



– NON-PAPER –

Virtual informal meeting of EU Health Ministers | Friday, 2 October 2020, 10:00 – 12:00 (CEST)

Introduction

After the Ebola crisis in 2014–2015 and other serious cross-border disease outbreaks, the COVID-19 pandemic has once again put World Health Organization (WHO) into the spotlight. According to its constitutional mandate, the WHO is the leading and coordinating authority in global health. This includes a central role for the WHO in addressing global health challenges, including prevention, detection and response to outbreaks. No other international organisation is equally equipped to play a leading, central role in addressing the health aspects of cross border disease outbreaks, including pandemics.

While addressing the current pandemic, WHO finds itself in the middle of a conflict between two of its Member States. One of them, the largest financial donor of the organisation, has announced to withdraw from its membership to the organisation.

The expectations of the international community, its 194 Member States but also of the general public regarding WHO are huge: As laid down in its constitution, the organisation is supposed to set up norms and standards and promote and monitor their implementation in a variety of fields, to shape the research agenda, to articulate ethical and evidence-based policy options, to react to outbreaks all over the globe, to provide adequate and timely information for health professionals and populations

worldwide as well as to provide technical support. And last but not least, WHO has the role to monitor the health situation worldwide and to assess health trends.

1. Reform of the WHO

However, it has become clear, particularly in the pandemic, that the WHO partly lacks the capabilities to fulfil this mandated role. The international community's expectations regarding WHO's capacities seem to outweigh by far its given financial, structural and legal abilities.

The European Union (EU) took the lead in the preparation of the 73rd World Health Assembly in May 2020 and shaped a resolution on COVID-19 which was consequently adopted by the Assembly. The resolution asked the Director-General to initiate *“a stepwise process of impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation, including using existing mechanisms, as appropriate, to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19, including: (i) the effectiveness of the mechanisms at WHO's disposal; (ii) the functioning of the IHR and the status of implementation of the relevant recommendations of the previous IHR Review Committees; (iii) WHO's contribution to United Nations-wide efforts; (iv) and the actions of WHO and their timelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, and make recommendations to improve global pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response capacity, including through strengthening, as appropriate, WHO's Health Emergencies Programme.”* This assessment will be carried out by the Independent Panel for Preparedness and Pandemic Response (IPPR) which has started its work in September. In addition, the WHO convened a Review Committee on the Functioning of the International Health Regulations (2005) during the COVID-19 Response.

2. Role of the EU and its Member States in the WHO reform process

While the EU was not been perceived as a key player in global health for a long time, the situation has now changed radically as the COVID-19 pandemic, including the

difficult geopolitical situation, has brought global health to the centre of attention also in the EU (Member States and EU institutions). It has demonstrated that the global health role of the EU cannot be separated from its geopolitical position. Today, many third countries look at the EU for guidance and expect that the EU continues its leadership role in global health overall but in particular in the forum of the WHO. The question arises to what extent the EU needs to be proactive and both increase its political support to and financial investment in global health.

The following questions are supposed to serve as a starting point to launch a discussion:

- 1) Should the EU Member States play a coordinated and leading role in shaping the WHO reform agenda linked to the COVID-19 response and in particular the outcomes of the IPPR's assessment and the IHR Review Committee?
- 2) Do the EU Member States share the view, that the international community's expectations vis-à-vis WHO outweigh its given capacities, and if so, which concrete mechanisms could be proposed to reconcile both?
- 3) If the EU attained a more proactive role, which concrete suggestions for measures in particular regarding the revision of IHR should be considered by the relevant panels and committees?