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# country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



## Geneva Barometer

**Developments in the Geneva-based international organisations  
Mid-December 2020 to February 2021**

*Olaf Wientzek, Sarah Ultes, Diana Peters, Katarzyna Gorgol-Mäder<sup>1</sup>*

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

**Just a few weeks after US President Joe Biden took office, the effects on the multilateral organisations based in Geneva can be felt. As expected, the USA immediately rejoined the WHO. However, the change of leadership in the White House also had specific consequences for the Human Rights Council and the World Trade Organization more quickly than expected. The appointment of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the new WTO Director-General is historic. From 1 March, she will be the first representative from the African continent and the first woman to hold this position. The issue of fair vaccine distribution globally has been just as much on the agenda of WHO as the discussion around a WHO reform over the past few weeks.**

### WHO—an intense start to the new year

The turn of the year saw several important events: the return of the USA to the WHO, the start of the WHO’s mission to China as well as the 148th session of the Executive Board from 18 to 26 January. It is worth noting that a road map for neglected tropical diseases has been adopted.

### Taking stock after one year of the pandemic

A year after the outbreak of the pandemic, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus warned against ignoring the lessons of 2020. He also warned against misinformation and conspiracy theories and, in no uncertain terms (citing “moral failure”), called

for international solidarity on issues such as vaccine distribution.

At the same time, he highlighted the major achievements of the past year: He described how the pandemic had “triggered the most wide-reaching response to a global health emergency in human history”, for example through the “unparalleled mobilisation of science” as well as various global solidarity mechanisms. “Vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics have been developed and rolled out at record speed”, thanks to the collaboration under the ACT-Accelerator initiative. COVAX, its vaccine arm, has been able to secure “access to two billion doses of promising vaccine candidates”: so that lower-income countries can also vaccinate their healthcare personnel as well as risk groups, at a minimum. Representatives from the WHO and the Vaccine Alliance have been saying for months that it is necessary to achieve the broadest possible vaccine coverage in all countries in order to effectively tackle the pandemic. This is not only a moral question but is also an economic necessity: a study conducted by the International Chamber of Commerce Research Foundation confirms that vaccine nationalism could cost the global economy up to USD 9.2 trillion. Almost half of this—USD 4.5 trillion—is incurred by the richest economies. By comparison, the funding gap for the ACT-Accelerator this year amounts to USD 26 billion.

Looking at the pandemic in 2020, Dr Tedros emphasised three lessons in particular:

1. “Governments must increase investment in public health, from funding access to COVID vaccines for all people, to making our systems better prepared

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Maewa Dutuit-Sauter for her support

to prevent and respond to the next, inevitable, pandemic. At the heart of this is investing in universal health coverage[...].”

2. Until everyone has been vaccinated against COVID, they need to continue following the proven simple yet effective measures (social distancing, hand washing, wearing masks).
3. The importance of international solidarity.

### Eagerly awaited return of the USA

On 14 January, the USA announced that it would return to the WHO. This was one of the first decisions made by the Biden-Harris Administration. At the same time, the USA also announced it would join the COVAX initiative. Its involvement is hugely important for financing this key instrument for global solidarity. The “reconciliation” between the USA and the WHO became clear at the session of the Executive Board in which Anthony Fauci, head of the White House Coronavirus Task Force and head of the US Delegation took part. In January, the USA also withdrew its support for the anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration that it had initiated in October under the previous administration along with Egypt, Brazil, Indonesia, Hungary and Uganda.

### WHO’s sobering mission to China

Danish scientist Peter Ben Embarek led the WHO mission to China from mid-January to mid-February this year to study the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. China had delayed an independent international enquiry for months, even though this had already been decided at the World Health Assembly in May 2020. Some observers described this delay as a “farce”. Even Dr Tedros, who otherwise tries to avoid criticising member states, made his disappointment clear in January. The experts did not have much time on the ground, as they first had to quarantine in Wuhan for 14 days. At a press conference upon their return, there was particular criticism of the lack of access to raw data. They requested more data on potential early cases of coronavirus in Wuhan.

In a statement, the team displayed a mixture of frustration and realism, saying that while they had been able to learn a lot more about the early stages of the pandemic, it had now become almost impossible to

fully clarify the facts. While the experts still believe that the novel coronavirus was transmitted from bats to people via an intermediate host, it is still not clear when or how this happened exactly.

The USA criticised the lack of support that China had given the WHO mission. China rejected this criticism and highlighted the blocking tactics used by the USA in the WHO over the past few years.

### 148th session of the Executive Board—focusing on the discussion of reform and the budget

The WHO Executive Board’s first session of the new year addressed a wide range of topics, including tackling so-called non-communicable diseases, disability, antimicrobial resistance and issues of intellectual property.

The discussion about the lessons from the pandemic for reforming the World Health Organisation also remains on the agenda. 46 states, including the EU and the USA, called for a resolution to strengthen the emergency capacities of the WHO at the World Health Assembly in May.<sup>2</sup> The push, especially by France and Germany, to strengthen the financial basis and political independence of the WHO, has been met with resistance from other member states (including Russia and Brazil). The demand made by Germany, France and Chile to allow the WHO and independent experts quick access to assess potential outbreaks is not being met with enthusiasm everywhere. Some countries are calling for a reform of the International Health Regulations of 2005, while Australia and Japan are calling for better monitoring of their implementation. The future of the provisions on travel restrictions is subject to dispute. However, there are signs of greater consensus regarding the introduction of a progressive warning system for international emergencies.

The suggestion from the EU of a new “pandemic treaty” to strengthen the prevention of future pandemics was well received by WHO Director-General Tedros. However, it is still not clear whether concrete proposals will be presented at the World Health Assembly in May.

The WHO budget for 2022–2023 was discussed at the Executive Board, where the sum of 4.5 billion was proposed (a 19% increase from 2020–2021).<sup>3</sup> If the

<sup>2</sup>[https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB148/B148\\_CONF4-en.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB148/B148_CONF4-en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB148/B148\\_25-en.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB148/B148_25-en.pdf)

proposed sums for tackling polio as well as various special programmes are added to this, it would amount to just over 6 billion (a 5% increase). In light of the large number of tasks currently facing the WHO, this increase appears to be rather modest to some observers.

On 1 March 2021, Catharina Boehme, Chief Executive Officer of FIND (Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics) will succeed Dr. Bernhard Schwartländer as the chief of cabinet of the WHO Director General.

### **New Ebola outbreak**

A new Ebola outbreak, the first in Guinea since 2016, is cause for great concern. Guinea was one of the three worst-affected countries in the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the largest since the discovery of the virus in 1976. Nevertheless, the country's cooperation with the WHO, and that of the Congo, which is also frequently affected by Ebola, seems to be working well at a national and regional level.

### **Road map for neglected tropical diseases**

Aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been the focus of public attention, the WHO is continuing its fight against other diseases: On 30 January, the WHO presented a ten-year road map to prevent, control and eliminate neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) by 2030.

This was adopted in November 2020, at the 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA), and replaces the London Declaration of 2012, in which governments, research institutes and pharmaceutical companies committed to work together to control and eliminate at least ten NTDs. NTDs are a diverse group of 20 communicable diseases that are caused by parasites, bacteria, viruses, fungi and toxins and affect around 1.7 billion people around the world, particularly in developing countries. According to the WHO, despite significant progress, not all the targets for 2020 could be achieved. The new plan reveals measures to achieve the targets for 2030: these include achieving a 90% reduction in the number of people who have to be treated for NTDs and the elimination of at least one NTD in 100 countries.

The Geneva-based Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) and the International Federation of

Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations (IFPMA), a trade association that represents pharmaceutical companies throughout the world, welcomed the new road map. Since 2012, the pharmaceutical industry has committed to donating 14 billion treatments to control or eliminate ten NTDs. The WHO is renewing its decades-long cooperation with Sanofi, an example of a successful public-private partnership, as part of a five-year agreement worth USD 25 million.

### **Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala—the WTO's new beacon of hope**

The discussions on who would succeed WTO Director-General Roberto Azevêdo (Brazil) after he stepped down in August 2020, which had been going on for months, moved forward remarkably swiftly: After consultations with member states, South Korean Yoo Myung-hee withdrew her candidacy on 5 February. Shortly thereafter, the USA announced it would support the last remaining candidate, Nigerian Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. The Trump Administration had vocally backed Myung-hee, thereby blocking Okonjo-Iweala, who was able to rely on a broad base of support across all continents—including from the EU. At a General Council special session called by the WTO on 15 February, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was appointed to be the new WTO Director-General from 1 March and will be the first woman and the first representative of the African continent to hold the role.

This brought the more than five-month vacancy at the helm of the WTO to an end. Her term as the new Director-General is set to end on 31 August 2025. This also means that the search for a successor will not be in the same year as the US election campaign once again.

With Okonjo-Iweala, the member states have selected a candidate who is considered a resolute reformer and who should also have a good perspective on the interface between global health and trade due to her current position as the chairwoman of the

Board of the Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.<sup>4</sup> Her CV (having as Finance Minister and with a long career at the World Bank) also shows her to be someone who will be able to face state and government leaders on an equal footing.

The new Director-General will face a variety of challenges: First, the time and place of the WTO Ministerial Conference must be agreed quickly, as it could not be held as planned in June 2020 in Kazakhstan due to the pandemic (it will likely take place in December 2021 in Geneva). This will also be the first big litmus test of the new leadership. There is also an urgent need to bring the difficult negotiations on limiting fisheries subsidies to a swift conclusion. Furthermore, the role of the WTO in tackling the pandemic will require her immediate attention. This includes discussions in the TRIPS Council on the waiving of patent rights for vaccines and medication for COVID-19, which is expected to go further than the existing flexibilities. This has been supported by India, South Africa and many developing countries. However, the most difficult dossier is probably not just the reform of the WTO, which the USA considers urgent and whose rules are often not adequately suited to new challenges and the practices of some member states (such as the strong role of the state in Chinese companies), but also the Appellate Body in the WTO's dispute settlement system, which has been dysfunctional since December 2019. While many observers consider this as a most pressing issue, it does not seem likely that a quick and easy "win" is to be expected in this dossier.

During her inaugural speech, Okonjo-Iweala announced that the economic and health-related consequences of the pandemic would be addressed and vaccine nationalism tackled as a matter of priority. The future head of the WTO was cautious in various statements during February on the ongoing dispute about suspending patent protection: arguing in favor of a "third way", she stated that it would be necessary to find a solution in which vaccines could be produced in several countries without this discouraging research and development. The WTO is to play a key role in eliminating export restrictions that put supply chains for medical goods at risk.

Around two weeks ago, the export restrictions on vaccines introduced by the EU caused a stir at the WTO. Without explicitly addressing this, on 2 February the four remaining deputy Director-Generals of the WTO emphasized the central importance of the global availability of vaccines.

It is still unclear the extent to which the new Director-General, as a self-declared reformer, will interpret the role of the WTO Secretariat. In the past, many voices had spoken out in favour of strengthening it, given the frequent stalemates between the member states. The multilateral organizations in Geneva are certainly not expecting Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala to say "just carry on as usual". Many are pinning their hopes on the new WTO leader, particularly in light of her broad experience in many areas of policy that are relevant to the pandemic.

## Differing views in international mediation efforts

### Syrian Constitutional Committee at a dead end

"We can't continue like this," the week was "a disappointment"—UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, was surprisingly direct when speaking about the now Fifth Session of the Small Body of the Syrian Constitutional Committee that came together in Geneva at the end of January. Once again, the participants left with no tangible results and without a new date having been set. Proposals made by the Syrian National Council and by Pedersen himself were rejected by representatives of the Syrian regime. Around 17 months ago, the committee came together in order to draft a constitutional reform in line with UN Resolution 2254, which was to pave the way for fair elections under UN supervision. However, the drafting process has still not begun and the next official elections are set for 16 April to 16 May 2021. While Western states are increasingly seeing the process as a delaying tactic—recently Germany and France had held the Syrian regime accountable for the breakdown of the negotiations<sup>5</sup>—Russia, Iran and Turkey jumped to its defence: On the third day of ne-

<sup>4</sup> The thoughts of the WTO Director-General on the role of world trade in the fight against the pandemic can be found [here](#)

<sup>5</sup> A corresponding statement can be found [here](#).

gotiations, a corresponding delegation met in Geneva and spoke out against deadlines imposed from outside.<sup>6</sup>

Pedersen reminded the Security Council: There will be no progress without constructive international diplomacy in Syria—whether by the Constitutional Committee or in other formats.

### **A partial victory for Libya: Transitional government agreed**

One year after the Libya conference in Berlin, the UN Special Envoy for Libya and the deputy head of the UN support mission UNSMIL, Stephanie Williams, spoke of an “historic moment”; UN Secretary General Guterres even called it a real “breakthrough” after 74 members of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) elected a new transitional government on 5 February in Geneva. After several rounds of voting and a run-off, businessman Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah from Misrata was elected as Prime Minister and Mohamed Menfi from eastern Libya was elected as the chairman of the three-member Presidential Council. Musa al-Kuni from southern Libya and Abdullah Hussein al-Lafi from western Libya became his deputies. The group of four now faces many challenges: The new cabinet is to be chosen by 26 February and a national reconciliation process to be started in the following months so that the first national parliamentary and presidential elections since 2014 can be held on 24 December. Although the ceasefire agreed in October in Geneva is currently holding, it remains fragile. A 90-day deadline to withdraw foreign troops and soldiers finally expired on 21 January. Therefore, Williams urged the international community to respect the result of the elections and called for decisive and quick action. She also stated that a new resolution of the UN Security Council would be advisable.

### **Upcoming change in leadership at OCHA**

After almost four years in office, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock is stepping down as head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) for personal reasons. Although he was charged with wide-reaching reforms after the World Humanitarian Summit, Lowcock was

also faced with less and less room for manoeuvre, particularly in relation to operations in Syria and Yemen. He was committed to increasing anticipatory humanitarian assistance as well as other issues. Most recently, he launched the UN’s biggest humanitarian appeal, the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, which is still only about 40% funded. Although the position has been held by a British citizen since 2007, Germany and Sweden are also being considered as countries that may provide a successor, due to their status as major humanitarian donors.

### **Human rights—a vote for the presidency, the USA is back**

For the first time in the 15-year history of the UN Human Rights Council, the annual rotating presidency was selected following a vote rather than being agreed upon by consensus. Former judge and Permanent Representative of Fiji, Nazhat Shameem Khan, had been the unopposed candidate for the council presidency since July 2020. She is considered a staunch advocate for human rights. In light of the renewed commitment of the USA, countries including, in particular, Russia, China and Saudi Arabia blocked the usual consensus, supporting either the Representative to the UN of Bahrain or that of Uzbekistan as opposing candidates. In a secret ballot, the Fijian candidate nevertheless prevailed, with 27 out of 47 votes, against the candidates from Bahrain (14) and Uzbekistan (4).

Not only have Russia and China rejoined the Council this year, the USA also announced its return to the Council and to “re-engage immediately and robustly”, two weeks after the inauguration of US President Joe Biden<sup>7</sup>. Secretary of State Blinken explained that the withdrawal of the USA in 2018 did not bring about any positive changes, but created a vacuum which countries with authoritarian agendas have since used to push forward their own agenda. According to diplomats, the USA will seek full membership in October this year; until then, the country will act as an observer. This means that all five permanent Security Council members would be represented on the Human Rights Council for the first time in years.

<sup>6</sup>A corresponding statement in English can be found [here](#) and a statement in German can be found [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> The statement of Secretary of State Blinken can be found [here](#), an initial official statement on this in Geneva is available [here](#).

Just four days after its return to the Council, the USA<sup>8</sup> supported the initiative of the United Kingdom to call for a special session—the first in almost three years—on the situation in Myanmar. At the session on 12 February, a resolution, albeit a watered-down one, was adopted by consensus, which condemns the military coup as well as calling for the immediate lifting of the state of emergency, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and for the results of the November election to be respected. Russia, China, Venezuela, Bolivia and the Philippines disassociated themselves from the resolution despite the fact that their concerns were noted.

The first week of the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council has so far not confirmed the fears that the presence of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council at the Human Rights Council would lead to the paralysis of the latter. The debates have been relatively frank and China has received harsh criticism for reported human right abuses in Xinjiang and crackdown on civil liberties in Hong Kong.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was also critical of the situation in Myanmar. As a member of the ILO, Director-General Guy Ryder urged the country to uphold relevant conventions, for example freedom of association, and not to deny workers their right to participate in peaceful protests.

### ITU—difficult discussions on standards with good outcomes for Europe

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has three main areas of responsibility: management of the global radio spectrum, connecting the global population to communication networks and developing ICT standards. While the last area has traditionally been outside the interest of broader public, the situation changed over the last years with China's offensive in the ITU to develop standards for new digital technologies. The discussions in ITU Study Groups on proposals for so-called new IP from Huawei and facial recognition from China Telecom showed that ITU is indeed one of the favorite standardization organizations for stakeholders from China.

Justified by the need to develop standards for future Internet which will provide new data-intensive “real

time” services, the proposal from Huawei aimed to create a new workstream within ITU for standards related to Internet infrastructure (e.g.: addressing, protocols). This proposal met with a clear opposition not only from representatives of EU Member States, like-minded countries, but other stakeholders from the private sector and civil society. They argued that while Internet technologies are constantly evolving, relevant standards are already being developed elsewhere, namely in the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), in California, open to any interested stakeholder. The attempt to bring this work to the ITU, a state-driven organization, is very much in line with China's state-centered vision of multilateralism.

The work on facial recognition takes place within an already established workstream on video surveillance where existing ITU standards are being updated with intelligent components (e.g. facial or image recognition). Chinese companies are market leaders in the area of facial recognition, which is broadly used domestically e.g. in the social credit system. Policymakers from Europe were concerned about solutions proposed in the ITU which could result in massive processing of sensitive personal data, without respecting the safeguards enshrined in data protection laws. Worth noting is a very high participation by the EU Member States (as well as the EU institutions) and the like-minded countries (US, Canada, Japan, Australia) in sessions of ITU Study Groups in December 2020. As a result both controversial proposals were rejected by a clear majority of participants. This doesn't mean they could not be resubmitted in the future, however the strong position of the EU demonstrated important red lines.

### Digital Davos WEF meeting

The annual Davos meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) on 25–29 January was held digitally due to the coronavirus pandemic. As well as the pandemic, issues included digitisation and climate change.

The European speakers welcomed the return of the USA to the international organisations. It is worth noting that once again, Chinese President Xi Jinping

<sup>8</sup> All supporters of the 29th special session on Myanmar can be found [here](#).

used the opening of the platform to make a passionate plea for multilateralism and open markets (!!) and to pledge to support poorer countries in tackling the pandemic and climate change. Due to the epidemiological situation, the 51st meeting of the WEF will be held in Singapore in May and not at Lake Lucerne as was originally planned.

## Change at UNCTAD

After the resignation of Mukhisa Kituyi (Kenya), former Secretary-General of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), Deputy Director-General, Isabelle Durant (former Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium and Green MEP) became acting Secretary-General on 16 February. The successor is determined by the UN General Assembly on the suggestion of the UN Secretary-General and is expected to be named by summer 2021. Based on the usual rotation, the representative should be from the Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC). Rumour has it that (at this early stage) candidates from Mexico, Costa Rica and Ecuador are being considered. The G77 have already made clear in a letter that they will insist on a candidate from a developing country.

## Disarmament

After the USA and Russia agreed to a five-year extension of the New START treaty, the US representative called for greater ambition at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, stating that arms control must include more weapon categories and states in the future and would involve reaching out to China in particular. This year's conference started on an equally hopeful note. However, the first disappointment came shortly after it began: Iran blocked Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from attending as observers and Turkey blocked Cyprus' involvement. Both the Secretary-General of the Conference, Tatiana Valovaya, and countries including Germany and the USA expressed their surprise regarding this action. As well as this, there was yet another stalemate regarding a work programme for 2021; Brazil is taking over the presidency with, in its own words, "disarm", "like a blind man in the middle of a gun fight who does not know quite well where to run to". The representative has already announced that he will

cancel the conference should it, yet again, deliver fine speeches only.<sup>9</sup>

## Commentary

At first glance, several developments seem to indicate that the crisis of multilateralism is easing: The immediate signals from the Biden-Harris administration in the WHO, as well as in the Human Rights Council and in the WTO could contribute to strengthening value-based multilateralism. Appointing a new head offers hope to the WTO, which has been badly shaken of late.

Nevertheless, we should proceed with caution:

1. While many of the steps taken by the Biden Administration were important successes, they required relatively little foreign and domestic political effort. The hard work still lies ahead. There is not much time to lose: The reform of the WTO dispute settlement is particularly urgent. Failing this, calls for alternatives to the WTO that only include like-minded market economies will gain more momentum.
2. The member states are and continue to be the key players in the Geneva-based organisations. The new head of the WTO will also be dependent on their willingness to cooperate. However, for the same reason, the expectations of the WHO reform process should not be too high.
3. International solidarity remains a scarce commodity, even during the pandemic. Despite the added value of international cooperation, the issue of fair vaccine distribution remains one of the major concerns in multilateral Geneva. The plea—whether it is from Dr Tedros, or from Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala—that the crisis can only be overcome with true solidarity (e.g. via COVAX and the ACT-Accelerator) should be given more consideration in German and European discourse. The credibility of German and European foreign and health policy will crucially depend on these expectations solidarity not going completely unfulfilled.

<sup>9</sup> The closing session can be listened to [here](#).

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

Dr. Olaf Wientzek  
Director of Multilateral Dialogue Geneva  
European and International Cooperation  
[olaf.wientzek@kas.de](mailto:olaf.wientzek@kas.de)



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