



April 2021

# country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva

 **KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
STIFTUNG**

## Geneva Barometer

---

**Developments in the Geneva-based International Organisations from mid-February to the end of April 2021**

*Olaf Wientzek, Sarah Ultes, Katarzyna Gorgol-Mäder*

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

**The global imbalance in the distribution of vaccines for COVID-19 is a dominant issue in both WHO and WTO. Given the deadlock in discussions on most topics within the WTO, the new Director-General of the WTO, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, is seeking pragmatic solutions. Encouraged by her hands-on approach, many observers are hoping for a breath of fresh air and new impetus – not least in view of the WTO Ministerial Conference in December.**

**By contrast, things got pretty rough at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council. UN officials have expressed warnings that the humanitarian crisis is worsening worldwide. An important staff decision in the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) is looming.**

### Controversy over vaccine distribution

The worldwide distribution of vaccines for COVID-19 has been the most debated issue in Geneva over the last few weeks. Representatives of multilateral organisations in Geneva, among them the heads of WHO and WTO, have repeatedly called for more global solidarity in recent months – sometimes diplomatically, sometimes more urgently.

The reason is that the supply of vaccines differs widely throughout the world: out of around one billion vaccine doses, more than 80% went to countries with a high or medium level of income; only 0.2% to low-income countries.

The COVAX initiative, a global solidarity instrument headed by the Gavi Vaccine Alliance, the WHO and CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations) that aims to supply 20% of the global population with the vaccine is making slow progress: until 3 May, 121 countries have received a total of 49.7 million doses via COVAX<sup>1</sup>, while the goal is to distribute 2 billion doses by the end of the year. Although the CEO of the Gavi Vaccine Alliance, Seth Berkley, was confident that the backlog could be met, the imbalance of the worldwide distribution of the vaccine is still substantial – not least since many poorer countries procure their vaccines via COVAX.

WTO is also in the focus of this discussion. The so-called “TRIPS waiver” proposal by India and South Africa calls for a temporary relaxation of patent protection for vaccines and other medicines to increase production capacity worldwide. Specifically, the initiative recommends the suspension of sections 1, 4, 5 and 7 of the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) until there is comprehensive and inclusive vaccination for COVID-19. The proposal, which is under discussion in the WTO’s TRIPS Council has been co-sponsored by 60 countries, has received less formal support by further states and is equally supported by several non-governmental actors, e.g. Doctors without Borders, since it was launched in October 2020. Major players in global trade – the United States, the EU, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Chile,

---

<sup>1</sup> A regularly updated overview of the doses shipped can be found [here](#).

Brazil and others – are sceptical of the initiative and point out the existing flexibility within the TRIPS framework.

Most recently, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros supported India and South Africa more openly and criticised the pharmaceutical industry in an unusually severe manner: according to him drug companies focus on lucrative bilateral deals at the expense of a global solidarity instrument such as COVAX.

While the TRIPS waiver cannot be a panacea for the problem of vaccine shortages<sup>2</sup> and discussions about it polarize the global community, the concept itself puts pressure on the industry and industrialised countries to seek solutions for the problem. Unlike her counterpart in the WHO, the new WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala has so far avoided taking sides in this highly controversial issue. Nonetheless, she also ceaselessly urges member states and industry representatives to tackle the problem and calls for a pragmatic “third way”. Speaking at a seminar with representatives of governments, pharmaceutical companies, civil society and international organisations on 19 April, Okonjo-Iweala called on states to reduce export restrictions, supply chain barriers and bureaucratic hurdles; she also called on the industry to strengthen voluntary technology transfer and reorient existing production capacities. The WTO is willing to facilitate such discussions, she underscored.

Observers are now eagerly awaiting to see the position of the United States in this matter. The U.S. trade representative to WTO Katherine Tai said during the workshop that “We must learn from, and not repeat, the tragedies and mistakes of the past”. She compared the current pandemic with the HIV/AIDS crisis but did not explicitly refer to the TRIPS waiver. It’s no secret that the Biden administration is under strong pressure from both opponents and supporters of the TRIPS waiver.

In the last meeting of the TRIPS Council, the fronts seemed to have hardened, but the topic will remain on the agenda. The next meeting of the

TRIPS Council will take place in June.

## WTO – numerous challenges for the new Director-General

In addition to the COVID crisis, a great number of problems keeps the WTO on its toes.

In addition to the COVID crisis, a multitude of unsolved and ongoing issues keep the WTO busy. The new DG has a reputation of being extremely “hands on” and determined that WTO delivers on at least some of the ongoing work before the Ministerial Conference in December 2021 (“MC12”). On several occasions, she warned about overloading the Conference, demanding a pragmatic focus on a number of dossiers for which specific results can be achieved. In her inaugural address, she warned that if the sluggishness in enacting reforms and decision making continued, the WTO could end up being irrelevant.

According to Okonjo-Iweala, discussions on fisheries subsidies, which have been going for over 20 years, are the first candidate to deliver concrete results. The aim of these negotiations is to eliminate subsidies for illegal fishing and to ban subsidies that contribute to overfishing. A Ministerial meeting is planned in July to review and finalize the text of fisheries and discuss one or two other topics.

These could include progress in the so-called plurilateral initiatives, in which only a section of the WTO members take part. Noteworthy is the Joint Declaration on Domestic Regulations, in which 59 WTO members take part. It aims at the lifting of trade barriers arising from national regulations of services. According to WTO insiders, the agreement could be signed on the margins of the Ministerial Conference.

Electronic commerce is another area in which substantial progress is being made. In April, the group of the 86 countries participating in the Joint Statement Initiative agreed on provisions for electronic signatures and authentication. The negotiators hope to reach an agreement in ten areas under

---

<sup>2</sup> Opponents of the waiver point out that the bottleneck is due to lack of know-how, export restrictions and the lack of production capacities. Even the immediate suspension of patent rights would not lead to the hoped-

for short-term effect, while constituting a dangerous ruling in terms of precedence.

discussion still before the summer break and to report “substantial progress” in the initiative at the MC12.

## **WHO – preparation of the WHA; discord about the withdrawal of a report**

At the same time, in the WHO, preparations for the World Health Assembly (WHA), the top decision-making body of the WHO, which will take place at the end of May (24 May-1 June), are running at full speed. The agenda is full to bursting. Not only will the issue of vaccine solidarity play a vital role.

Another topic will be the proposal, first made by Chile, later taken up by the EU and hailed by 25 heads of government and Dr. Tedros,<sup>3</sup> to create a pandemic treaty. Under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO), the treaty should allow for the strengthening of national, regional and global capacities as well as the resilience of countries to future pandemics. However, experts are warning that a pandemic treaty must be integrated in the existing regulatory architecture and not lead to the weakening of international health regulations. Many reforms can be implemented without a pandemic treaty, they say. The treaty must focus on core areas and not turn into an incoherent collection of wish lists from the member states.

Several evaluation reports on the response of the WHO and its member states to the pandemic will be presented in May.

These reports are intended to provide crucial input for the discussion about a reform of the WHO. Since the summer of last year, a number of possible proposals for reform have evolved. They include the introduction of a phased warning mechanism for future international health crises as well as an instrument for a mutual investigation of member states regarding emergency preparedness according to the model of the UPR process in the Human Rights Council. Calls for an increase of mandatory contributions from the member states and demands for a strengthening of the WHO's

political independence were more controversial in the discussions.

Just how important the last item is can be seen from the withdrawal of a critical report on the crisis management in Italy during the opening months of the pandemic, written by a representative of the WHO office in Venice<sup>4</sup> in May 2020. Motive: alleged mistakes in the report or fear of a deterioration of the relationship between the WHO and Italy. The Italian Public Prosecutor's Office is now investigating the responsible high-ranking WHO consultant Ranieri Guerra. Guerra had been a senior official in the Italian Ministry of Health before joining the WHO. Interesting enough: In confidential messages, Guerra claimed Director General Tedros knew about the whole matter. The WHO categorically denies this. In any case, all those accusing the WHO of being too submissive when dealing with member states despite the organisation's success fighting the spread of COVID-19 feel corroborated.

To strengthen the political independence of the WHO, observers will also discuss far-reaching proposals, including the strengthening of the position of the Director for health emergencies or limitation of the WHO Director-General term of office to one term. Others don't think these ideas are very auspicious.

A general observation in recent weeks: With the Biden administration, discussions in the WHO have become soberer. Great hopes have been put on Washington's involvement in the COVAX initiative. Under Biden, the United States has become a constructive actor. However the US have not been shy to express criticism (regarding the report of the Wuhan mission) and urge for reforms.

## **Rough climate in the Human Rights Council**

Power politics are back! As expected, the new composition of the Council brings a harsher tone to the highest UN body for human rights. With the return of the United States, a number of autocratic states and their allies have made it abundantly clear: there will be no "return to the status quo

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-03-2021-global-leaders-unite-in-urgent-call-for-international-pandemic-treaty>

<sup>4</sup> You'll find more details on the background in the [Geneva Observer](#).

ante" under US leadership with them. The United States appeared at times self-critical<sup>5</sup>, at times confrontational. The debates in the 46th session of the Council were thus more politicised. Some authoritarian countries accused the global West, in particular, of interfering in internal affairs of sovereign states, of double standards and attacked some states directly. The representatives of Western countries in turn initiated resolutions, pleas or joint statements on country situations that were not addressed for quite a while<sup>6</sup>. Around 50% of all resolutions were adopted after a vote; after Russian criticism of the special procedures, there even was a vote on the suspension of the Council session as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

The general political climate at present also makes it difficult to discuss long-standing proposals for reform that the United States has put on the agenda again after its return. This includes the abolition of so-called Item 7 that criticises Israel – Israel being the only country that is the subject of a separate agenda item on the Human Rights Council. At least, Item 7 was weakened in the 46th Council session by transferring a resolution to another agenda (Item 2).

As in the 29th special session in early February, the military coup in Myanmar was again condemned severely, although Russia, China and Venezuela distanced themselves from the consensus despite warnings of "crimes against humanity" and "mass murder".<sup>8</sup> The resolutions on Sri Lanka and Belarus contained a novelty: Instead of establishing a Commission of Inquiry or an Independent Investigative Mechanism, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was given new, far-reaching accountability powers. These powers authorise Michelle Bachelet in the case of Belarus to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse information and evidence and, with the help of experts and special procedures, also identify those responsible to the extent possible. Russia, Belarus

and China brought up no fewer than 14 amendments to the text, all of which were rejected. In addition, for the third time in just a few years, China initiated a resolution on "mutually beneficial cooperation" that is considered the spearhead of China's attempt to actively reinterpret and ultimately undermine existing human rights standards. The EU and some other like-minded countries criticised the initiative. Nonetheless, the resolution was adopted.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on the enjoyment of human rights throughout the world, UN representatives have warned of the disturbingly high number of reprisals. Human rights-based policies that address the root causes of systemic inequality, marginalization and discrimination which existed already before the pandemic are the only way out of the crisis, according to the UN.<sup>9</sup>

### Humanitarian system at risk of being overburdened

The risk of famine has returned to several countries.<sup>10</sup> The economic and socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. However, the humanitarian needs had been at a record high already prior to the outbreak of the pandemic – at this point, one in 33 people worldwide is dependent on humanitarian aid. The aid provided has long stopped keeping pace with the rising needs. The urgent call from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and others that the causes of conflicts and climate change need to be dealt with was voiced at the donor conference for Yemen, for Syria, in the context of the situation in Tigray in Ethiopia or during the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW).

At a virtual UN donor conference for Yemen, 1.67 billion dollars were pledged: once again less than one-half of the funds needed and even less than

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. statement on racism and police violence can be found [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Finland](#) condemned the situation in Egypt on behalf of 32 countries. [Poland](#) criticised the situation in Russia on behalf of 45 countries. The [United States](#) send a clear message concerning the principle of non-interference on behalf of 53 countries.

<sup>7</sup> The suspension was ultimately rejected with 6 votes in favour, 31 votes against and 9 abstentions.

<sup>8</sup> The resolution adopted by consensus by the 29th special session on Myanmar can be found [here](#); that of the 46th Council session [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> The "Call to Action for Human Rights" that was presented by Guterres prior to the pandemic is seen as a crucial roadmap in this context.

<sup>10</sup> You will find an overview of the current hotspots [here](#) and [here](#).

the year before. Guterres and UN emergency aid coordinator Mark Lowcock expressed their disappointment, saying that “Cutting aid is a death sentence” for many people. The current resources are insufficient for preventing famine.<sup>11</sup>

While some donors, especially European countries, increased their commitments, some of the largest donors cut theirs, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United States.<sup>12</sup> The latter referred to the responsibility of regional actors. Lowcock likewise underscored the special responsibility of countries directly or indirectly involved in the conflict.

Lowcock as well as the ICRC expressed their concern about the humanitarian and human rights situation in Tigray: more than two million people have been displaced; according to the World Food Program (WFP), around 4.5 million people need emergency food assistance; sexual and gender-based violence has rapidly increased recently. Here too there is a lack of necessary financial resources and humanitarian access.

## ITU – potential successors to the SG are getting ready to go

The ITU is entering the phase of campaign before the elections of Senior Management. These elections will take place at the next Plenipotentiary Conference in November 2022 in Bucharest when the mandate of the current Secretary General Houlin Zhao from China ends.

On 31 March, the U.S. mission in Geneva published a statement signed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken that announced the U.S. government’s endorsement of Doreen Bogdan for the position of ITU Secretary General. The interest of Bogdan-Martin, an American citizen who is currently Director of the development sector in the ITU, was already generally known; now she has received the formal endorsement of her homeland. Her candidacy is another example of a more proactive commitment on the part of the new U.S. administration in Geneva organisations. Bogdan-Martin is not the only official candidate. The former Russian Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Technology, Rashid Ismailov, was

already introduced in 2019 during Prime Minister Medvedev’s visit to Geneva. His name was announced on the Russian Internet Governance Forum in Azerbaijan in April of this year.

Furthermore, the current Deputy Secretary General Malcolm Johnson (British citizen and ITU veteran, 73 years old) is said to be interested in the position. Should the British candidate be confirmed, he could count on the support of the Commonwealth, while the Russian candidate can rely on China and the G-77. The American candidate might be able to rely on votes from Europe and a number of Latin American countries.

Given the EU’s doubts about the ITU (e.g. in the area of standardisation, which is dominated by China), the ITU election is important since it will determine the direction in which the organisation is going.

## Mediation efforts

In a three-day informal meeting (27-29 April), the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot conflict parties, together with their guarantors Turkey, Greece, the United Kingdom and the UN, want to explore potential steps for a resumption of official peace negotiations in Geneva. A little over four years ago, the last negotiations aiming at establishing a federal solution failed. The prospects of an early breakthrough are deemed slight.

## Disarmament Conference

During a high-level panel at the Disarmament Conference in late February, Secretary of State Blinken presented the top priorities of the Biden administration in the area of disarmament. While he signalled – after the extension of the New START treaty – a willingness to enter into a strategic stability discussion with Russia, he warned Moscow to comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention in the light of incidents in Syria, with respect to the Kremlin critic Navalny as well as the former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal. Increasing attention was paid to China’s “provocative and dangerous

<sup>11</sup> Look up the donor conference for Yemen [here](#) and the subsequent press conference [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> You’ll find the pledges of 1 March 2021 [here](#); by comparison, the pledges of 2 June 2020 [here](#).



weapons development programs”.<sup>13</sup> Standards and norms on safety in outer space need to be developed together with Russia and China, according to Blinken. Despite these recent announcements by the United States, there have not been thus far any specific proposals or drafts for agreements about arms control in outer space. Again this year, observers consider the prospects for new initiatives to be rather slight.

### Commentary and outlook – end of “business as usual” in the WTO and Human Rights Council?

In the last few weeks, a fresh breeze seemed to be blowing in some Geneva organisations: This is due to the (constructive-critical) commitment of the Biden administration, especially in the WHO and the Human Rights Council. How sustainable it will be remains to be seen: There is fierce opposition, mainly from China and Russia, against initiatives by the United States and other democratic countries.

The new Director-General of the WTO also brought a little fresh air to the organisation: Veteran insiders are impressed by her energetic and hands-on approach. At the same time, her decision to search for short-term helpful pragmatic solution in the muddled patent rights discussion on

the TRIPS Council shows that her project to make the added value of the WTO more tangible is not merely lip service. Of course, she also needs to appeal to the political will of the member states but seems more willing to increase the pressure on them than her predecessor. At least over the first one and a half months of her term in office, Okonjo-Iweala seems to actually put in practice her announcement that there won't be any “business as usual”. It is to be hoped that the vigour of the new WTO head will not be crushed by the forces of resistance and stagnation that have blocked progress in key dossiers in the past. The next tests are the conclusion of negotiations on the reduction of harmful fishery subsidies and the Ministerial Conference in December.

#### 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)



The text contained in this work is licensed under the conditions of “Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 international”, CC BY-SA 4.0 (available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>)

<sup>13</sup> A recording of the entire high-level panel can be found [here](#).