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# Länderbericht

Multilateral Dialogue in Geneva



## Geneva Barometer

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**Developments in the Geneva-based International Organisations from mid-October 2020 to mid-December 2020**

*Olaf Wientzek, Sarah Ultes, Meike Lenzner*

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

**The issue of the worldwide distribution of vaccines was one of the most discussed topics in the international Geneva community. The COVAX Facility established to foster fair global access to a COVID-19 vaccine was for a long time struggling to achieve the targeted coverage. Thanks to additional pledges in the past days i.a. by the European Commission and the European Investment bank as well as Norway, Canada, Kuwait, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Singapore and Estonia, the goal to secure two billion doses could be met.**

**The World Health Assembly in November discussed, among other things, possible lessons to be learned from the pandemic. One vital question for reform will be the relationship between the World Health Organization (WHO) and its member states; this was highlighted by a controversy that flared up over the past few days over an evaluation report withdrawn by the WHO in May.**

**For the World Trade Organization (WTO), the year ended with two (for now) disappointments and a glimmer of hope.**

**The results of the presidential election in the United States led to a collective sigh of relief in the international Geneva community. It is not to be expected, however, that years of disputes will miraculously vanish into thin air.**

### **Difficult balancing act for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines**

Several promising vaccines are in the process of being approved or have already gotten approval:

The problem of their fair global distribution is coming more and more to the fore in the Geneva-based organisations as well. That several vaccines are (will be) available within a time period of far less than a year is seen as a considerable achievement. According to experts, the WHO contributed to the success by coordinating research activities and the ACT Accelerator Initiative for cooperation in the development, production and fair distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics. The “vaccine pillar” of this initiative, the so-called COVAX Facility<sup>1</sup>, is jointly headed by Gavi, the WHO and CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations). The goal is to supply a vaccine by the end of 2021 to the most vulnerable 20% percent of the population of participating countries. For this, a total of two billion doses of vaccine are needed. The initiative is particularly important to smaller or lower-income countries that are not covered by additional bilateral agreements with manufacturers.

For a long time there was still a significant need for funding for the ACT Accelerator Initiative as well as for COVAX: This is why the WHO urged its members to close the short-term gap of 4-5 billion this year and of 23 billion next year. The urgent appeals made by the Director-General of the WHO Tedros Ghebreyesus to the member states to boost the funding of COVAX did initially not have the desired impact however. Only a few stakeholders increased their pledges, including the EU, which raised its contribution from 400 million to

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the initiative [here](#).

500 million. One reason for this reluctance that can also increasingly be seen in the area of humanitarian aid is the financial pressure caused by the pandemic, which is noticeable in most countries. Eventually however, thanks to a combined European Commission grant and European Investment bank loan as well as pledges by Norway, Canada, Kuwait, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Singapore and Estonia, the goal to secure two billion doses can be met<sup>2</sup>.

During these days and weeks, when the focus is on practical and logistical issues of transportation and distribution of the vaccine doses, other hard decisions need to be made by the WHO and its member states: For example: Not even COVAX will be able to distribute vaccine doses simultaneously in all 180+ countries involved. Some countries – on different continents – will constitute the avant-garde (be it by privilege or by necessity). The experience gained in terms of technical, infrastructural and social distribution issues are then to be quickly integrated into the practice of the following months. Representatives of the WHO are calling for patience: not everything will go smoothly, and controversial decisions might be made, they say. They warn against jeopardizing the necessary – albeit fragile – global solidarity through hasty and premature mutual accusations. WHO representatives have been stressing for months that the effective fight against the virus is only possible with a joint effort.

Given the imminent start in vaccinations, the WHO also published proposals for increasing the willingness of the population to be vaccinated: The measures include the creation of favourable infrastructure conditions (e.g. locations for vaccination centres). In addition, the countries should foster trust by providing clear information about risks and on the severity of the disease.<sup>3</sup> Collaboration with journalists, local communities and social media will help to improve the provision of information.<sup>4</sup>

Many Geneva-based organisations worry about questions such as how the vaccine is to be brought

into conflict and crisis areas or to particularly vulnerable groups such as refugees. The Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Antonio Vitorino, appealed to the EU and its member states to allow refugees and migrants access to the vaccine.

A heated, open-ended discussion has evolved over the last few weeks. It revolves around the demands that South Africa, India and numerous other developing countries on different continents had made at the WTO in early October, namely to abrogate patent protection for a wide range of health products (patents, copyrights, production secrets) to combat the virus. South Africa, in particular, brought out the heavy rhetorical guns, speaking of an imminent “vaccination apartheid” between richer and poorer countries. The United States and the European Union reject such a far-reaching step. Among other things, they refer to the possibilities of the WTO’s TRIPS agreement, which allows for some flexibility without completely suspending the patent. Another argument is that rapid market approval and preparing the infrastructure for effective distribution are more important aspects. Accordingly, the discussions in the TRIPS Council ended without any appreciable outcome; more discussions will follow in March.

### **World Health Assembly: Signs of disagreement behind the harmonious façade**

Observers were relieved that the virtual World Health Assembly (WHA, 9-14 November) took place without any “nasty surprises”. To be more specific: the meeting was just the continuation of the brief meeting held in May. Among other things, a resolution was adopted that demands better preparation for health emergencies. The resolution calls on the WHO and its member states to build out their emergency preparedness systems and crisis response by following the guidelines of the International Health Regulations. In addition, the WHO is requested to develop “supplementary mechanisms” by May of next year, e.g.

<sup>2</sup> <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/covax-vaccine-2021-2-billion/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-guidance-covid-vaccine-uptake/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-launches-africa-infodemic-response-as-vaccine-rollouts-begin-around-the-world/>

a tiered early warning system. So far, the WHO has only one individual “warning shot” in the form of the Declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). At this point, many member states are in favour of a kind of “traffic light system”.

What is emerging at this early point: Ideas about the conclusions to be drawn from the crisis and possible reforms differ widely: The German Federal Health Minister Spahn as well as representatives of other EU countries, Australia, the United States (which, unlike in May, made a critical but constructive contribution)<sup>5</sup> and Brazil spoke in favour of reforms: some demanded a more independent WHO; other demands related to stricter rules, better data exchange and more transparency – including corresponding modifications to the International Health Regulations. China, Russia and Pakistan opposed this, calling instead for a better implementation of existing regulations.

This discussion will likely develop greater momentum over the next few months. Several evaluation reports are expected to be on hand before the next WHA takes place in May, including that of the so-called Independent Panel (IPPR), chaired by the former heads of government Helen Clark (New Zealand) and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Liberia). More far-reaching proposals, e.g. the introduction of a sanctions system for non-compliant countries, have had until now no chance; peer reviews by the member states, similar to the UPR system in the area of human rights, more so.

The question of how the WHO is funded remains on the agenda: Represented by Jens Spahn, Germany emphasised the urgency of the issue.

As in May, the participation of Taiwan was again on the agenda. The United States (supported by a number of European countries) and Taiwan-friendly countries had advocated Taiwan’s participation. As it was six months ago, Beijing’s strong opposition has prevailed, although the diplomatic phrase is that the issue would be reconsidered at a point in the future. In the end, only two states

each (Honduras and the Marshall Islands on the one side, China and Pakistan on the other) made public statements, which represent the two poles arrayed against each other in the dispute. Insiders assume that, if it comes to a vote, only a few countries would risk an open confrontation with Beijing on this point of contention.

The question of the origin of the virus also came up for discussion more frequently. A delicate situation for the WHO: First off, many – not just Western – countries are pushing for a strong, independent and transparent investigation as soon as possible; by contrast, the WHO had to accept restrictive conditions imposed by China.<sup>6</sup> Some countries criticised that they were not consulted when the mandate was determined. The selected members from ten different countries (including Germany, the United States, Russia and Japan) are considered to be highly qualified.

The importance of a fundamental investigation of the relationship between the WHO and its member states as well as the issue of greater independence on the part of the WHO was highlighted by a controversy flaring up in December about the withdrawal of a critical report on the response to the crisis in Italy shortly after it was published in May. Intriguingly enough: According to reports, the report on Italy was withdrawn at the instigation of a high-ranking WHO official, who had been head of the health preparedness department in the Italian Ministry of Health prior to joining the WHO.<sup>7</sup> The low expectations on the part of those who have little hope that the investigative mission still to be sent to China will yield any findings seem to be confirmed.

## WTO – hoping for new momentum in the coming year

2019 ended for the WTO with the crisis of its dispute arbitration mechanism; 2020 ends without any new leadership. No agreement was reached in the question of a successor to Director-General

<sup>5</sup> Several countries, including Germany and France as well as the United States, South Korea and Chile, have presented papers with specific proposals for reform over the last few months. Discussions are currently being held over how to combine these approaches, many of which aim in the same direction.

<sup>6</sup> A background article of the New York Times can be found [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Background details can be found in this article from [Health Policy Watch](#).

Roberto Azevêdo, who resigned. And yet, during the consultations led by a WTO ambassador triumvirate in late October, a broad consensus for Nigerian candidate Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala had evolved. The United States had made it clear, however, that it still supports the last remaining competitor Yoo-Myung-hee (Republic of Korea). The announcement was like a veto. Accordingly, a meeting of the General Council, in which the consensus for the election of the first female and African candidate would have been determined, was postponed. If you look at the candidate, Washington's negative attitude comes as a surprise because Okonjo-Iweala actually met most of the criteria defined beforehand by the U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer. The allegation: The Nigerian candidate who also has an American passport is too close to the former World Bank President Robert Zoellick (Republican!); she also lacks specific trade expertise. With this, the prediction of some observers in Geneva ended up coming true: they had said in the summer that the search for a new head might be drawn out until the spring of 2021. It is expected, though, that the new Biden administration will give the go-ahead for Okonjo-Iweala in the spring. The intended appointment of Katherine Tai as the new US Trade Representative by Joe Biden was unanimously welcomed by the Geneva trade community<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the vacancy at the top, the work of the WTO has not stopped. On the contrary: The discussions were continued in many dossiers over the past few months. Nonetheless, the organisation has had to cope with a new blow: Despite all the efforts made in recent months, no compromise has been reached – as was expected by insiders – in the fishing negotiations that have been going on for many years. This means that the promise made by the heads of state or government in 2015 that common rules on limiting fishing subsidies would be adopted by the end of 2020 was not kept.

Although there have been further discussions over the last few months, the positions between the various sides are still too far apart: The EU – supported by many other Western countries, including the United States – demands a general

abolition of subsidies, which result in overfishing. China and many developing countries, especially India, are calling for far-reaching exemptions. In addition to the delays due to COVID-19, the postponement of the WTO Ministerial Conference to 2021 also accounted for the failure to keep the deadline. This dossier has not become any less urgent, though. Hence one of the four Deputy Director-Generals at the WTO, the German Karl Brauner, called for the talks to proceed as soon as possible.<sup>9</sup>

The figures on growth of world trade offer a little respite from recent news: Driven, among others things, by strong growth in Asia, the decline in world trade will “only” be 9% for 2020. That is even a better figure than the WTO had forecast in its most optimistic scenario in early April (14% decline).

## Human rights

As part of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) that aims to improve the human rights situation in all 193 member states of the UN, the focus at the beginning of November was on Belarus and the United States. In November, Western countries in particular made serious accusations again against the Lukashenko regime. The allegations related to shortfalls in terms of freedom of opinion and assembly; continuing violence against peaceful demonstrators; disappearances and torture; and the non-cooperation with the relevant special rapporteur. More than 40 countries, notably Russia and China, on the other hand, praised Belarus' progress in the area of human rights.

Noteworthy was the sharp criticism of the United States within the scope of the Review. One reason: Since the withdrawal of the United States from the international body in 2018, official requests for visits by the special rapporteur have not been answered. Alongside a number of African states, some European countries criticised structural racism, excessive police violence and sanctions against members of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

<sup>8</sup> More from the [Geneva Observer](#)

<sup>9</sup> The statement is available [here](#).

At the end of October, the U.S. government as co-organiser and co-signatory, together with 33 other states<sup>10</sup>, including Poland, Hungary, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and Belarus, had campaigned for the “Geneva Declaration of Consensus”, which is critical of abortions. The declaration underscores that there is no international right to abortion and no obligation of states to finance or facilitate it. The declaration, which was pushed less by ministry officials than by political officials of the Trump administration, is largely understood as a political signal.

In 2021, all members of the Security Council will have a voting rights in the highest body of the UN on Human Rights, except for the United States. It remains to be seen whether the new presidency also means that the U.S. will return to the Council. On the occasion of the International Day for Human Rights on 10 December, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet said that COVID-19 demonstrated more clearly than ever the failure to protect human rights worldwide. She strongly criticised the political leadership of numerous countries who still rely on herd immunity, are politicising the pandemic or misusing it to take action against critics. She also pointed to massive setbacks in the area of women’s rights.

### **New attempt in mediation efforts**

Some of the international mediation efforts, already resumed in the summer, regarding the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen were able to be continued towards the end of the year. Initial results of the talks about Yemen in Montreux were visible already in October: for example, the largest exchange of prisoners between Aden and Sanaa (1061 people) since the outbreak of the war in 2014 took place. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which headed the operation, even called it the biggest liberation operation in wartime since the Korean War. Nevertheless, the second anniversary of the Stockholm Agreement dated 14 December is a warning that there is still a long way to go until the goal of exchanging 15,000 prisoners has been achieved.

Progress was also made in the Libya dossier over the last few months after the Joint 5+5 Military Commission had come to a “historic ceasefire agreement”.<sup>11</sup> as the current UN special rapporteur Stephanie Williams (of UNSMIL) refers to it. In addition to the withdrawal of troops, the paper also provides for the withdrawal of foreign operatives. In early November, vague items were substantiated with recommendations for a monitoring mechanism. According to Williams, it is now mainly up to the international allies to comply with the agreement.

The Syrian Constitutional Committee also came to Geneva at the end of November for a fourth round of negotiations. What observers increasingly see as lacking in the discussions over symbols or citizenship is the nature of political negotiations and corresponding progress. The subject of Syrian refugees currently prominently launched by the Syrian regime in various forums has been echoed in the debates in Geneva as well. Specific constitutional principles will not be discussed prior to the next meeting on 25 January. The UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, expressed hope that progress will be made internationally with the new Biden administration. However, foreign policy observers are dampening high expectations; Syria will be put on the back burner, given the priority of numerous domestic issues; the mutual mistrust between key external players, e.g. the United States and Russia, is pronounced.

### **Increased humanitarian needs**

While the light at the end of the tunnel can be seen in wealthier countries due to the initial vaccination programs, this is not the case for the poorest countries on the planet, said Under Secretary-General and UN Emergency Coordinator Mark Lowcock on the occasion of the presentation of the “Global Humanitarian Overview”.<sup>12</sup> in Geneva. Within a year, the number of people in need of humanitarian help has risen by 40% to 235 million. The humanitarian requirements grew accordingly to a total of \$35 billion, a rise of more than 20% within a year. This record high was almost entirely due to COVID-19 and the secondary impacts of the pandemic. 2020 saw the biggest decline in per

<sup>10</sup> More supporters of the declaration can be found [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> The entire agreement is available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> The full report is available [here](#).

capita income since 1870; extreme poverty has been on the rise again since 1990; the number of people at risk of hunger might double; in short: development gains of four decades are truly at stake. The global humanitarian response plan to COVID-19 that was presented in March includes a total of 63 countries; among them, the situation in Yemen, with 24.3 million people in need, is especially dire. For weeks, the UN has been warning of a humanitarian disaster in the Tigray region and estimates the number of people in need in Ethiopia to reach 21.3 million next year. However, the needs of the Democratic Republic of Congo (19.6 million), Afghanistan (18.4 million), Sudan (13.4 million) and Syria (13 million) remain enormous as well.

In late November, Geneva organised a new UN donor conference for Afghanistan that took place virtually. With about \$12 billion for 2021-2024, around 20% fewer commitments were received than was expected, despite the fact that demand more than doubled from last year. Due to the slow pace of previous peace discussions in the country, the United States, for example, promised only half of the money for the time being; the EU and Germany stuck roughly to their commitments of previous years

## 70 years of the UNHCR

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the creation of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the recently appointed High Commissioner Filippo Grandi called for a stronger focus on the causes for why people flee from a country. Originally endowed with a temporary mandate, the work of the UNHCR has continued to expand more and more over the years – more an indication of the failure of the international community than a reason to celebrate, according to Grandi. Key steps for changing this include greater commitment in the area of political conflict resolution; improved burden-sharing in the field of resettlement; and, above all, an intensified international collaboration for combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences.

In this context, a study<sup>13</sup> conducted jointly by the IOM and the World Food Program (WFP) recently

also focused on the connection of COVID-19, conflicts, hunger and displacement: While the pandemic reduced international migration flows in the short term, an increase must be expected in the mid-term to long term, not least due to a lack of food security.

## Comment – Geneva window of opportunity for the West

The relief following Joe Biden's election victory is almost palpable in multilateral Geneva. Indeed, both the announcements and the personnel decisions that are becoming apparent give rise to hope for the international Geneva community and the role of the global West in these organisations: Specifically, the WHO will probably benefit most; the Biden administration will likely reverse the withdrawal from the WHO initiated by Donald Trump; secondly, there might be a commitment initiated to support the underfunded COVAX Facility. And some (not all!) discussions in the WTO are likely to be less controversial. If the United States rejoins the UN Human Rights Council, the defenders of Western values there would be strengthened; a stronger commitment would be greatly appreciated, not least due to the arrogance on the part of numerous autocratic states and Chinese initiatives to re-interpret international human rights standards. Nevertheless, a warning against excessive expectations is advisable here.

1. Even after Joe Biden takes office, it will take some time until the change of course in terms of multilateral organisations will actually become tangible.
2. On some issues, it will be more the tone than the basic attitude that changes. Not least regarding the WTO: It is not likely that the pressure for a fundamental reform of the WTO will abate.
3. From a German and European perspective, the window of opportunity must be used to expedite vital reforms in international organisations and to achieve common approaches in many issues. It will be necessary to address more clearly some justified criticisms on the American side.
4. Multilateral organisations are still consensus-based. Vital reforms of the WTO and WHO will not be able to be pushed

<sup>13</sup> The full study is available [here](#).

through against the will of other (major) countries. Just because the new U.S. administration is taking a more constructive stance does not mean that resistance will vanish into thin air. Success will often simply mean that compromises reflect Western positions a little more or that bogged-down dossiers get a bit more momentum. This is why we warn against excessive expectations despite all justified relief.

### Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

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



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