



SOUTH CENTRE STATEMENT FOR NAM HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING AT THE 74TH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

27 May 2021

Your Excellency Dr. Teymur Musayev, Acting Minister of Health of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Your Excellencies Ministers of Health of the NAM, distinguished delegates,

I am grateful for the invitation to the South Centre to speak to you on this occasion. The strong solidarity, which has guided this Movement in the past decades, and its founding principles, are more relevant today than ever.

We live in very critical times. In just one year, more than three million people have died, and many continue to die as we speak, as a result of COVID-19. The inability to rapidly contain the pandemic has led to an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis, particularly in developing and least developed countries.

In this scenario, it is not surprising that there are several parallel initiatives at the World Health Organization (WHO) and at the World Trade Organization (WTO) aiming at reviewing the response to the pandemic and proposing further action to deal with the current and future pandemics.

It is undeniable that despite solemn declarations, there has been no effective global coordinated action in the fight against COVID-19. International solidarity has been proclaimed but not practiced by all members of the international community. The inequality in the access to the tools necessary to respond to the pandemic—which should have been considered global common goods—will remain one of the major policy and moral failures of the twenty-first century.

One year ago, WHO and other partners launched the ACT Accelerator to advance global access to tests, equipment, treatments, vaccines and related technologies based on voluntary cooperation. Two of its mechanisms, the COVAX Facility and the C-TAP, have so far failed to address the pervasive inequity in access to those products and technologies. On average, in high-income countries almost one in four people have received a COVID-19 vaccine. In low-income countries, it is one in more than 500. The pool set up for sharing intellectual property has been ignored by technology holders.

Currently, reviews are being carried out at the WHO by the International Health Regulations (IHR) Review Committee (IRC) and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee (IOAC) for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme. An

Independent Panel was also established on Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPR) with the mandate of impartially assessing the effectiveness of the mechanisms at the disposal of WHO, the functioning of the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005), WHO contribution to the United Nations (UN) system - wide efforts and the actions of WHO and their timelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to these three processes, a new initiative has recently been launched by 25 Heads of States, the European Council and the WHO Director-General, pursuant to which a proposal has already been submitted for a decision to start negotiations on a “pandemic treaty” in the WHO. The draft decision invokes Rules 41 and 86 of the WHA Rules of Procedure to establish an intergovernmental meeting (IGM) to prepare and negotiate a WHO framework convention on pandemic preparedness and response (to be adopted under Article 19 of the WHO Constitution).

On the other hand, at the World Trade Organization (WTO), India and South Africa with the support of more than 100 countries, have proposed a temporary waiver of three years with regard to the obligations relating to intellectual property rights for products needed to address the COVID-19 pandemic (IP/C/W/669, Rev.1). Eight months after its submission, the United States and other countries that originally opposed to this proposal have announced that they are willing to sit down and negotiate. But time is of the essence in combatting a pandemic; negotiations should not further delay a solution to the current undersupply of vaccines.

Moreover, a proposal for a General Council Declaration on Trade and Health “COVID-19 And Beyond” (JOB/GC/251/Rev.1) relating to export restrictions, tariffs, customs, services and technical regulations, transparency and inter-agencies cooperation, has been submitted to the WTO.

All the above initiatives and processes are interdependent and, in some respects, overlapping. Advancing on one of them without considering the others may result in contradictory or inconsistent outcomes.

In order for an orchestra to play properly, all performers must follow a musical score. Within WHO a chief of the orchestra is needed: let the WHO Director General play this role under the direction of the Member States for all the instruments to play in harmony. Effective coordination is needed, in addition, to ensure consistency with the initiatives taken in other fora, notably at the WTO.

This 74th WHA and the period until a special WHA session in November provides the opportunity to review the findings and recommendations of the referred to committees and panel, assess the effectiveness of the mechanisms put in place in response to COVID-19, and consolidate the emerging proposals, including on the idea of starting the negotiation of a possible new pandemic treaty.

If such a treaty were negotiated, it should help to address the current gaps and weaknesses and contribute to establish a stronger international health framework, having in view the needs of countries at different levels of development, with WHO—as the governing authority for global health—equipped with the appropriate enforcement mechanisms and tools. In particular, such a negotiation should not

overlook that WHO has already adopted IHR 2005, a specific set of regulations aimed at preventing the international spread of diseases, and that a revision of these regulations has been undertaken.

It is vital to find global solutions as soon as possible and to prevent more suffering and loss that will make fully unrealistic the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 for many countries. It is also necessary to better prepare the world to respond to future pandemics. A coherent multilateral action, grounded on the ongoing processes and on the lessons learned in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, should allow the Members States to strengthen the WHO capacity in performing its core mandate guided by the global public interest.

The South Centre reiterates its willingness to continue to provide support to the NAM Presidency and members, as appropriate.