



February 2022

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva

# Geneva Barometer

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**Developments in the Geneva-based international organisations from mid-December 2021 to beginning of February 2022**

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

**The beginning of the year is normally a comparatively quiet time in Geneva: The marathon of major meetings usually only begins in spring with the Human Rights Council convening at the end of February. This year it was different for several reasons: Firstly, several meetings took place that suggest that many organisations, WHO and ILO among them, are facing quite arduous and/or highly charged discussions. Secondly, vital personnel decisions loom on the horizon. And last but not least, current and imminent conflicts have placed Geneva right in the middle as a mediation platform.**

## **Disillusionment at the WHO, new momentum for COVAX**

The meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board (EB),<sup>2</sup> which took place from 24 to 29 January, ended with a sobering result: In several important topics, no consensus could be reached. Observers read this as a harbinger of difficult discussions on the strengthening of pandemic emergency preparedness and empowering the WHO. In 55 agenda items, the Executive Board, comprising 34 members and convening twice a year, wanted to discuss the long-term funding of the WHO and pave the way for a new instrument for pandemic preparedness - among

other things - subsequent to a special meeting of the World Health Assembly (WHA) having resolved to open negotiations at the end of November.<sup>3</sup>

### **China blocking key reform proposal**

The question of whether, in the event of suspected infectious disease outbreaks, the WHO should be given access to the site of the outbreak early on is for many countries, including Germany, an integral part of a possible pandemic agreement. Even before the start of the EB meeting, China made clear its opposition to such a reform step. With its veto, China was able to put a damper on the entire discussion on empowering the WHO mandate as part of a possible pandemic agreement at an early stage.<sup>4</sup> If nothing else, the Executive Board was able to argue in support of such an empowerment and, if needed, an adaptation of the International Health Regulations was aimed at.<sup>5</sup> Here too, however, Russia called for respecting the sovereignty of the member states.

### **Long-term funding**

Consensus could not be reached on a proposal for reforming WHO funding either, which would entail an increase in membership fees. The report of the “Sustainable funding” working group recommended a substantial increase of fixed contributions by the member states: By 2028-29, 50% of

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<sup>1</sup> This issue was compiled with the assistance of Alexis Blachon.

<sup>2</sup> Find more information over [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Read more about it in the [last issue of the Geneva Barometer](#).

<sup>4</sup> More information is available over [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> The decision can be found [here](#).

the organisation's core funding needs were to be gradually covered by fixed contributions.<sup>6</sup> This would have enabled the WHO to plan more strategically and longer-term and reduce its dependency on voluntary donations.<sup>7</sup>

A large proportion of WHO member states, including Germany and several African and European countries, are in favour of such a gradual reform. Senior experts had called for an even more radical reform of WHO financing. A handful of countries, including the United States, Japan, Argentina and Brazil, still hesitate to commit to higher fixed annual funding contributions. Unlike under President Donald Trump, the United States under President Biden are willing to contribute to funding the WHO; although Dr. Tedros only in late January praised Germany as the WHO's largest donor, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently promised an additional \$280 million for the WHO. Some experts ascribe Washington's current scepticism regarding an increase of the fixed contributions to domestic policy concerns.<sup>8</sup> Any agreement of the United States to an increase of the fixed contributions to the WHO would have to be approved by Congress. In other countries, there is a concern – going beyond worries of overburdening national budgets in a time of crisis – that consent to raising the WHO budget might lead to applications for higher fixed payments to other organisations in the UN system. At any rate, the mandate for the working group was extended until the convening of the WHA in May, so there is still time to reach a compromise.

The deputy chairman of the EB, Clemens Martin Auer, Austria's Special Representative for health, who in turn had unsuccessfully tabled a reform proposal on the Executive Board's way of working, didn't hesitate to make his discontent be known during the meeting: "We have to be aware that we haven't concluded on anything and that we are leaving this organization in a critical situation."<sup>9</sup>

Other observers fear that the WHO may lose significance due to such blockades, creating a vacuum that would then be filled by other global players.

### **Tedros' re-election in May is ensured**

Dr. Tedros was nominated for a second term by a large majority; all WHO regions voted for him. It is notable that, of all places, criticism of his nomination came from his native country Ethiopia. Ethiopia's Permanent Representative in Geneva, Zenebe Kedebe, accused Tedros of not having lived up to expectations. The reason for the accusation is likely based on the fact the WHO Director-General, who comes from Tigray, criticised the Ethiopian government for its handling of the region.

### **Positive momentum at COVAX**

COVAX, the initiative for the joint procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, has made some progress over the last two months and is now ready to catch up with the delivery of 2 billion doses set for the end of 2021. The initiative helps achieve the WHO's goal of having vaccinated 70% of the world's population by July. To date, COVAX has supplied more than 1.15 billion doses and made 1.6 billion doses available<sup>10</sup>; in December alone, COVAX delivered more than 300 billion doses. In view of the bottlenecks of last year, the figures represent a huge increase, says Seth Berkeley, Director-General of the Gavi Vaccination Alliance, which is involved in the initiative. COVAX was able to overcome challenges in the supply chain by diversifying its production facilities, among other things. The international humanitarian organisation CARE said the delivery of the vaccines is only half the battle; at present, 681 million vaccine doses are not being used and are at risk of expiring. COVAX attempts to solve these problems by offering vaccines that are most suitable for the respective conditions, including consideration of heating and storage capacity and preferences in the population. Equally COVAX has diversified its

<sup>6</sup> More information can be found [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Currently, the WHO receives only about 16% of its total budget from fixed contributions; the bulk of the budget is based on yearly fluctuating "voluntary contributions" from member states and other donors.

<sup>8</sup> Further information can be found [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Find more information over [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> Further information is available [here](#).

supply of vaccines by taking advantage of other options, including more Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson vaccines as well as the new vaccine by Novavax. At present, COVAX holds at ready vaccine inventories that allow for the vaccination of 40% of the population in the 91 receiving countries. Seth Berkley believes the goal of 70% can still be reached by mid-2022.<sup>11</sup>

### COVID-19: Pandemic or Endemic?

Not for the first time, there are an increasing number of calls towards labelling the situation as endemic<sup>12</sup>, and the omicron variant has lent some support to these voices. On 11 January, the WHO stressed that it is too early to treat COVID-19 as an endemic disease; however, it concedes that the development of the virus is uncertain and that the pandemic is still progressing worldwide.

### Competition for heading the ILO

The election of a new leadership for the International Labour Organisation will be held end of March. The current Director-General, the British trade unionist Guy Ryder, is due to step down after ten years. A total of five experienced candidates have thrown their hats into the ring. There are no clear frontrunners. Nominees include the former French Minister of Labour Muriel Pénicaud; the former South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyeong-wha; the President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Gilbert Houngbo (Togo); the current Deputy Director-General Greg Vines (Australia) and the law professor Mthunzi Mdwaba (South Africa). The 56 members of the ILO governing body will elect the new head on 25 March; in addition to the 28 representatives of member states<sup>13</sup>, the board includes 14 representatives each from the employer and employee side (including the German chair Renate Hornung-Draus).

The selection will be based on various criteria: qualification, geographical origin<sup>14</sup> as well as the candidates' reputation with employers and employees. After many years of a union representative, some voices are urging for the election of a DG that is closer to the business side. Others point out that, after more than 100 years, it is high time for the first woman to be at the helm of the organisation. Despite his ILO experience on the business side, Mthunzi Mdwaba is considered an outsider in the roster of candidates since his own country (South Africa) does not support his candidacy. There are obstacles in the case of the other candidates as well. Greg Vines, for instance, is seen by some as being too close to the departing leadership. Pénicaud is strongly supported by France and Emmanuel Macron, while some union representatives voice strong concerns about her. Easy favourites are therefore the South Korean candidate Kang and Houngbo from Togo, yet by no means is the election a foregone conclusion either. Kang has an impressive UN career and might be able (like Vines) to count on voices from the Western faction as well as the business side; however, she lacks stronger experience in the field of labour and social affairs. But as was shown by the WTO election of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala in 2021, relevant specialist expertise in the field can be compensated by considerable experience in the UN system and a strong reputation. The former Togolese Premier Houngbo, who has experience both in the private sector and in the ILO, can count on the support of African countries and seems to be gaining approval from some union representatives as well. But switching to a new position just after he's been re-elected as IFAD head (not least with European support) would certainly be met with criticism.

In the first round of introductions, the candidates tried to give an idea of where they stood: Kang underscored gender justice; Pénicaud the issue of digitisation; Vines the modernisation of the ILO; Houngbo universal social protection; and Mdwaba

<sup>11</sup> More information can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> A disease is endemic if it occurs regularly in certain regions. For the disease to be labelled endemic, the number of people falling ill stays at a relatively constant level. It is higher than in other regions but does not increase over time. Over a certain period of time, about the same number of people are diagnosed with the disease again and again.

<sup>13</sup> Due to its industrial significance, Germany is one of ten permanent members.

<sup>14</sup> From the ten Directors-General to date, seven have come from Europe, two from the United States and one from South America

closer collaboration with small and medium-sized companies. The successor of Guy Ryder will face several challenges: In addition to long-term trends (including the transformation of work through digitisation), the social implications of the COVID crisis must be tackled. A global employment report published in January made clear<sup>15</sup> that, despite a recovery, it cannot be assumed that the global employment rate will reach pre-pandemic levels before the end of 2023. In developing countries, where the proportion of economically vulnerable groups of the population is greater and the size of the economic stimulus packages smaller, the impact is especially pronounced.

A sensitive issue that might be on the agenda for the next round of hearings in mid-March is how to deal with accusations of forced labour in Xinjiang against China.<sup>16</sup> The report of the committee of experts on the implementation of international labour standards, published in February, addresses these allegations made by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), criticises in clear terms the Chinese re-education camps and discrimination against Uighurs and other minorities and demands a revision of discriminating provisions of China's national and regional policies.<sup>17</sup> It can be assumed that the topic will play a role in the International Labour Conference in early June as well.

## Human Rights

### Special session on Ethiopia

The worrisome findings in a report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)<sup>18</sup> last November, have led to calls for a special session of the UN Human Rights Council. At the initiative of Slovenia, the Council convened on 17 December with only a narrow majority for the already fifth special session in 2021. The resolution which was tabled by the EU and established an international commission of human experts on Ethiopia was ac-

cepted only after a vote. Although the entire African Group had argued against the mechanism in advance, Sudan, Libya, Mauritania, Togo and Senegal abstained from the vote.<sup>19</sup>

### Belated completion of the 3rd UPR cycle, representation of Sudan disputed

The third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) which lasts about 4.5 years and provides for the review of the human rights situation in all 193 UN member states by means of a "peer review", was wrapped up only belatedly. The reason: The representation of Sudan was disputed. The previous ambassador Ali ibn Talib Abdelrahman Mahmoud, who had fallen out of favour with General al-Burhan after the military coup on 25 October, had several times asked for the review of his country to be postponed. In the fourth attempt on 9 February, the review was finally led by Mahmoud's former deputy Osman Abufatima Adam Mohammed and by Howaida Ali, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Justice. Mohammed had most recently been appointed by the new rulers in Khartoum as ambassador and chargé d'affaires a.i.. Given the fact that the situation is deteriorating under military rule, many countries have called for a return to the democratic process and free and fair elections to establish a civilian-led government. Demands that Adama Dieng, the expert mandated at the 32nd Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council, be allowed to enter the country were raised as well. Khartoum had postponed his visit recently. People demonstrating peacefully in Sudan are currently attacked almost daily; the OHCHR assumes more than 71 deaths and over 2,200 injured people since the end of October.

### OHCHR report and visit to Xinjiang spark controversy

Negotiations for a trip by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet to Xinjiang commenced as early as September 2018. Now entry has been promised for the first half of

<sup>15</sup> The report is available [here](#).

<sup>16</sup> See the briefing of the [Geneva Observer](#).

<sup>17</sup> The entire report is available [here](#) (on China, p. 514-521).

<sup>18</sup> A summary can be found [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> The report is available [here](#).

2022; but only once the Winter Olympics have ended. The condition: The visit would have to be “friendly”, foster cooperation and not constitute an “investigation” with an assumption of guilt.<sup>20</sup> Closely associated with the visit is an OHCHR report on the situation in Xinjiang that has been due for three years now. It was prepared without the visit by the High Commissioner and is said to contain deeply disturbing information, similar to the so-called Uighur Tribunal.<sup>21</sup> The report was finalised in mid-December, although most of it had already been ready for a long time. Some Western states and NGOs had therefore urged publication in the run-up to the Winter Olympics. Since it still needs to be presented to the Chinese government, it can be assumed that there will be no progress before the end of the Winter Games.

## Humanitarian aid

### **Afghanistan: Call for donations, Taliban in Geneva**

More than five months after the Taliban took over, more than half of the Afghan population is in need of humanitarian aid. In 2022, almost the entire population will be at risk of falling into acute poverty. Accordingly, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) jointly presented their response plans on 11 January. Set at \$4.5 billion, OCHA presented the largest appeal ever made for a single country; an additional \$623 million are needed to support around 6 million displaced Afghans in neighbouring countries.

A visit by the Taliban to Geneva in early February, which was organised by Geneva Call, must also be seen in this context.<sup>22</sup> The aim of the visit was to obtain a commitment from the Taliban to uphold humanitarian principles and guarantee the safety of humanitarian actors. Further talks, in which the situation of women was also addressed, took place with the WHO, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières

(MSF) and the Swiss Foreign Ministry, among others.

### **Cyber-attack on the ICRC**

On 18 January, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) announced that it had become the victim of a targeted and very sophisticated cyber-attack, which took place already on 9 November of last year. Access was gained to sensitive data of more than half a million people which had been collected in the context of the family reunification program of over 60 Red Cross and Red Crescent societies throughout the world. Although it is still unclear what the intention of the attack was, who the perpetrators were and what they want to do with the data, given the high level of the attack, it cannot be ruled out that it was instigated by a state or state-like actor. Owing to a potential loss of trust in humanitarian organisations, there have been renewed discussions about the extent to which certain information should not be collected (digitally). The ICRC is seen to be an organisation with the most extensive security and data protection requirements in the entire sector; this is why the attack is a huge wake-up call to other organisations as well.

## Mediation and disarmament

### **Crisis diplomacy in Geneva: Discussions over Ukraine between the US and Russia**

Geneva is increasingly becoming a main dialogue forum between the US and Russia: After the meeting between President Biden and Putin for direct talks last June, a “strategic stability dialogue” was agreed upon in the follow-up. Initial meetings have already been held in September and October. An extraordinary session of this format took place on 9-10 January in the context of the Ukraine crisis at the level of the deputy foreign ministers of both countries. Eleven days later, Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Lavrov met in Geneva on January 21. If needed, another meeting

<sup>20</sup> A statement by the Chinese mission in Geneva is [here](#).

<sup>21</sup> More information on the press conference can be found [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> Among other things, Geneva Call works with non-state actors to encourage them to comply with international humanitarian law enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and other international treaties. A press release can be found [here](#).

between Putin and Biden was taken into consideration. Although the discussions have not, as is well known, resulted in a breakthrough, Switzerland has been able to strengthen its reputation for its “good offices” once again. However, it remains to be seen whether this can bring new momentum to other Geneva forums, for example in the area of disarmament.

### **Low expectations in disarmament conference**

Given the growing challenges in terms of disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control, the role of the only multilateral forum to negotiate disarmament treaties ought to be more important than ever. But expectations for a breakthrough seem low again this year after decades of paralysis. Still, it was possible at the beginning to agree on the approval of participation for all UN member states who wanted to attend the conference. Iran and Turkey had blocked Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Cyprus last year. What would be important now is an agreement on a new program of work. The sequence in which topics are to be discussed has been the subject of repeated disputes. On 25 January, China took over the presidency and presented a proposal of the presidents of last year (P6) for a simplified agenda and the possibility of setting up sub-bodies that deal separately with individual topics. Some members say this proposal might neglect the vital negotiating mandate of the conference. China expects to reach an agreement in the week of 14 February.

The first meeting of a newly established open ended Working Group (OEWG) on reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviour<sup>23</sup> had been eagerly anticipated. The working group is supported by many Western nations; but Russia, China, North Korea and Iran, among others, object to it. Due to Russian concerns, the first meeting has now been postponed and will not take place before the end of May.

### **WTO – discussions on hold**

Many discussions within the WTO are currently in limbo: It is still unclear when the 12th WTO minister conference will finally take place. A date suggested by the WTO Secretariat for early March was met with scepticism by some members. Given such an unclear outlook, India proposed to hold a virtual minister conference in early January. This meeting was to deal solely with countering the pandemic, including a suspension of patent rights (so-called TRIPS waiver) for vaccines and COVID-related medicines, strongly supported by India. WTO Director-General Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala spoke in favour of setting up an informal working group for answering questions revolving around the intellectual property rights to COVID vaccines. Decoupling the TRIPS waiver from other items on the agenda of the minister conference, as desired by India, is not an option for other WTO members, especially for the EU and Switzerland. The difficult negotiations in the informal working group caused Dr. Ngozi to express concerns that a possible answer by the WTO about countering the pandemic might come too late. The relevance of a release of vaccine patents is increasingly questioned by sceptics, not least since worldwide vaccine production has increased enormously, so the real problem now is the logistical distribution of the vaccines. Other dossiers are also treading water given this state of limbo: There was no final breakthrough in the debate on reducing harmful subsidies for fisheries – the talks are currently on hold.

Despite all these difficulties, the WTO is still perceived as an important (arbitration) body. This became clear at the end of January: On 27 January, the European Commission opened proceedings at the WTO against China. The accusation: The discriminatory trade practices against Lithuania. Since the beginning of the year, Beijing has effectively banned imports and exports of products made in the Baltic EU country. With these harsh measures, China responds to Lithuania’s having broken with the one-China policy – in Beijing’s eyes

<sup>23</sup> Resolution A/C.1/76/L.52, supported by 163 nations constitutes the basis for the “Open Ended Working Group (OEWG) on Reducing Space Threats Through Norms, Rules and Principles

of Responsible Behaviour”. 9 abstained from voting; 8 voted against it (among them, China, Iran, North Korea, Russia).

– when it allowed the set-up of a de-facto permanent representation of Taiwan in December of last year. After several mediation attempts had failed, the EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis announced the initiation of a WTO dispute complaint against China. Within the framework of a formal request for consultations, China now has 60 days to provide information on its trade practices. If this again produces no result, the EU, in a next step, can request the establishment of a panel. Intriguing enough: Should one party appeal after the arbitration ruling, it would be an especially prominent case for the WTO multi-party interim appeal arrangement constituted in 2020; 52 WTO members (among them the EU and China) had agreed on this body since the blockade of the actual WTO appellate body.

### **Busy annual accounts for digital Geneva**

From 16 to 18 December, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) convened for the 6th World Telecommunication/ICT Policy Forum (WTPF-21). This conference develops common goals for ICT legislation to be able to tap into the potentials of new technologies for the transition to a digital economy. The statements focused in particular on the guidelines for improving the infrastructure of remote regions and developing countries and on the use of secure and affordable networking to achieve sustainability goals.

Nearly at the same time, the negotiators of the UN group of experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) convened in Geneva to discuss rules on the use of automated weapons. The negotiations, which have been going on for eight years, were given somewhat more attention since, according to a UN report, an autonomous armed drone was deployed in Libya in March 2021. More than 30 countries, including Germany and China, again campaigned for a legally binding agreement. The body, which is based on consensus, did not achieve any agreement, due for the most part to the objections of Russia and the United States.<sup>24</sup>

The U.S. favoured the introduction of a non-binding code of conduct. Observers hope that the topic will be put on the agenda of the UN General Assembly soon or that a process similar to that pertaining to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines will be initiated. This convention had finally come about after years of pressure from a coalition of civil society players and the initiative of individual diplomats.

### **Virtual Davos meeting**

This year again, the annual summit of the World Economic Forum could only be held virtually and in an abbreviated form. The meeting was rescheduled for 22-26 May in Davos. In his opening remarks, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping appealed to those attending not to fall back into a cold war mentality in these times of growing geopolitical tensions. He warned against zero-sum games and the (re-)introduction of protectionist measures. Other leaders, e.g. the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, emphasised the sovereignty of their countries and that of the Asia-Pacific region and condemned Beijing's sometimes worrisome influence. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, put the focus on the huge challenge of climate protection and underscored the necessity of ambitious projects, e.g. the recently adopted European Green Deal. Shortly before the event, the World Economic Forum published its annual risk report. The main focus is on the consequences of the COVID pandemic: The report warns against a risk to the livelihoods of some sections of the population, diminishing social cohesion as well as a potential global debt crisis. Furthermore, the report pointed to the different speeds of recovery for industrial and developing countries and the resulting risk of different priorities in the light of global challenges.<sup>25</sup>

### **Comment**

In the first few weeks of the new year, there is much that is in limbo in multilateral Geneva: The date of the next WTO minister conference is still

<sup>24</sup> More information is available [here](#).

<sup>25</sup> More information is available [here](#).

uncertain although seasoned observers see a June date as likely; some ambitious reform plans regarding the WHO underwent a setback before they could gain traction. China's role will remain a central theme of discussion in the multilateral organisations: The situation in Xinjiang is likely to cause controversy not only in the Human Rights Council but also in the International Labour Conference.

And it remains to be seen how the discussions in the Human Rights Council will develop, especially due to the return of the United States to the body. In both the WTO and the WHO, the EU saw that it is not necessarily always on the same wavelength with Washington even under a Biden administration: in the WTO, the two sides have different positions on the reform of the appellate body and on the TRIPS waiver. In the WHO, dissent became clear in the discussions on the reform of funding for the WHO, the necessity of a pandemic agreement or the creation of new global health forums.

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