bringing the issue of the financing of multilateral organisations increasingly into focus. Some are already chronically underfunded (such as the OHCHR) – not least because of the weak payment practices of many states. In others, the threat of a payment freeze is being used as a political instrument. Still others have to rely on voluntary contributions to such an extent that long-term planning and the adequate funding of prevention capacities is basically impossible. Accordingly, a debate on reforming international organisations cannot be discussed independently of the issue of financing. For example, strengthening the WHO and its crisis response capacity will not succeed without a significant increase in the compulsory contributions of the member states. In this context, the categorical rejection of an increase in contributions, even by those member states that can scarcely be considered among the developing countries anymore, is disconcerting – especially when one considers the relatively negligible size of their contributions. Moreover, as experienced observers rightly point out with regard to past crises, the window of opportunity for ambitious reforms is likely to close rapidly. Accordingly, the debate shouldn’t wait until after the World Health Assembly in May next year. Learning the right lessons from not just the WHO’s but also member states’ crisis response will be a key element in preparing for the next pandemic. Accordingly, it is to be hoped that the Evaluation Reports will not be talked to death for months and months after their presentation in May.

A ray of hope, however, seems to be the constructive position taken by the US during the discussions in the WHO Executive Board in October. A strong commitment from the US side to the WHO and a close transatlantic partnership in

¹¹ The database on best practices from different countries can be found [here](#).

¹² This report is available [here](#).

¹³ The UNHCR recommendations can be found [here](#), the ones from IOM over [here](#).

the field of Global Health are in Germany's key interests.

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