



WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

Ngozi OKONJO-IWEALA
Director-General

20 April 2021

Dear Friends,

Thank you for reaching out and sharing your concerns with me in your letter of 13 April on how best to address the serious problem of inadequate supply and inequitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

I share many of your concerns: very simply the current inequities in access are both morally unconscionable and profoundly injurious to human health and wellbeing, and they demand immediate action. I'm therefore heartened to see that we share the same objective of ensuring that people in the developing world will not be left at the back of the queue when it comes to receiving these lifesaving vaccines. I am further encouraged to see that so many diverse organizations from all over the world follow this issue so closely. This matter is very personal to me, as my experience with GAVI and the creation of COVAX has impressed on me the importance of effective and equitable access to vaccines across the globe and the need for serious concerted action to achieve this. I also believe very strongly that the WTO has a central role to play in combatting this pandemic, a belief only reinforced since I took up this position just last month.

That's why on 14 April, I convened a meeting of governments, manufacturers, members of civil society, international organizations and financial institutions specifically to address the question *COVID-19 and Vaccine Equity: What Can the WTO Contribute?* The aim was to offer the WTO's support to addressing supply chain issues impeding vaccine supply, and to encourage manufacturers to increase production and investment, particularly in developing and least developed countries. But it also was intended to encourage constructive dialogue, exchange, and some movement on the issue of the TRIPS waiver that you have raised in your letter.

The discussions, including important contributions from civil society organizations, offered invaluable insights into the practical contributions that the WTO might make – immediately, in the medium term and to build lasting mechanisms to head off any future obstacles to effective and equitable pandemic responses. It is clearer to me than ever that the only way we can address vaccine scarcity and inequitable access is through cross-border cooperation. This is a global problem and we must solve it together.

Our vaccine equity event did demonstrate that there is untapped production potential in the developing world. Getting the intellectual property and technology transfer dimension right is clearly critical to unlocking this potential, along with a range of other practical, logistical, financial and regulatory challenges. I am now convinced that if member governments engage, and carry forward what is unquestionably a common resolve to reach universal global vaccine coverage, they can find constructive and pragmatic ways to bridge their differences on the TRIPS Agreement and the waiver proposal, so that we can contribute solutions to the present pandemic whilst preparing for future ones.

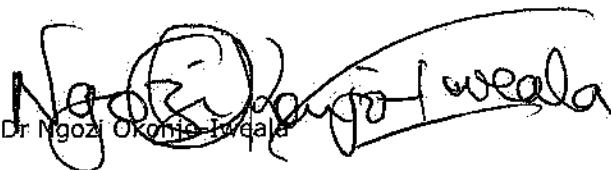
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With this concentration on immediate, pragmatic solutions, I see real opportunities for progress and concrete action in the weeks and month to come. My suggestions have been included in the concluding statement I gave to the 14 April meeting (attached) and it can be found at www.wto.org.

All of us are all being tested to do the right thing and I believe that any solution must come through collective endeavour and lead to an outcome which benefits every citizen of the world. Our first meeting of those directly involved helped us clearly map out the way ahead, and you can be sure that the follow-up will be concrete, fully-engaged and inclusive.

I hope to continue this dialogue with you in the critical months ahead.

Yours sincerely,


Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

cc. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director General
World Health Organization